

BED ROCK



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BED ROCK

BY JACK BETHEA

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TO
OCTAVUS ROY COHEN
BUT FOR WHOM THIS BOOK WOULD NOT HAVE
BEEN WRITTEN

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BED ROCK



CHAPTER I

A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

Blackford regretted his words the moment after he spoke. He had not intended to make such an admission. Angered by his father-in-law's sharp questions, he had struck back in the only way he knew.

That it was a contemptible thing to do, he did not consider. Reubens's bullying words probed him, the searching interrogations confused him, until at length he lost the iron self-control with which he had come to the interview.

He had not expected it to be easy. He knew Reubens too well for that. President of the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company, secure in the power of his millions, Reubens took interference from no one, and from a subordinate it was incredible.

For Blackford had interfered, had done it with calculation. He had planned to speak out coolly the accomplished fact of Alice Reubens's marriage to himself, expecting that it would disarm the ruthless old ironmaster.

Blackford's nerves had tightened when he received the summons from his own desk in the superintendent of mines' office to Reubens's private suite on the floor above. That moment was the crisis of the game he had set out to play. Clothed in an impassivity he had told himself nothing could shake, he had gone to the meeting, if not with confidence, at least without misgiving.

He was cynically sure of his plan. There would be a storm, but he knew Reubens's worship of Alice and was confident of getting what he wanted.

But he had overestimated his own strength. He had been trapped, his words twisted, his pride outraged; so he had spoken the heartless words, distinctly, quietly, in spite of the rage that shook him inwardly. A moment later as he saw the triumph in Reubens's gaze he was sorry, but it was too late.

To Reubens, Blackford's cool assurance was salt in the wound which had been opened by his daughter's announcement the night before. That an obscure clerk in his own office should have dared to do this was inconceivable, fantastic.

But Reubens wasted no time now in useless passion. He had set out to seek a remedy for a situation he did not like. Now, having found it, he nodded in satisfaction.

"I knew it was true, but I never thought you would admit it," he said quietly.

Blackford did not answer for a moment. His anger chilled and he braced himself for a blow.

"You underrate your powers, sir," he said finally. "You bring me in here with every advantage yours, you bully me, you browbeat me—what could you expect? You could make one admit anything."

"You have admitted enough," the older man retorted. Chewing an unlighted cigar, he stared at Blackford appraisingly. But Blackford's face, its pallor accentuated by his black hair, was a mask. The ironmaster flung his cigar into a wastebasket and spoke savagely:

"Well! Say something! What about it?"

"There doesn't seem much for me to say, sir. You seem perfectly able to say it all yourself."

"You're damned right I am," Reubens grunted. "And it's going to be to the point. It's a good thing I got back when I did."

Reubens whirled his chair, heaved to his feet, and padded over to a curtained alcove.

"Come out, Alice," he said, his tone suddenly tender. "You see, it's just as I told you. You heard."

The girl came from behind the curtains, putting out a groping hand that Reubens caught. She swayed for an instant and then went to the chair her father indicated. Her words came with difficulty:

"Yes, Dad, it's as you told me."

Her voice was low, the tones blurred.

"Well, are you convinced?" her father demanded.

She bent her head. "I am convinced," she replied.

There was regret in her tone, but no anger. The cadence of her voice was deliberate, as if she were holding herself in check.

"I should have known," she added. She seemed to be considering herself rather than any one else in the room, her chin in her hands, her eyes on the floor.

Blackford knew now the cause of the triumph in Reubens's face. His angry words had burned the bridge. There could be no going back. Reubens broke the silence, speaking to his daughter.

"You've heard your husband of a week admit that he married you only for what you could bring him. He stole you while I was away. And you told me last night that he was the finest man in the world!" A shiver was Alice Blackford's only admission that she heard. "The thing to do now," her father continued, "is to get you out."

For the first time, Alice looked up, her brown eyes filled with tears. "But, father," she said. "I can't——"

"Oh, yes, you can. There is always a way. And with his kind it is no mystery. Although up to now I have avoided blackmailers."

Alice shrank at the word. "You don't think that, do you?"

"You heard what he said. It is his idea, not mine. Blackmail isn't a pretty word, but that's what it is."

He took a checkbook from his desk, inked a pen and held it poised. He looked at Blackford in ironic politeness. "How much shall I make this for, sir?"

Blackford made no sign.

Alice broke the tension with outflung arms. "Oh, Warren! And I trusted you so!" she cried. "Why did you?"

Reubens swept her into his arms and strove to comfort her. "There! There! Honey. Never mind. Daddy will get you out of it. You ought to have told me ... there ... Daddy's right behind you as he always has been."

Alice, quieted, sat back in her chair, biting her lips. She was near the breaking point. Blackford knew it and marveled at her courage. He sat up and, leaning forward, began speaking slowly, weighing his words.

"Put up your checkbook, Mr. Reubens," he said, and paused, painfully striving for the phrases he needed. "I don't blame you for feeling as you do. I'm not very proud of myself right now. Whatever I may be and do, I have no illusions about myself."

"No one else will have very long," interjected Reubens.

For an instant Blackford looked toward Alice; his eyes appealed for understanding. But she turned away.

"Well!" Reubens urged harshly. "Say what you have to say!"

"It's foolish to play a game with all your cards on the table," said Blackford quietly. "But I am going to do it. I don't think you'll understand. I know you won't sympathize. You couldn't. Did you ever want anything badly? So badly you felt you would sell your soul for it and think it a good bargain? And you knew you couldn't get it? You knew it was hopeless?" Blackford was staring straight before him. "You don't remember it, of course, but you brought me to Pittsburgh. Do you recall your trip over the Alabama coal fields before you decided to buy in down there? You picked me up then. I was just a kid and slaving to put myself through school. I never did understand why you should have bothered with me. You forgot me as soon as it was done. I jumped at the chance to come East with you. I forgot about school. I thought it would be better than any school could be. I was crazy to get somewhere."

"You never told me that," Alice interrupted, a queer note in her voice.

"No," Blackford agreed.

"Go on! Go on!" prompted Reubens.

"Let him tell it his own way, Daddy," said Alice.

"That was twelve years ago," Blackford observed. "A long time. I worked hard when I came to Pittsburgh. I studied hard. I saved money and put myself through a technical school at nights. I already knew the practical things. The books didn't come easy, but I learned them. And then I found out something. I found that work didn't count. One must attract attention to get ahead. If you are known, things come your way. If you aren't known, you haven't a chance. At least, that is the way it seemed to me."

"I find this interesting," observed Reubens suavely. "Go on."

"I don't say that men who couldn't do the work were pushed up," Blackford resumed. "They were all good men, but no better than I was and not nearly so experienced. I wondered why I never got a chance. Then I saw it was because I wasn't known and they were. I was an out-lander, and when I got to be chief clerk to the superintendent of the mining division, I stayed there. I watched them go up. Drake was made director of blast furnaces because he was a nephew of the chief engineer. Hawkins is at the head of the by-products division because he went to college with the operating vice-president. I ought to have had both places. It was that way for six years. They were known and I was not. I was simply a good clerk. I guess I thought about it too much. I didn't have much else. I stood it as long as I could and then I made up my mind to do something. I would become known. One night I was working late when my ... your ... she ... came in looking for you. She ... was kind. That night ... I wondered. You went to Alabama ... so ..."

Blackford's voice trailed off into silence and Reubens sat up abruptly.

"Rot!" he declared. "I know your kind, Blackford. I know what is wrong with you. You never thought of anybody or anything but yourself. You couldn't give anything unless you could see where you would get Shylock interest for it." He laughed scornfully. "You've got to give. Do that and the jobs will take care of themselves." He paused for a moment and then went on. "And so you sneaked into my home and stole my daughter. Well, now that you are known, what do you want?"

CHAPTER II

A WORKING BASIS

Blackford did not reply at once. He seemed to be debating whether it were worth while trying to explain further.

"I'd like a chance to handle a mine," he said at last. "I never have, but I know I can do it. I'm tired of the city."

Reubens considered thoughtfully, and Blackford was surprised at his ready acquiescence when he said:

"Very well. We've a working down in Alabama without a superintendent. You'd like to go there?"

Blackford nodded. "I'd rather go to Alabama than anywhere else. It's where I came from."

"You can go down there. It's a good way off and that will be an excuse to send Alice to Europe. At the end of a year a divorce can be arranged."

Blackford again nodded assent, but Alice interposed for the first time.

"We can discuss that later, Daddy," she said quietly. "Now I would like to talk to my husband—alone."

"What can you have to say to him?" demanded her father. "I should think you'd never want to see him again."

Alice's voice was a little weary. "But I do want to speak to him."

"All right," assented Reubens reluctantly, rising, "but be careful." He walked to the door and paused, glancing back uneasily. "Don't be too long," he admonished and was gone.

Alice settled herself in her chair, smoothing her skirt over slim knees. She looked at her husband with a twisted smile. "Well, are you satisfied?"

Blackford winced. There was pathos in her courage. "Don't say that, Alice," he begged. "You didn't hear it all."

"I heard enough," she answered. "Your words were very definite."

"But I wasn't myself. You know what I have been through. Surely, after the days we have spent together, you can't think I _____"

"That's the terrible part of it. That is just what I do think."

There was no bitterness in her voice, only great sadness. It seemed to Blackford she would have spoken so of some one dead. And he recognized that to her he was worse than dead. It galled him to appear contemptible in her eyes.

"You kept me here to say that?" he asked finally.

"No, not for that," Alice said with a half-shake of her head, and fell to smoothing her skirt again. Her lips curved into lines of pain. "You say you are disillusioned. So am I, and I think my illusions are the hardest to lose. To think that you were laughing at me all the time!"

"Oh, but I never laughed at you. I could not have——" he began, but she stopped him.

"How could you have helped it? All the time you were thinking, 'Isn't she easy?' You were right. I was easy. I told my father you only needed a chance. That is what I thought of you. I believed in you. I gave myself to you. I held nothing back. And you were only using me!"

Blackford saw her eyes fill as she fought to choke back the sobs. He leaned forward, but she drew away from his touch. "Alice, if you will listen," he said beseechingly; "when you will listen, I have something to say. I can explain ... all this. Things aren't ... aren't ... I'm not as bad ... I was angry ..."

"But remember what you said," she interposed. "I can't forget that. You might have been angry, but you were speaking the truth. You spoke the truth because you thought it would hurt my father."

Blackford's words stumbled on his tongue. She was right. He had meant what he had said, but he had not meant to say it.

"Do you remember the day on the river, the second day after we were married, when I dreamed aloud for you?" Alice asked. "I thought it was so wonderful to have somebody interested in me, just because I was myself and not because I was Forest Reubens's daughter. You remember I told you it was the first time such a thing had happened to me. It was true. And you said you were interested in me, not because of who I was, but because of what I was behind my eyes. I believed you, but you were lying. And there are so many times when you have lied. I know it now. You owe me something, Warren."

"What?" asked Blackford eagerly. "What can I do? I'll do anything."

"You said that before. I wonder if you mean it more now than you did."

"Don't be so sweeping," Blackford pleaded, and then stopped in disgust at himself. He would play the hypocrite no longer. He owed it to her not to pretend. He was not in love with her, but he longed to shield her from himself.

He loathed himself for the thought of his whole plan. It had seemed different when he had made it. Then he had not thought Alice would know. He had not meant to hurt her. Blackford clung to that thought as she spoke again.

"You are wondering why I kept you here. I know you want to get away. I would not have asked you to stay if it had not been for something my father said. He is planning to send me abroad and speaks about a divorce. There isn't going to be any divorce. And I'm not going to Europe."

"Then what are you going to do?"

Alice looked at him steadily. She drew a long breath. "I am going to Alabama with you."

"But—but—you can't do that!" Blackford cried.

"Why not?"

"Why, because you can't! With things as they are? You've just said you hated me. You——"

"I didn't say I hated you—yet."

"But you do. You can't go with me."

"I know you don't want me, that I will be in the way, but I am going just the same."

"But—but—I don't even know where I am to live."

"That doesn't matter. I would as soon go one place as another. I can't stay here."

"Why not? Your father doesn't—blame you."

Alice's emotion slipped the leash for a moment and she spoke rapidly, the words tumbling out.

"Of course he doesn't! That isn't it at all. I am not going to stay here and have them begin to whisper and then to talk... The newspapers ... stories ... I just couldn't! No one but Daddy is going to know what a mistake I have made. There isn't going to be any divorce and I won't stay here. That leaves only Alabama—and you."

"You don't know what you are saying," Blackford rejoined crisply. "You have never lived in a mining camp. You have had luxury all your life. You have never suffered isolation or loneliness——"

"But I have, both of them. Many times. I will not be lonely. You need not be afraid," she warned, a hint of contempt in her voice. "I am not going because I love you."

"Now at least do me justice," said Blackford. "I suppose that is the last thing I should expect, but don't make me any worse than I am. I wasn't thinking of that at all."

"I saw it in your eyes!" exclaimed Alice. "You need not worry. I shan't annoy you. I may not have any pride so far as you are concerned, but I have about other people. That's why I am going."

"What will your father say?"

"He will object, of course," Alice answered wearily. Her strength was going fast. "He will not approve, but I can manage him. He'll know how I feel"—with a sudden rush of sobs to her throat—"he always knows how I feel."

"I've no objection to your going if you really want to," Blackford said, "but let's not have any misunderstanding. I don't know what conditions I shall find. Your father isn't going to pick anything easy for me. I don't want you blaming me afterward for taking you down there."

"I shall not blame you, no matter what happens."

"Then," Blackford assured her, "as soon as your father tells me where to go, you will know." He hesitated and stammered. "I will do my best to make up to you for ... things ... Alice," he said. "Shall I still call you ... Alice?"

She moved her head indifferently. "Call me what you choose. There is one thing more. We'll have to live in the same house. Because you do not love me and ... and ... well, because we are as we are, there is no need of our living a cat-and-dog life. We need not be petty." She paused, considering. "I shall try to make a home for you. At least, I shall keep a house for you to live in. I am not doing this for you. If I still loved you, I think going with you would be the last thing I would do."

Blackford moved uneasily. "There isn't much I can say," he began. "I can only show by my actions how I feel." Alice was not looking at him, but was gazing out of the window again. Blackford paused. "Do you know anything of your father's plans?" he asked finally, when it seemed she would not break the silence.

"No," answered his wife, with a pathetic little smile. "You see, this was only told me to-day."

"What will you do in the mean time?"

"I shall stay at home—at my father's house, I mean. I—I could not go back to the apartment."

"Then I am dismissed?"

"You may go if you like," she assented, and he passed out of the door, carrying with him the picture of her figure huddled in the big chair, her head thrown back as if her strength was exhausted.

CHAPTER III

TRAVELING SOUTH

Alice was alone in the dim library of her father's home when he came in quietly. Only the flickering blaze in the wide chimney lighted her face fitfully. She had refused lights.

The passing of the days had not made her trouble easier to bear, nor could she turn her mind to other things. She had recovered from her first numb dismay and now the corrosive of anger was eating at her heart.

Her face in the shadows was wan under her father's eyes as he moved up the room. He held his fingers to the blazing coals and eyed her keenly. Reubens, for the first time, had found himself unable to comfort his daughter, unable to get her to relax and weep out her sorrow.

"You ought to have lights in here, young fellow," he said.

"I didn't want them. I can think better like this."

"That's just why you should have them. You are doing too much thinking. You need something to do besides think."

"What else can I do?" she asked

"That is what I want to speak of. Can you talk with me yet? I shall not hurt you more than I can help. But we must decide. Are you still determined to go with your ... him?"

Alice nodded and a slight animation came into her manner. "I am. There isn't any use in going over that any more, Daddy. You see how it is here. I should go mad if I stayed."

Her father grunted. "I can understand your reasons if I cannot sympathize with them. You know what you are doing? I shall not always be able to stand between you and ... things, if you leave me."

"I'll face what I must. When will you know where I am going?"

"I know now. Have known all along, but I wouldn't tell you because I hoped you would change your mind."

"You should have known me better than that. Whose daughter am I?"

Reubens covered one of her listless hands with his own massive fingers. "Mine. And always will be. Never forget it. Promise."

Alice stooped and laid her lips on his fingers. "As if I could! And where am I going?"

"I shall send him to Cahaba. Day after to-morrow. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"Cahaba is not a place I would choose for my daughter's home. But I can't help myself. I want you to remember that when you get down there. Remember that everything I have done and shall do is for you and for your happiness. You will find yourself in a strange world. And when you want to come home, I shall be waiting. It will be lonely for me."

Alice kissed him. "I know it will, Daddy. And I'm sorry. But I can't do any other way either. I want you to forgive me. You understand! Don't you? Please, please do!"

Reubens patted her gravely. "Never mind. Whether I do or not, I love you just the same. Now one other thing. Will you tell him or shall I?"

"You, please, Daddy. I don't want to see him until I go to the station. And I don't want you to go with me. I would rather tell you good-bye here. Alone."

Blackford had not been happy as he waited for the orders that would plunge him into a contest against the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company. He was not afraid or reluctant; he strained for the struggle. It was the thought of his wife as he had seen her last that haunted him. If he could only make up to her the pain he had caused! Waiting now in the vast railroad station, he pondered his course.

After all, love was not so important, he told himself cynically. He had done without it thus far. His wife's respect, however, was a different thing. Having lost it, he began to attach value to it. Blackford all his life had cared little for what others thought of him, but this was strangely different. What Alice thought of him did matter.

Blackford was not in love with his wife. He did not want to be in love with any one. But the thought that he could do no wrong in her eyes had been comforting. He knew he was not the finest man in the world, but that she should think so had been sweet.

Something of this was in his face as he watched Alice leave the Reubens automobile at the entrance to the station and come toward him. He had half-expected her father to come with her, but she was alone, with no one to tell her good-bye, except the chauffeur, who touched his cap, changed gears with a noisy crash, and drove away. To Blackford, watching, the loneliness of the trim figure was pathetic. He went quickly toward her with a silent resolution. He had done harm enough; he would do no more.

"We have ten minutes," he told her. "Would you like to stroll about or to get on the car?"

"Let's get on," she answered, and added whimsically: "I've crossed the river and I don't want to look back." They found their seats in silence.

It was a strange journey for Blackford, the long trip from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, from Cincinnati to Birmingham, and from Birmingham to Cahaba over the Mineral. He found himself wondering at his wife's calm unconcern, her casual friendliness, her apparent forgetfulness of all that had passed. Most of all he wondered at the intangible barrier she raised between them.

He strove by incessant attention to her comfort to establish a closer, less impersonal relation. He wondered at times if Alice realized she was being made love to, subtly, very carefully. Not that Blackford loved her—he was still honest enough with himself to admit that—but he was offering the counterfeit and hoping to make it so nearly like the genuine she would not know.

He wondered if she knew. Sometimes he thought she did and was quietly enjoying his discomfort. Watching sidewise, he sometimes caught her eyes on him, her face lighted for an instant by quizzical amusement. Blackford wondered if she was laughing at him.

They spent much of their time on the observation car. Mostly in silence, but breaking occasionally into desultory conversation, they watched the landscape unreel behind them. Blackford's efforts to talk were sometimes successful, sometimes not. She was quite passive. If he suggested a stroll through the train, she went with him without protest; if he thought she would enjoy a nap, she submitted while he made her comfortable with pillows and magazines; if he proposed the observation platform, there was no demur.

As they were approaching Chattanooga, the last beams of the sun lighted the towering sides of Signal Mountain and threw into relief the white spires of the battle-field monuments. Leaning over the railing, Alice gazed eagerly up at the heights and then down to the gigantic Moccasin Bend of the Tennessee. Blackford watched the sweeping lines of the firm chin, the odd curve of the lips and the chiseled nose. But when he spoke, waving a hand toward the summit, her eyes were cold.

"See that rock way up yonder, the one that looks as if it was just about to tumble down the mountain?" he asked. "That is Umbrella Rock, and standing on it you can see seven States on a clear day."

"Yes."

Her answer, as usual, invited no response, but he kept on. "I am pretty familiar with this country through here. Years ago, when I was just a youngster, we traced the Cahaba vein of coal to its source and it took us up among these hills. We used to come to Chattanooga once or twice a week. I've tramped all over Lookout Mountain." He glanced at his wife to find her looking again at the huge peak. Half to himself, he continued. "It is like getting home to see these red hills. I was

raised in them." His voice took on unusual animation as a new thought struck him. "How would you like to stop in Chattanooga and go over the mountains?"

Alice looked from the peak to the Bend and then to Blackford. "Would not that be lingering by the wayside? Aren't you eager to get to Cahaba?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "But I thought maybe you would like to see Lookout Mountain. Most Eastern people do when they come down here."

Alice laughed briefly. "Their mission is different from mine. I don't think I could do justice to the mountain. Aren't you spending a great deal more time than necessary in thinking what I would like?"

Blackford winced. "What do you mean?"

"When I decided to come to Alabama with you, I knew just what I was doing. I did not do it blindly. You need not feel the slightest obligation to look after me. I can do that myself, or, if I can't, Daddy has hired people who can. You look out for yourself." There was a hint of her father in her voice. "You need it more than I. I should be careful if I were you."

After a moment's silence, Blackford spoke: "You said we were not to bicker. Aren't we in danger of doing it? Suppose we talk of other things."

"Very well." Indifferently. "What, for instance?"

"We might consider what we are to do when we get to Cahaba. We are pretty close now to Birmingham and it is only forty miles from there."

"Do you know anything of the place?"

"Only what I was able to get from the files in the office. Your father said the superintendent's house is maintained furnished. I shall get along all right, but what of you?"

"I have told you not to worry about me. That is my concern."

"You can't get servants in Cahaba if it is anything like mining camps were when I left Alabama."

Alice laughed. "I'm not going to have any servant. I can get along."

Puzzled and rebuffed, Blackford lapsed into silence. Strange, he mused, that he should find himself considering his wife more than the opportunity he had bought so dearly. He was more interested in the soft body, reclining in the chair so close to him that a faint perfume was wafted to his nostrils, than in Cahaba. Strange that one's desires should change so suddenly. Of what was she thinking? Would she ever again give herself as freely as she had done? He had had such a chance for happiness and had tossed it so lightly away! He had been blind and now he was dumb, his lips sealed by his own words. But were they sealed? She had believed before. If he told her the truth and asked, not for justice, but for mercy, she might listen. If she did ...

The hours flicked by unnoticed. He was aroused by an exclamation from Alice, who was leaning out and staring ahead where the sky glared for miles. "What is that?" she asked, struck by the beauty of the far light.

Blackford glanced at his watch. It was nearly midnight. "Those are the blast furnaces at Birmingham. We are due there in twenty minutes. We change trains there, you know. We'll either have to go to a hotel or take the Coal Special over the Mineral at two-thirty. That would put us into Cahaba at seven in the morning. But you don't want to do that. You are tired and would not want to travel all night. There aren't any sleepers on the Mineral. They just hook a passenger coach behind the coal cars. We had better go to a hotel."

"But I don't want to go to a hotel!" cried Alice. "I had much rather go out to-night on the train. I like traveling at night. I don't mind sitting up. Besides, I had much rather get to Cahaba in the morning. It is so depressing to reach any place at night."

So, when they reached Birmingham, he hustled her into a taxicab and to the Mineral depot far over on the North Side.

Alice gazed eagerly about her when she had settled into her seat in the dilapidated passenger coach in the deserted train

shed. Her interest was undampened by the red plush cushions, the ghastly light from the gas lamps, or the dozen men sprawled about in various attitudes of slumber, mouths open, snoring. Her nostrils contracted at the unmistakable burned-sugar odor of corn whisky mingled with strong tobacco.

In an instant, Blackford had a window up and the fresh, cool air pouring in. Seeing that the light in her eyes annoyed her, he prevailed on a surly flagman to lower it, leaving that end of the car in semi-darkness. He quelled by the mere force of his gaze the antics of two men who threatened to become boisterous.

Alice never forgot that journey in the cool April night. Years afterward, she was to know it so well that she could guess her location by the curves, but now it was all new. The peace of the low green hills, with their mysterious glades in half-light from the full moon, entered her soul. The Mineral ran along the shoulder of Red Mountain for miles, while below stretched the valley. In her nostrils was the fresh, green fragrance of pines.

The train climbed on a steady grade, finally to reach the summit and plunge triumphantly over the divide. Here a new set of wonders was revealed when the lonely farmhouses came into view; little ugly log-cabins, with tumbled-down outbuildings, infinitely more appealing than the neat countryside of her own Pennsylvania.

Her face revealed her thoughts and Blackford grew a little easier. At least, she would not hate the country. He, too, was drinking in the scene, long ago familiar. This was his home, and his heavy heart lifted a little as he listened to catch the song of the pines.

Almost before they knew it, daylight had come and with it the end of their journey. Watching the colors of the sunrise, Alice was too absorbed to notice that the train pulled around a jutting cliff that overhung the tracks, slipped through a gap in the mountain, and came to a panting stop. She lifted startled eyes, in which dreams still lingered, to her husband as he rose.

"Come on," he said. "Here we are. This is Cahaba."

CHAPTER IV

SIMPLIFYING THE SITUATION

Parsons Fain was chief of the safety department of the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company. To those in its good graces, he was genial, good-natured, heavily pleasant. Frowned upon, one saw another side. Forceful, unscrupulous, brutal, even, when necessary, he was dominated by one idea—fidelity to the Cahaba Company and to Reubens.

Reubens had made him. Fain had been a rising young lieutenant in the Pittsburgh police department when he first came to the ironmaster's attention. Both had been younger then, but both had given promise of the men they were to be.

Reubens was already dreaming of the industrial empire he was to create from the small beginnings of the Monongahela Steel Company and he recognized in Fain a kindred spirit. Reubens was like that, able to pick men with uncanny certainty. And he had chosen Fain unerringly, having in mind for him the place he afterward created.

They knew each other, these two. Together they had come through the fires of the financial revolution that left Reubens on the steps of the throne he was afterward to occupy undisputed. And in his upward progress, Fain had been at his shoulder.

Their relations were not those of executive and subordinate. They were more personal, based on mutual esteem that had been hammered out on the anvil of action. Fain was loyal with an unquestioning obedience that Reubens found priceless, and in return the ironmaster shared liberally of his wealth and power.

Ostensibly, Fain commanded the special police maintained by the Cahaba Company to protect its holdings, to keep the peace among its employees, and, sometimes, to administer its laws by a swift appeal to force. Actually, he was much more than that. His duties did not stop with mere policing. He was Reubens's confidential adviser with much wider authority than his title gave him.

Reubens appraised Fain's cool judgment correctly, respected his untiring patience, and was content to leave details to him. He told Fain what he wanted and that was enough.

In their years together, Fain had done many things for Reubens which he promptly forgot. But Reubens did not, and it was natural that now he should turn to Fain. Only Fain could combine understanding with action, and Reubens nodded gratefully as his friend came in and sat opposite him.

Fain was a huge man who handled his body easily. His face was round, his smile slow, his eyes brown, alert. With his bigness there was a comforting stolidity about him. He seemed solid, with massive shoulders and barrel-like chest above long legs.

There was nothing sinister about him; he had long since lost the mannerisms and habits of thought of his police days. There was but one incongruous note in the generously carved face, a scar that ran jaggedly across his cheek from his temple to the angle of his jaw. It was a relic of a long-past fight. In those days it had been necessary for him to use his hands and he had never refused a challenge. Soon there had been none to challenge him. But the scar was a reminder that men, seeing him, never forgot. His face in repose was placid, comfortable, with only the deep-set eyes to give the impression of an unasked question.

Fain looked at Reubens and squared himself mentally. Trouble there. The old man's face showed it.

Reubens stirred the papers on his desk fretfully with both hands before he spoke. His face was lined and there were pouches under his eyes. His usual ruddy color was a mottled gray and one corner of his mouth twitched. Fain read his face, but even he was surprised when Reubens spoke.

"Fain, I want to break a man." He might have been asking for a box of cigars, but Fain sensed the hard-bitted restraint under the words.

"It's been done before," he said soothingly. "Who is he?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds. I suppose I had better tell you all of it. It's Blackford."

Fain drew his breath softly. So. Then there had been something in the office gossip that had come to his ears. He had been incredulous, because he knew Reubens.

"But he is your——"

"That's why I want to break him!"

Fain shrugged cautiously. "I never interfere in family matters if I can keep out of them, but if you say so——"

Reubens pounded his desk. "Dammit! I didn't call you in here to gossip. I want something done."

"Want me to do it?"

"I don't know. I want to talk to you. It's not so simple. I don't want to ... to ... I don't mean physically."

Fain spread his hands, but said nothing. Reubens's mounting excitement made his voice shrill. He was terribly nervous. He had been able to think of nothing since he had watched Alice go out of his home to step into his waiting automobile. She had not come back. Reubens, goaded by his thoughts, was irritable.

"If it was just ... eliminating him, it would be easy. But that won't do. It's not that simple. We'll have to talk it over."

Fain soothed him. He rose and stretched his great body before speaking slowly. "We've been together a good many years now, chief. Never struck anything yet we couldn't manage. I guess we can handle this—one of us. You tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Reubens calmed a little. Fain's very bigness and calm confidence made him feel better. He had fretted under inaction, but now that was over. He had determined his course. No need to get angry; that only lost him the advantage. He sat with his eyes closed and saw Alice's face. His mouth drew down at the corners.

"I don't want his money. He hasn't any, and I wouldn't have it, anyway, I want his spirit broken."

Fain was thoughtful. "That's something you can't use a hammer to break. But sometimes it's easier than the other. I'll help any way I can."

Reubens was vehement. "I suppose you've heard talk in the office?" Fain nodded, and Reubens's voice was harsh. "I knew it would come, but don't let me find who is doing it. If you've heard that, I guess you know pretty well what I am facing. Blackford thinks that through Alice he can use me." Reubens smiled unpleasantly. "I let him think so. When he finds differently, it will be too late. It won't be too easy for him, anyway. I put Alice in that alcove and sent for Blackford. He admitted the truth before I was through. And she heard him." Again Reubens smiled. He was calmer now, but he patted his desk softly. "She ... she took it pretty hard. I don't think he will hoodwink her again. He told me a fairy story. Said he wanted to run a mine with a chance to make good. I've given him Cahaba." He paused as Fain straightened up, and they both smiled. "Let him clean it up himself."

Again Fain spread his hands. "What do you want with me? That should be enough. It's the toughest camp in Alabama, and you know what it has been used for."

Reubens shook his head. "You don't know Blackford as well as I do. I wasn't blind just because ... because I hated him. I think he's good enough to clean it up—like it is."

"And you want me to see that he doesn't?"

"Precisely." Reubens put his fingers together as he explained. He was quite calm now, except for the hard mouth under the bristling mustache. "I'm worried about my daughter, Fain. I can't understand why she should go to Alabama with him. She may have some lingering regard for him, and that is what I want destroyed. I want him discredited in her eyes. She must see him as he is. He must fail at Cahaba, but we must seem to give him his chance. What is the situation at Cahaba?"

Fain was on sure ground now. The prospect of a fight roused him and the scar on his face gave the key to his emotion. It glowed vermilion, standing out with startling distinctness. There was a queer streak in this man. Hard as he was, he loved Reubens, and the old man's distress moved him. It was no longer a contest between the Cahaba Company and an opposing force. It was a personal battle. His mind was already busy with plans as he answered.

"I've been intending to speak to you about Cahaba since I got back from down there. I know you have used it as a sort of trial camp, and that you have sent undesirable men there to test them, but I think we are going too far. Your last experiments haven't been successful. Crosslands was easy-going and didn't see anything unless he chose. There was plenty to see. Whisky! Gambling! Women! Everything goes. They didn't know who I was and I told only a few, so I saw it all. It's time we did something or the State will be stepping in. It's costing us something now to keep 'em out."

Reubens listened with kindling eyes. "Don't you touch it! Leave it just as it is. And if things don't happen, see that they do. That's your job, understand."

Fain leaned back and spread his legs before him. His tone was complacent. "Easy! You know my method. Somebody on the ground you can trust. Send somebody from this office. Each checks up on the other and we can start anything we want. And it'll be twice as easy here."

"Got anybody down there?"

"Sure. One of the things I went for. Got two or three. I know that valley like a book. There's a man named Stringfellow I picked out. He's been on my staff some time. He's chief clerk. That's for the company. I spotted another one, too. Charlie Galloway. He's the Mineral agent there. And there's still another that I never knew about until I went to Cahaba. They've got a sort of king. Name's Big Shackleford, and he lives over the mountain from the mine. He has had trouble with the company and it wouldn't take much to stir it up again."

Reubens's eyes were admiring. "You believe in preparedness, I see. I knew that, but I didn't expect it so thoroughly here. Who will you send from this office? He'll have to be an engineer of some sort."

"There's young Gower. He's a good dub engineer and I can depend on him."

Reuben's voice was decisive. He was mapping the campaign against Blackford as he talked and he found his plan to his liking. After all, the difficulties would not be as great as he had thought. Alice would not be hard to convince now. He spoke incisively.

"All right. Let Gower go when Blackford asks for help. He ought to be assistant superintendent. See that there is a vacancy. I don't want to send Blackford a man until he asks for him; then he won't be suspicious. Now get this straight! Let Galloway or Stringfellow spread the word that the lid is off so far as the company is concerned. Stringfellow can tell them that Blackford is not too well liked by the company. Let Gower give the impression that he is jealous of Blackford and wants his job. That will make what he does seem more reasonable. Understand?"

Fain was thoughtful. "That's a good plan. You've overlooked one thing, though. You'll wreck the mine."

"I don't give a damn," flared Reubens, his nostrils pinched and his cheeks again mottled. His repressed anger burst forth in a torrent of words. "What in hell do I care for the mine? I'll wreck three mines for my girl. She's gotten away and I'm trying to get her back. Damn the mine. I'm going to have her."

Fain's face was grave as he realized that he had not yet plumbed the depths of his chief's grief and anxiety. And he was sorry for him. He had daughters, too. Reubens had flung himself back in his chair with one hand over his eyes.

The paroxysm had spent itself and he was again an old man thinking of his daughter. "Lord knows, it isn't money! I wouldn't care whether he had a nickel if he was a man and Alice loved him. But he isn't; he's never done anything and he never will. She doesn't love him; only what she thought he was. I've got to wake her up if she hasn't realized it already. I've got to have her back." His voice rose a little, and he looked at Fain appealingly. "She's got to be happy. I won't have it otherwise."

Fain answered Reubens's look. "Do you want me to go to Cahaba?"

The ironmaster leaned forward for a moment and Fain could not see his face. When he straightened he was calm. "No, not yet. It may be necessary later, but not now. Blackford knows you and might get suspicious. Alice must not suspect about this. If she did, it might spoil everything. Blackford must appear to have a free hand and he must fail."

Fain rose. "Somebody will be hurt. They are mountain folks, you know. Take all restraint off that camp and you will have trouble."

"There will be Blackford."

Fain looked at him steadily. "What do you mean? Suppose Blackford should be ... the one hurt?"

"He'll have to take that chance. He asked to be superintendent. The place carries certain hazards and he must face them."

"But suppose he should be accidentally ... eliminated?" Fain persisted.

Reubens's lips were thin. "That might simplify the situation considerably."

CHAPTER V

"I LOVE YOU"

Blackford and Alice paused on the platform of the tiny depot, unmindful of the men who poured out of the coach and brushed against them. The railroad ran out on the shoulder of the mountain. Below them was a circular valley with precipitous sides in which nestled the town. Diminished by the distance, the houses straggled aimlessly along the wandering street. To his left, Blackford saw the shaft-work of the mine and the stacks of the engine-house. Across the valley, perched on the slope of the opposite mountain, was a rambling bungalow. Blackford pointed.

"There is where we are to live, I believe. That is the Residency."

"But how are we to get there?" Alice asked.

Blackford looked around expectantly for some figure of authority. One of the resident executives should have met them. As the last man disappeared down the hill, glancing curiously at Blackford and his wife, the superintendent realized that they had not been expected until afternoon.

"There is no one here," he said. "They did not expect us on the morning train. We'll wait here until some one shows up."

Alice breathed deeply and relaxed in the keen air. "Can't we walk? I can see the whole town and there isn't very much. Where are we going first?"

"To the Residency. You'll want to see your house, of course."

"What a queer name. The Residency. As if some ruler lived there."

"The superintendent does rule in a mining camp."

"I see. I am hungry. Let's walk. It isn't far."

"If you like. Come over here. You can see better through the trees."

Following his pointing finger, Alice saw the house at the head of the single street that wound leisurely through the camp. Vines grew about the pillars and pines dotted the back yard. A single gigantic oak, an evergreen, lifted its height in the front yard. Even at that distance, there was a look of comfort about the place and Alice felt her impatience increasing. She seized Blackford's arm and pulled him after her down the steps. "Come on," she urged. "I am in a hurry. Isn't this air fine?"

Blackford followed with a reluctant grunt. "Wait a moment. It won't run off. I know it doesn't look far. It never is the actual distances in this country. It's the amount of traveling you have to do. Any idea how far it is? More than a mile. It is so far down and then up. Besides, your shoes are not meant for walking."

Alice looked down in whimsical surprise. "I've plenty more in my trunk. Let's walk, anyway. There are three reasons why I am in a hurry." She tabulated them on her fingers. "First, I'm hungry; second, I'm cramped from the long ride; third, I want to see what the house is like."

Blackford followed her in silence. Alice loved home-making. He knew that. If he could have her once more building a home, he would be wiser than before. His thoughts were brighter. Her attitude had changed ... softened. Perhaps a home might ease her bitterness. His musings were interrupted by Alice's surprised question.

"Where is the camp? I thought Cahaba was a camp. You talked of a mining camp, and so did Daddy."

"All mining operations are camps," Blackford explained. "That does not mean people live in tents or in the woods. It is not literally a camp."

"Why call it a camp, then?"

"I never heard it explained. All my life a mine working has been a camp. I suppose it is because the company owns the land and the houses, and the people in them are tenants. They can be put out any time the company chooses. In that sense

they are camping in company houses."

"That's rather uncertain for them," said Alice thoughtfully. "Are all camps like that?"

"Oh, yes, or the company could not control the men."

They dropped rapidly down as they talked and now began to cross the bottom of the valley. Soon they would ascend the other side and come to the Residency on the first ridge of the higher mountain. They met no one. It was scarcely sunrise and the men were within doors. At the shaft, smoke pouring from the engine-stacks told of the fan never idle. They went down the main—and only—street in the village, and Alice looked curiously at the dingy houses. Carefully tended flower-gardens struggling in the clay soil added a touch of color to the drab fronts. At last they came to an odd-looking structure with a wide veranda across the front, barred windows and high walls.

"What is that?" Alice asked.

"The commissary. The men buy there what they eat and wear."

"Does the company have that, too?"

"We own it and a manager operates it. Offices are usually in the rear. Yes, there they are." He pointed to an ell leading from the main building.

"Are you the company here?" Alice asked suddenly.

Blackford looked at her. It was a new thought. "Why, yes. I suppose I am."

"You could do anything you wanted?"

"Within reason, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"Would you be limited by reason unless you wished?"

"I am only one man."

"But if you control the things people eat, the clothes they wear, and the houses in which they live, who would stop you?"

"I don't see what you——"

Alice's voice was sharp. "You have the opportunity you wanted so badly. You should realize it."

Then Blackford saw behind her questions. She had not forgotten, after all. They walked in silence up the sharp slope and neared the Residency. As they opened the gate, a long figure rose from the steps. He held a key in the hand he extended as they came up the violet-bordered walk.

"You're Mr. Blackford, I s'pose," he said, his voice a drawl, yet the words enunciated with the effect of careful choosing. "Here is the key to the Residency, sir. I kind of thought you would be in this morning. I got everything ready for you last night. I hope you'll like it."

"You knew we were coming?" Blackford echoed. "How? I told no one."

"I just guessed it," the man said, a faint smile bringing lines about the quizzical eyes as he added: "I'm a pretty good guesser—about some things. I meant to meet you at the depot, but I didn't get up in time."

Blackford took the key without further questions. He was thinking of other things and spoke absently. "I am Blackford, the new superintendent. I see you know that already. Er—who are you?"

"My name is Stringfellow, Goslin Stringfellow. I'm your chief clerk. Excuse me for not tellin' you sooner. I forgot you would not know me."

The man's eyes turned toward Alice and Blackford answered the look with an introduction. "Mrs. Blackford," he said. "Alice, this is Mr. Stringfellow. If he is my chief clerk, we are going to know him better."

Alice put out a small hand. "How do you do?"

Stringfellow took her fingers in his own and looked down at her.

"I'm afraid you'll find it lonely up here. We don't think about much besides the mine."

"I am not afraid." Alice smiled at him. He was not at all like the men she had seen on the train. "If you have nothing else, you have the mountains. I've never seen anything so fine as this view, and the air is wonderful. I'll find plenty to do."

Blackford listened hopefully. He had expected at best only tolerance of Cahaba and himself. If she should like the place ... He scarcely heard Stringfellow.

"I won't bother you any more now, sir. I know Mrs. Blackford is anxious to see the house. I think you will find everything ready. I didn't know what you would bring, so I didn't move anything. I sent groceries up from the commissary and you'll find meat in the cellar. I s'pose you would rather look around for yourself than have me tell you."

"Thank you, I would," Alice said, and turned to Blackford. "Let's go inside, Warren. I can't wait to see it."

Stringfellow turned away. "If you need anything I will be at the commissary, sir," he called to Blackford. "The company offices are in the rear."

"I know, thank you. I don't think I shall bother with anything to-day. I want to get Mrs. Blackford settled. This is all new to her, you know. I'll look things over to-morrow."

Blackford dumped the grips into a wicker chair, but as he inserted the doorkey, Alice spoke. She was a trifle breathless. "Wait a minute, Warren. Sit here with me a moment and enjoy the view."

She made room for him in the swing that hung from the oak rafters and they gazed in silence. It was a different silence from that of the train, Blackford thought. Instead of watching the valley, he searched Alice's face. They were alone together at their own home! Their own home! It thrilled him a little. This would be better than Pittsburgh. They would see more of each other. There would be fewer interruptions. She would be more dependent on him. There would be no interests save those he provided. Blackford was not yet ready to admit that he loved his wife, but he wanted her respect. She must respond to his ... He awoke with a start to find her looking into his eyes.

"A penny for your thoughts," she challenged.

He shook his head. "They are worth much more than that. They are of you."

Alice looked at him closely. "Why! I really believe he means it," she laughed. Her tone was subtly luring and Blackford found no sting in her mirth. "If you won't tell yours, I'll tell mine. But no! A fair exchange is no robbery. I'll tell mine and then you tell yours. Will you?"

"Yes," Blackford said, his pulse quickening and very conscious of her nearness.

She sobered. "I feel odd," she mused aloud. "That was why I did not want you to open the door just yet. When we go into the house together, we are crossing a bridge we never can cross back. I wanted to hesitate a moment, like all women." She pointed toward Double Oak Mountain where the early sun touched the peak's bald top. "It's so different. I never imagined anything like this. It's beautiful. I don't wonder you wanted to get back. Alabama. What does the name mean?"

"It's an Indian name. When De Soto and his Spaniards came to a river not far from here they were tired and hungry and sick. They found food and shelter and friendly Indians. The savages called it Alabama and told De Soto it meant 'Here we rest.'"

"Here we rest," repeated Alice. "I think I will rest here." She smiled and laid a hand on his arm. Blackford stirred under the intimacy of her touch, but she continued without noticing. "When I told you I was coming to Alabama, I felt quite a martyr. I thought people lived in tents and ... and cooked outdoors. I didn't expect this. Isn't it quiet!"

The men were gathering at the shaft for the day's work. As they looked, the siren on the hoisting-engine feathered into steam and its bellowing call echoed in the surrounding hills. Stragglers quickened their steps obediently.

"That is the day shift," Blackford explained. "Soon you will see the night men come out of the mine. There won't be so

many, as a full shift is not working. Only the sprinklers and fire-bosses."

Blackford thought Alice nestled against him for an instant and his heart jumped. But he kept his eyes on the valley where the houses were tiny and the hurrying figures small. Back over Double Oak Mountain the sun came up and the long April dawn was over. It was work-time.

"It's your turn now," Alice said at length. "Of what were you thinking?"

Blackford's voice was a bit unsteady. "I told you. I was thinking of you. I was planning to make things here as pleasant as I could." He reached for her quiet hand. There was no resistance as he held it lightly. "I'll do the best I can for you. I _____"

Alice removed her hand, not hastily, not unkindly, but ... firmly. "What! Sentimental before breakfast! Surely not, and you a man! Come. We must hurry. Quickly! I must feed you!"

She hustled him to the door ahead of her. Blackford bent obediently to turn the key and then paused. Memories long dormant stirred in his mind. And she had not been hostile. Did he dare? He glanced sideways at her and she smiled.

"Hurry," she said.

Still Blackford hesitated. To-day he had touched her for the first time since ... His throat was choked and his heart pounded. He straightened abruptly as he swung the door wide.

Alice moved forward and suddenly he hesitated no longer. Catching her lightly in his arms, he lifted her over the threshold and then stepped quickly back, his face flushed. "In our country, all brides come into their new homes that way," he said softly. "It brings good luck."

Alice did not seem angry. "But I am not a bride——" she began and stopped.

It was a big room they entered, extending across the whole house. Furniture had been hewed out of the native oak. On the floor was a rug, on the walls pictures. At one end, logs on giant andirons filled the open fireplace. Around were built-in bookcases and in a corner a piano. The room gripped her with its simplicity. In the center were low-hung chandeliers and around the wall was window after window, so that one could sit and from every direction see the green outside.

Alice dropped into one of the chairs and gestured in amazement. "Think of finding such a place! It's ... it's overpowering!"

Blackford shared her pleasure without comment. He was as surprised as she, but his curiosity was forgotten in her enjoyment.

Alice sprang up. "Let's go exploring! This very minute! I can't wait. Isn't it wonderful!"

Together they went over the big house; the dining-room with its hand-made furniture, its carved and polished side-board, the built-in china closets, swinging doors into the kitchen, and the kitchen itself. And such a kitchen! On one side was a stove that shone with polish. Beside it was neatly stacked kindling and behind, the coal box. A sink. And running water!

"They evidently pump it up from the mine," Blackford explained. "The electricity, too. They use it at the mine and it is much better than lamps. It makes the house complete."

There was the cellar. And the bedrooms with bedsteads all of oak. And the linen. Alice rummaged in drawers, pulled back the curtains to look out, and altogether conducted herself like the bride she had denied being.

In the midst of her delight, she stopped. "I forgot," she cried contritely. "You must be starving. Bring my grip this minute. Wait in the living-room while I change and we'll have something to eat. I am hungry myself."

She pushed him out even while one hand was fumbling with the hooks of her traveling dress.

Blackford never forgot that first day in the Residency. He helped get breakfast from the things they found on the swinging shelf in the cellar and in the pantry. He even helped wash the dishes and put them away, to be chided for not doing it properly.

Alice was tireless. She was everywhere—exploring, exclaiming, delighted with the bedrooms and the living-room, even crawling into the attic to see what it contained—which was nothing.

After supper they lighted a fire in the living-room and sat before the blazing logs in companionable silence. Alice had changed into a lacy negligee that clung about her, and after supper took down her hair, letting it fall about her shoulders. Her eyes were provocative as she brushed, glancing sideways at her husband.

Blackford leaned forward and took her hand. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," she answered simply.

He rose and sat on the arm of her chair. After a moment's hesitation, he slipped an arm around her. He could feel his heart pounding. She did not stir. "Do you think you can be happy here with me?" he whispered.

"With you?"

"Yes, with me. That is the only thing worth while to me now."

"Do I mean that much to you?" She brushed her hair from her eyes and looked up.

Blackford's voice was unsteady. The touch of her thrilled him. His head whirled. Suddenly he knew she was the one woman. He could be honest now. He marveled that he should have been so blind!

"You mean everything to me," he said huskily. She did not stir. He was silent for a moment and added: "I love you." The words startled him. Had he spoken them? She was unstirring and he said again: "I love you."

Alice slipped out of his arms and gazed at him intently. "I am so glad," she breathed.

He would have drawn her back, but she resisted. "I am glad, but not for the reason you think," she said calmly. Taken utterly aback by her flat tone, he could only stare. "Sit there, in the other chair, and let us talk," she directed. Deftly she bound up her hair while he watched wonderingly. "You say you love me," she said judicially. "Are you sure? This is not the first time you have said that."

"Of course, I'm sure ... As sure as ..." Blackford stammered. "Oh, sweetheart! I have wanted to explain about that wretched time. I didn't mean it. I love you. I do."

Alice eyed him. "Yes, I believe you do. And I'm glad. Do you know why? Now I can hurt you as you hurt me. It is my turn now." There was repressed bitterness in her voice. "Do you know why you love me? Because I made you. I knew I could. You must have wondered why I came here with you. It was for this moment." Still Blackford did not speak. "You thought I had forgotten and that was stupid of you. I'll never forget, nor will you. I am bitter, I know, and it doesn't grow less. This is only a beginning. I'm not going to leave you—not for a long time. That would be too easy for you. Don't expect that."

Blackford put out a hand. "I won't believe this. You are my wife—"

"No," she said quietly. "I am not your wife. Not really. That is over. You have made it impossible—forever. I think you will be ... sorry. More than you are now. And remember, you did it yourself."

Then she turned and walked slowly into her room. From outside came the mournful cry of an owl. Blackford shivered.

CHAPTER VI

ON DOUBLE OAK MOUNTAIN

When Alice arose next morning she found him in the same chair. His face was gray and his eyes tired. In her manner, Blackford found no reminder of the night before.

She appeared from the kitchen, shrouded in a bungalow apron and with flour on her forearms. "Do you want your egg fried on one side or both?" she asked.

"Either," said her husband briefly. He rose gingerly and stretched his cramped muscles. "Come in and sit down. I have something to say to you."

Alice dropped her airy manner and was again a grave-eyed woman, jealous of her own pride. Blackford leaned against the mantel and stirred the dead ashes with his toe. He had difficulty in beginning.

"I suppose I should have expected this, but I didn't," he said soberly. "I thought you ... But never mind. I don't care to speak about myself, but of you. You cared for me at one time, but if that is gone, I can only blame myself. I thought I was to have another chance. If I'm not, I don't see that there is anything I can do. If you want to hurt me, you can. I'll not try to deny that. You raise an issue between us I hoped to settle in another way. But it is out of my hands now and I can only agree in what you wish." His face was inscrutable and he spoke without heat. He smiled painfully. "I hoped this would be home to you, but if you feel as you do, that is impossible. But this is your house. That was what I wanted to say. I shan't intrude. I'll trouble you as little as possible. What I am trying to say is that I know my place. You're free and you're here because you wanted to come. I wondered why, but you have explained. It is all clear now. I shan't ask you to go and I shan't protest." Blackford straightened and his voice took a deeper note. "Whatever I did, I never deliberately hurt you. I don't think I'll ever forgive you for last night. I've seen much cruelty, but nothing like that. You did not even have the excuse of anger. And you planned all this! I'll never forgive you for that. Never!"

"It will not be necessary," said Alice. "You think you have been badly treated. You pity yourself. I am rather pleased that you do. It is what I hoped. I did not mean for you to be indifferent. As for forgiveness"—she laughed—"wait until I ask it."

Blackford's voice was quiet. "I shall. And you will ask it."

"No. Not now or ever. Between you and me there can be no forgiveness."

"That's final then. This is the end. It's such a pity that ... I should have been just too late. Are we quits now? You have had your ... requital. Are you satisfied?"

"This is a beginning," she repeated.

"You must be bitter. But then you have cause ... I judged your nature differently. I shall not be so trusting again. Can you continue like this? What of the future?"

"Let the future take care of itself."

"Then I have finished. I shan't speak of this again. I ... I ... But what's the use! I don't want any breakfast. I'm going to the office."

Blackford was curiously numb when he left the house. He felt as if something had gone out of his life. There had always been the hope that he could undo the past by the sincerity of his penitence. He hoped no longer. He must put that behind him. But what else mattered now? He stumbled a little as he walked.

Early as it was, he found Stringfellow bent over a desk. He rose slowly with a surprised greeting. "Hardly expected you down so early, sir. I've only just gotten here myself. I was going over yesterday's figures from the tippie."

"Which is my desk?" asked Blackford and Stringfellow indicated a corner. The top was bare of papers and a new chair stood invitingly before it. Blackford sat down indifferently. Stringfellow waited for questions.

"Was there anything you wanted to know, sir? Or did you figure on lookin' around outside first?"

"Let the outside go for the present," Blackford said. "How long since you had a superintendent here?"

"About two months."

"Who has been running the mine?"

"I've handled the inside and Joe Lawler looked out for the shaft."

"Lawler is the general foreman?"

"Yes, sir, that's his title. He has really been chief engineer, tippie boss, mine foreman, and everything else outside."

"Isn't there an assistant superintendent?"

"Not a real one. Lawler said he would wait until the central office sent the new superintendent before he began to ask for more men. He thought you would bring your own assistant."

"Rather a slipshod way of running things. Who handles the payrolls?"

"I do. Me and young Baskin. He's my helper here."

"You sign the checks?"

"We don't use checks. I make up the payroll on Lawler's report from the weighman at the tippie. I O.K. it as chief clerk and send it to Birmingham. Our office there sends us the money."

"Very good." Blackford's tone was uninterested. "Suppose you continue the arrangement for the present. How many men are working?"

"Picks or all told?"

"Both."

"Two hundred and forty-one pickmen checked in this morning and seventy-one others on top and the dead workers below."

"What is production?"

"It usually goes about a thousand tons a day." Stringfellow hesitated slightly, but Blackford was staring out of the window and did not notice. Seeing Stringfellow still waiting, he waved his hand impatiently.

"Put the daily reports for the last week on my desk and get on with your work. I shan't disturb your routine just yet. I'll look on a while before I take over. You and Lawler can carry on. By the way, when you get Lawler on the phone, tell him I want him."

"Very well, sir."

Blackford did not study the reports his clerk presently placed before him. Instead, he stared out at the unfamiliar prospect, in his abstraction hardly seeing the pines on Double Oak Mountain. Blackford ignored his desk and lived over the night before. Alice's change had been utterly unexpected, just when he thought he had retrieved his error. She was right. He had been easy. But not again. He would give her no opportunity to repeat the taunt.

Sunk in bitterness, he was oblivious of his surroundings. He had no anger against Alice. His scorn was turned against himself.

A man in grimy overalls, smudged face, and with a lighted lamp in the miner's cap on his head came quietly into the room. Blackford glanced up to see him advancing. Blue eyes beamed friendliness out of the black smear of his face.

"This is Mr. Blackford, ain't it?" he boomed, his voice nearly a shout. "This is Lawler, Mr. Blackford. Glad to see you here, sir. Stringfellow told me you come last night and I been waitin' for you to send for me."

"All I wanted was to tell you to go ahead as you have been. At least, temporarily. I'll look things over before I do anything."

"That's right. You'll find they do things kind of different down here from in the East. Hear you come from Pittsburgh. I come from Wales, myself, when I was a boy. Been right here in this workin' ever since it opened."

"Very interesting. Do you need more help?"

Lawler shook his head. "I kin git along all right until you see what you want to do. 'Course I am kind of short-handed at the tipple, but I been gittin' along for a couple of months and I'll be all right. The boys'll be wantin' to see you. When you comin' down?"

"Pretty soon. When I'm familiar with things up here. When I wish any changes, I will call you or notices will be posted on the bulletin board. I think that's all just now."

"Thank you, sir," Lawler said cordially as he turned away. "I hopes you like it and I'll be waitin' for you."

Lawler seemed competent, Blackford decided, and dismissed him to return to his thoughts. He grew restless in the small office. It seemed to stifle him. Double Oak Mountain beckoned and he rose abruptly and left without a word to Stringfellow.

The breeze fanned his hot brow and the murmur of the pines soothed his spirit as he walked. At the summit, he found a shelving plateau with the giant oak that gave the mountain its name. Huge rocks were scattered about and, seated on one, he scanned the spaces before him.

On one side was Cahaba Valley with its straggling houses and the gash of the mine shaft under the shoulder of the mountain. On the other was a valley that stretched in unbroken green as far as he could see, the blue haze of the mid-afternoon broken here and there by a spiral of smoke that curled lazily up from the trees. The smoke puzzled Blackford, for he could see no houses. There was no break in the deep green of the pines, relieved at times by the lighter shades of the oaks. At the horizon, Blackford caught the shadowy outlines of another high peak. Below he saw the gleam of a stream in the narrow gap that joined Cahaba Valley to the one at his feet.

As Blackford gazed, his jangling nerves grew quieter. It was almost hypnotic. Leaning against a boulder, with the sun warm to his back, he wished for glasses that he might scan the valley more closely. Imperceptibly he grew drowsy. His emotional strain lessened. His taut nerves relaxed. His head went back against the rock, his thoughts moved slower ... and he slept.

Blackford awoke with a start to find the sun low. He was ravenously hungry as he walked slowly down the mountain, his thoughts still busy. He passed through the village, meeting the day-shift men as they passed from the shaft to their homes. They eyed him, but did not speak and neither did he. At the office, he saw Stringfellow still bent over his desk. He continued up the hill to the Residency, his heart failing a little at the thought of again meeting Alice. He was sensitive. But he shrugged his shoulders and pulled himself together. She had not whimpered. Neither would he.

In this spirit he met her. She had been busy unpacking trunks and arranging their belongings. He had ordered a regular supply of groceries from the commissary and found an appetizing supper awaiting him.

To his surprise, Alice met him casually. She was impersonally friendly and he forced himself to equal her manner. They passed the evening in desultory conversation.

Blackford soon fell into a routine of existence. He was frankly uninterested in the mine. Now that he had direction of a colliery, he felt curiously listless. He preferred to sit at his desk and think. When the office became oppressive or he grew weary of the sight of Stringfellow, busy with cost sheets and production totals, he flung out of the office to the summit of Double Oak Mountain.

Blackford made no attempt to take charge of the mine. He was content for Lawler and Stringfellow to continue as before his arrival. Both seemed competent. Why should he bother? He signed the papers Stringfellow placed before him, but he rarely troubled to read them. At daily reports from the tipple and commissary, he barely glanced.

He spent more and more time on Double Oak, staring into the blue distances and thinking and dreaming. He did not ask

himself where he was drifting. His interest in life had failed. Vaguely he was dissatisfied, but his energy seemed sapped.

Alice, apparently, found no difficulty about housekeeping. She volunteered little about the house or how she spent her days and he did not ask. He avoided her when possible, but occasionally they spoke casually. Blackford dreaded these moments, for behind her words he felt a mockery that stung him, but not enough to spur him to action.

"You've been here almost two weeks now," Alice said one night. "How do you find it?"

"Well enough."

"And the mine. Is it what you thought?"

"All mines are more or less alike. I see no difference in this one."

"And the work? I am interested in that. I remember how badly you wanted it."

Blackford moved restlessly and glanced at her sharply. Did she guess how little he had done? But that was not possible. She had hardly left the Residency, seeming content to play at housekeeping. His answer was cautious: "I shall not complain, no matter what happens."

"I did not expect that. I was merely curious to see what you would do. That was your justification to my father and I recall what he told me. I had no personal interest."

Again Blackford stirred. Her words irritated him. She had done enough—why not leave him alone? What did the mine matter to her? She was interested only in seeing his pain. Blackford retired into himself. He was determined to deny her that satisfaction and his tone matched her own.

"That is only another way of reminding me that you are indifferent. Thank you, I shall not forget. You have not found me presuming?"

If Alice guessed at his discomfort, she did not reveal it. Her eyes were veiled as she answered. "Oh, no. You have been so very busy, I wondered what you were doing. You never mention the mine."

Blackford laughed shortly. "Would that be likely? I could hardly expect interest from you."

Alice's voice was reflective. "I see you have not forgotten. Well, neither have I."

They always ended like that. When Blackford could bear it no longer, he left the room abruptly. He seemed to feel Alice's eyes follow him in amusement that he should be so easily disturbed.

Blackford felt that she was attempting to lure him to another declaration of his love. She should not have it. No matter his hurt, she should not know.

Blackford made no acquaintances or friends as the days passed. He knew no more of Cahaba now than when he had come. It worried him only vaguely. He did not care. Under the irritant of his thoughts, he grew silent and dour.

Blackford never met any one on Double Oak Mountain, though the trail seemed much traveled. He saw it continued over the peak into the oaks and toward the valley on the other side. Weary of sitting motionless on his accustomed perch against the biggest boulder, he decided one afternoon to explore. The path plunged abruptly down and he picked his way cautiously. A log presently barred further progress and he wondered idly why it had not been cut away. He stepped over it carelessly, there was a sharp click and his leg was held fast. In a sudden panic, he struggled to free himself, lost his balance, and pitched over the log on his face.

Struggling to a sitting posture, Blackford found his foot imprisoned in a bear trap, anchored to a tree with a logging chain. The teeth had been filed from the steel jaws and his flesh was not lacerated, but the heavy pressure on his leg rapidly grew painful.

He tried fruitlessly to extricate his foot; he could not force open the jaws without a lever and there was none within reach. After a time, he gave up the futile attempt and resigned himself to waiting. His foot grew numb as the blood was cut off and he attempted to ease his leg by rubbing it. As he worked he caught the sound of footsteps as some one came toward him leisurely. Blackford waited, his lips compressed and his face white.

"Hurry up!" he called impatiently. "Help me out of this dam' trap."

He was prepared for anything except the girl who appeared at his cry. Lying awkwardly on his back he gazed up at her.

"My goodness! See what Dad has caught in his bear trap!" she exclaimed, blue eyes under level brows regarding Blackford.

"I don't know who Dad is, but I'd like to," Blackford answered irritably. "He's too careless with traps. What did he think he would catch?"

The girl stood over him, with no move to free him. "Not you, perhaps, but some one like you," she observed.

Blackford struggled to his knees. "Have you a key or anything? How do you get it open?"

"I haven't any key, but I suppose I can release you when I know you ought to get out."

"Ought to get out? Why shouldn't I get out?"

"What were you looking for down this path?"

"Nothing. I was just exploring."

"You haven't been in the mountains long or you'd know better than that. Exploring isn't safe around Cahaba."

Blackford leaned back with ironical philosophy and now looked full at his questioner. She was oddly out of place. She wore a stylish sport skirt and her feet were in serviceable walking shoes. Woolen hose peeped from under her skirt and on her head was a white knit cap, held rakishly by a long jade pin. Tall she seemed, with the delicate coloring that goes with red hair. Blackford, now that he thought of it, was struck by the purity of her speech. Nothing of the mountains there, either.

"Let's get on with it," he said calmly. "What other questions must I answer before you will help?"

"Who are you?" asked the girl bluntly. She bent over Blackford and felt beneath each lapel of his coat. Her hand went to his vest and then to his pockets, patting them lightly.

Blackford realized he was being searched, and light broke. "Do you think I am an officer?" he cried. "No wonder you waited."

"It's a good thing you're not," returned the girl dryly. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Pardon me. My name is Blackford," with too-elaborate ceremony. "Warren Blackford, and at present I am superintendent at Cahaba."

The girl's face changed. With a cry of commiseration, she searched for a pole to use as a lever in prying apart the jaws of the trap. "Why didn't you say so?" she exclaimed contritely. "But then it was my own stupidity. Mr. Stringfellow told me you were here and I should have known you. By your clothes if nothing else."

Finding a stout club, she inserted it beside Blackford's foot. Throwing her body against it, she sprung the jaws enough to allow him to draw out his foot. He stood up and winced at the pains of returning circulation.

"Whom should I thank for the rescue?" he asked.

"I am Margaret Shackleford," the girl answered. She spoke as if the name should have been enough.

CHAPTER VII

DR. RAWLS EXPLAINS

Alice heard a knock on the kitchen door and opened it to find a gaunt, middle-aged negro woman on the steps. Her face was so black it shone and a generous smile displayed shining teeth. For the first time, Alice heard the musical slurring tones of a Southern darky.

"Mawnin', Mis' Blackford. Dis is Martha."

She entered the kitchen as if she needed no further introduction. Alice was surprised at the easy way in which the colored woman made herself at home.

"Martha. Martha who? And what do you want?"

The woman straightened up with a wide grin. "Lawd! Ain' Mist' Stringfellow sont you word 'bout me? I'se gwine cook fr you. Mist' Stringfellow said Mist' Blackford tol' him t' git you a cook an' he sont me. I cooks an' scrubs an' I washes an' cleans up. I works fr all th' white folks in Cahaba, but Mist' Stringfellow said y' wan'ed me all th' time."

As she spoke she took off her coat, removed her hat, and substituted a spotless length of white cloth. This she wound turban-wise around her hair, which was neatly divided into a series of rectangles on her skull, tightly plaited, wrapped with a string, and pinned flat against her head. She took from the bundle she had placed on the chair a pair of shoes in a state of incredible disrepair. These she donned with a sigh of satisfaction and stood upright.

"Has you made th' beds dis mawnin', Mis' Blackford? I speck I better start in right there. 'At's what white folks most gen'ally don' like leas' t' do."

"That is always the first thing I do," Alice said. "I made those long ago. I have swept the dining-room, dusted the living-room, and done everything but wash the dishes. You may do them."

Martha grunted in admiration. "You no'th'n white folks sho' is lively. Me, I likes lively folks. 'At's what I tol' Jim dis mawnin'. Jim's my husban' an' I had t' tell him where I was gwine."

Martha was new to Alice. She had seen negroes before, of course, but they had been merely imitations of white people. Martha was all negro and proud of it.

"You say you work for white people here. Who are they? I haven't seen any one but the miners," Alice asked idly as she watched the woman's deft work.

"Ain' many, 'at's a fac'. I helps Mis' Joe Lawler some. An' I keeps Doctuh Rawls' office an' his rooms clean fr him. Sometimes I goes over in Possum Valley an' works fr Mis' Marg'ret Shack'lfo'd. An' I keeps Mist' Stringfellow's place fr him. I has plenty t' do."

"Your husband works in the mine?"

"Yessum. Jim's boss drivuh."

Martha finished the dishes, seized a broom and began sweeping the kitchen. Alice decided she liked her and was glad even of the companionship of a servant. Alice was a little lonely after days of solitude. She had been glad at first when no one had come near the house and she had been left undisturbed except for the daily visit of the boy from the commissary.

Alice was not given to brooding. She did not look back. She allowed her mind to dwell on the future, but not the past. She interested herself in the house and in the yards where the flowers, while not blooming, gave promise of a riot of color when the buds should open. She thought of her husband or herself as little as possible.

She spent hours on the veranda, watching with never-tiring eyes the life that went on at her feet. There was much that excited her curiosity, but there was no one to explain, so that with understanding did not come loss of interest. Later, after she exhausted the possibilities of the house and settled down into a quiet routine, she wondered why nobody came.

She did not know that no one calls on the Mrs. Superintendent until she indicates her pleasure by calling first and conferring the favor of notice.

Alice was a little puzzled at her own state of mind. She was lazily content, willing to drowse through the quiet days without question of the future or the past. Life for the moment was kindly.

She found she could not summon any great anger against her husband. True, she was no nearer forgiving him, but she secretly admired his attitude. There was no childish pretense of formality between them; he had accepted her own casual note. She noticed and approved that there was never now any hint of intimacy; her husband was attentive to her smallest wish, but he volunteered nothing. Alice would have been glad if Blackford had been less watchful of intruding and had told her more about the mine, but he did not and she made no attempt to rouse him from his reserve.

Slowly her heart healed under the spell of the mountains. She would be foolish to let bitterness spoil such a time. If she could think tolerantly of her husband—and it seemed she could—well, why not?

It was then she decided to visit Blackford's office and walked down the mountain to the commissary. The dim interior smelled invitingly of spices and fresh cloth. Interestedly she scanned the walls. Evidently the store sold everything. Clothes, dry goods, groceries, toys. Goodness! One could buy anything here. As she passed to the rear, a woman examining a bolt of calico at a counter looked up and spoke hesitantly. It was the first time since Alice had been in Cahaba that any one had spoken to her and she was pleased. She returned the greeting cordially and the woman's rather care-worn face lighted up.

As Alice entered the offices, Stringfellow rose to meet her. "Mr. Blackford is not here," he said before she spoke. Stringfellow knew where he was, but had no idea of telling. "I don't know where you could find him. Was there anything I could do? How are you and Martha getting along?"

"Just fine. Thank you so much for sending her. I have scarcely anything to do."

"Martha is all right. I have known her since I have been in Cahaba. She likes to look after her white folks."

"She has quite adopted me," Alice laughed. "I am terribly spoiled. Who is the woman at the counter?"

"That is Mrs. Joe Lawler. She is the wife of the mine foreman and one of the first ladies of Cahaba. Mining camp society, you know, is divided along very definite lines. Would you like to know her?"

Alice nodded and the introductions were soon made. Mrs. Lawler proved to be eagerly talkative and they left the commissary together. "I declare, when you live in a place like this, it is awful hard to get anything done," Mrs. Lawler sighed. "When you have four children and can't get any help, about all you do is cook and sew. I have been at Joe to leave and go back to Little Belle, where we came from, but he won't. That's near Birmingham. You can go in on the street-car, and it's fine to live there. I hate Cahaba, it is so far from everything; no trains or roads or nothin'. We've been here so many years, I guess we'll always be here now."

Alice nodded sympathetically. "I can imagine it is very dull for you. I have not found it so yet. It is all too new."

Alice learned many things about the camp from Mrs. Lawler, but the foreman's wife demanded information as well, once the initial strangeness was over. Mrs. Lawler pointed out the bachelor quarters where the unmarried men lived, known as "Saints' Rest"; the doctor's office with the small emergency hospital adjoining; the houses of the various foremen. And she commented pungently on each. Alice found her interesting, and before she left had invited Mrs. Lawler to the Residency and agreed to visit her in turn. The next day, when Martha had gone down the hill and all the work was done, she ran down to the cottage on the edge of the village.

When she entered, she found Mrs. Lawler with Dr. Henry Rawls. Irma Gene, one of the children, had cut her foot and the wound had become infected. Dr. Rawls was giving Mrs. Lawler careful directions and Alice listened, interested in the doctor and his earnestness. He would have been commonplace but for his hands, Alice decided. They were white and delicate, well-kept and graceful, with long slender fingers, broad palms and thick wrists. The hands of a surgeon, she thought.

The three began talking as Dr. Rawls wrote a prescription with a promise to send it down later from the dispensary. He asked the question Alice was beginning to regard as inevitable.

"Don't you find it rather lonely here?"

She replied by rote. "No, I haven't yet. I have been too busy adjusting myself to become lonely. I am just beginning to get acquainted."

"You could not have made a better start than with Mrs. Lawler," said the doctor. "And I may add myself. We two, I think, know pretty much the who's who of Cahaba and something more besides—the why. It isn't every one who knows that."

"Do you find much to do?" Alice asked. "It seems to me people should be healthy here."

"They would be if they was let alone," interrupted Mrs. Lawler harshly. "But they ain't."

Rawls answered Alice. "I manage to keep busy. I am here more as a precaution than anything else. Just in case something should happen. I have not confined myself to treating just the people on the reservation; I try to help everybody who needs it, whether they are in Possum Valley or Cahaba. In that way I keep busy."

"It is a big thing to cure people," Alice commented.

"It is when they want you," Rawls returned with sudden feeling. "It's a thankless task when they don't."

"But every one wants to be well!"

"Not in Cahaba," he answered, and Alice wondered.

Dr. Rawls talked delightfully. Books, writers, pictures, music, of them all Alice found he spoke interestingly. She had missed such companionship lately. When she rose she suggested that he walk up the hill with her and he assented.

"Won't you tell me something of your work in Cahaba?" Alice asked as they strolled slowly toward the Residency, pausing frequently, for the ascent was steep.

"What do you wish to know? You ask questions and I'll try to answer them."

"I want to know everything. You see, I've never been in a mining camp before and it is all strange. I don't even know how it is operated. You made a peculiar remark back there. You said people here did not want to be cured. What did you mean?"

"I suppose I was referring directly to whisky. I don't understand this camp. It is different from anything I ever saw. Usually, you know, camps like this are run pretty straight. They have to be or there is trouble with the men, but this is wide open. There has been no check at all."

"What do you mean by no check?"

"By the company. There's no attempt to enforce discipline. Take gambling, for instance. Ordinarily it is not tolerated in a camp, but there is a crap game and a poker table going here every night. And there is the whisky. It pours in, and I suspect this is a shipping point for Birmingham. It is none of my business, though, and I have never said anything."

"Why don't the officers stop it?"

Rawls glanced at her to see if she was sincere. "There are none here but company officers and they don't care so long as the company is satisfied. That is bad enough, but there are other things that complicate conditions here. They fight and every now and then there is a killing. With it all, I have my hands full."

"It must be hard on the women," she observed.

Rawls was suddenly vehement. "It is hard on the women! And the children, too! For that reason I have fought against it, but I can do nothing: I have no authority. I thought when they sent a new superintendent down, it would be different, but—pardon me, I did not mean to say that. It slipped out before I thought."

"You need not have stopped," Alice said. "Finish the sentence. You thought that when the new superintendent—" Rawls still hesitated, but Alice was firm. "I want to know everything. Please go on."

Rawls spoke reluctantly. "What I started to say was that I thought most of the trouble here was in the superintendent's

office. We had not had one for some time and the last one paid no attention. I thought it would be different when some one else was sent here."

"What has that to do with it?"

"If it is to be stopped, only the superintendent can really do it."

"Why?"

"Because his word is law and from him there is no appeal. This is a little principality tucked away in the hills and the superintendent is judge, jury, and executioner. If he wants to go far enough and fight hard enough, there is nothing he cannot do. The Cahaba superintendent could stop this whisky to-morrow and the gambling and other things too."

Alice was still laconic. "How?"

"He could deport the men who run the gambling tables or refuse to allow them use of a company house if they would not go. He could even refuse to sell them food or allow them to get water. He could starve them if he chose." He paused consideringly. "As for the whisky, that might be a little difficult. That would bring him into conflict with Big Shackleford. He would have trouble there."

"Shackleford? You have the queerest names here," Alice commented. "Who is he?"

"He was once a level boss in this mine, but he made a windy shot one day and lost his right hand. When he could not work any more——"

"Wait a moment," Alice interrupted. "I am terribly stupid, but you will have to explain a 'windy shot.' I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

"When the miners do their blasting to break the coal down, they bore a hole deep into the face." Rawls was very patient. This opportunity was heaven-sent and he must make the most of the picture he was drawing. "They put the cartridge at the bottom of the hole and tamp it full of muck. Any explosive goes along the line of least resistance, and if they do not seal the hole carefully, the explosive blows out the plug and shoots a stream of flame into the mine room. That is what is called a windy shot and explains many mine accidents. The flame ignites the gas that is nearly always present in a mine, the gas sets off the dust, and you have a disaster."

"I understand. And Shackleford lost his hand like that and lived?"

"Yes, but he couldn't work in the mine any longer so he went over the mountain to Possum Valley and bought a place. He has been making whisky there since. The valley has more stills in it than any other in the State and their owners all look to Shackleford."

"Is that why they call him Big Shackleford?"

"N-o-o, not exactly. I don't know him very well, only his reputation. He is not a particularly big man physically, but there is something about him ... that ... I don't know. You'll understand, if you ever see him."

"You say he would fight. What could he do?"

"Nothing in the open, but there is no telling what he might try. It would not be hard, though, for the superintendent to stop his whisky being brought on company property. Then Shackleford could not ship it out over the Mineral and that is the only way to get it out."

Alice was almost wistful. "The superintendent could stop all this. Are you sure?"

Rawls's manner was impatient. He remembered what he saw daily. If he could reach the superintendent through her ... But he must not go too far. He softened his voice. "If he wanted to stop it, I see nothing that could prevent him. Lord, what an amount of misery it would save! The moral side of the thing does not interest me. It's just the human angle."

Alice asked an impulsive question. "How do you come to be at Cahaba? You don't belong here."

Rawls nodded. "That's true, I don't, but there is a good reason for my presence. I was in practice a number of years. I

wanted to write a book on surgery, but I knew I should never have the time in Birmingham. When I had the chance, I took this place and I have been working on the book. It is practically finished, and I am going back soon."

Alice turned to the personal. "It is a heavy responsibility on the superintendent—not to stop these things," she mused. They were sitting on the Residency steps. "He has done nothing?" she questioned again.

"You should know better than I." Rawls chose his words carefully. "It has not seemed to me that he is interested in the mine at all. Certainly not in the people. The men tell me he has not been underground since he came and I see no change in conditions. I ... I regret that a slip of the tongue should have forced me to say all this."

Alice was thoughtful. "I'm glad you told me of it. Perhaps I can do something. At any rate, I will see. Come up some evening when my husband is here, won't you? I would like you to talk with him about this."

With a word of assent, Rawls turned away, leaving Alice still on the steps struggling with a new doubt of Blackford. She was puzzled by his indifference: it was not like the man she thought she knew. Alice had never believed Blackford selfish: she had argued with her father when he warned her.

It seemed to her that Blackford really wanted to work, to shake off the routine of the office and gain an opportunity to prove himself. There had been something big in his determination to do that, no matter the cost, and Alice could understand in a way, although she had suffered by it. But this was different. If it had been money, after all! That made it so cheap. If he had merely used her for selfish gratification of his own desire for ease and comfort! That ... that was contemptible!

Her father's words came back to her. He had warned her that this moment would come and she had not believed. Could she admit to him that, after all, he had been right in his judgment of the man? Her pride forbade that. If Blackford would not act of his own choice, the spur must be applied. She could do it, for he loved her. He had used her; she would use him—and for a worthier object.

Alice was quite cool about her plan and she thought out the details carefully that night. She must know more about Cahaba and its people: she must see for herself. She spoke to Mrs. Lawler of it the following day.

"Mrs. Lawler, how ... how do you get acquainted with people here?" she asked diffidently. "I've been so interested in them, but I've seen so little."

"Honey, you don't want to bother with these poor white trash," Mrs. Lawler objected. "They ain't your kind."

"But they are people and I'm interested. Perhaps they aren't the kind I've always known, but that makes me all the more curious. I want to know them and I don't know how to go about it."

"Well, s' far as knowin' 'em is concerned, that ain't goin' to be hard. But these mountain folks is kind of touchous. I been livin' here a right smart time and I learned that long ago."

"I don't want them to feel that I am intruding and that's why I came to you. Tell me how."

Mrs. Lawler looked at her curiously. "'Bout the best way I know is to go to preachin'. They has a preacher that comes over the mountain ev'ry other Sunday. And most o' the women-folks go there. I do myself. 'S a funny thing. Don't matter how rough a place is, the women-folks always wants preachin'. An' if you really want to help, I guess that'll be the best way to start. The church could do with considerable helpin'. It don't git overly much support here. 'Tain't goin' to take you long to see that."

That was Alice's introduction to Cahaba and she could not have chosen better. She did not ask her husband to go with her when she left the Residency the following Sunday for the little square white building near the depot. As usual, he left immediately after breakfast and Alice was glad. It relieved her of questions.

There was a rustle in the church when she entered with Mrs. Lawler and glanced around her curiously. The congregation was mostly women, with here and there an occasional elderly man. Alice presently forgot the people about her in the simple appeal of the preacher, a lean circuit rider.

Brother Sanford was a tall man and his voice was strident, but he spoke with an earnestness that shook him. Of the mountains, he spoke a language the mountain people understood. To Alice there was a strange appeal in the women's

faces lifted to the grizzled figure in the pulpit. She sensed their groping toward something better. If she could only help! She could bring something new into their lives, perhaps. She forgot herself in the thought.

Alice's ideas were not coherent, but she determined to know them and she did. Mrs. Lawler introduced her to Brother Sanford and afterward there were the women who crowded forward to speak to the minister. They responded shyly at first, but she chatted cheerfully and went home with the promise to attend the Ladies' Aid at Mrs. Glisson's.

After that first meeting it was easy. They were reserved for a time, but Alice was so unaffected, so eagerly interested in their lives and so sympathetic that they forgot her dainty clothes, her correct speech, her evident refinement, and remembered only that she was a woman.

Slowly Alice won their confidence; they invited her to their homes and she began to see that Dr. Rawls had not exaggerated. The camp was poverty-stricken when it should have been comfortable; the houses were poorly furnished, the women's clothes shoddy, and they went in daily fear of their men.

"Tain't them, it's the whisky," Mrs. Glisson explained one afternoon in a burst of confidence. "My man, now, he's a good man. He's real considerate when he ain't got likker in him."

Many were like that. As Alice saw more of the home life of the camp, she understood more of what was wrong. The men were squandering their money on whisky and at the gambling tables of the club.

She waited hopefully for some sign that her husband saw and understood, but there was none. He did not mention the camp and Alice did not tell him of her thoughts. The time was not yet.

CHAPTER VIII

WELCOME TO CAHABA

Shackleford voiced the question: "Well, what do you think of him?" He put it bluntly to Stringfellow and the others sat up.

Stringfellow took his time about answering. He turned his pipe slowly in his hands. "I don't know, Ben. He is beyond me."

"How come?" Shackleford asked impatiently. "You've come closer to him 'n anybody."

"That don't mean I know more about him. He ain't done nothin' so's I could find out, not even looked at the reports. Blackford's a new kind of superintendent to me."

Lawler chimed in. "Yes, that's so. I thought he was goin' to take hold right away. I talked with him the first day, but I ain't seen him since. He ain't been in the mine and he ain't said nothin' to any of the men; he ain't even been over to the tipple."

Shackleford spat through his fingers and looked around at the little group. "Strikes me we ought to be findin' out what he's aimin' t' do. I been holdin' back to see what he was like. I don't aim to much longer."

Shackleford's voice was easy, but with an undertone of command. His massive head was thatched by grizzled hair and swayed slightly from side to side. It was a heritage of the accident that had deprived him of his right hand. His mouth was hard across his long chin and his eyes peered bleakly above a predatory nose. It was not a sullen face, though a powerful one. There were lines of humor about the eyes under heavy brows. A very light steel blue, the pupil and the ball were so nearly the same color he seemed to be staring blankly out of sightless eyes. He looked steadily at the men around him, his eyes unmoving in his shaking head.

"I've waited on Blackford 'bout long's I figger to," he repeated. "How 'bout you all?"

His blue eyes gleaming, Lawler sat forward in his chair. "I don't see any use waitin' no longer," he said viciously. "If he wants to get hard, I c'n keep him busy at the tipple."

Charlie Galloway, who had been silent, added his observation. "He hasn't tried to check up on the cars, either. He ain't been up to the Mineral depot since he come in on the coal train."

Galloway was the Mineral agent, weighing the coal as it was mined and signing receipts for it. These were forwarded to Birmingham and the coal routed from them by the traffic department. Galloway was one of three men who ran Cahaba for personal profit. Lawler was one. He was in charge of the mine and he took tax of every ton that left it. The second was Shackleford, who did not live in Cahaba. His whisky went to Birmingham and he owned a poker and craps game in the camp. The third was Galloway, and he took toll from both Lawler and Shackleford. He stood at the neck of the bottle through which Lawler's coal and Shackleford's whisky must pass. He imposed a transportation tax.

Stringfellow was out of place in the group. Because through him they could learn what went on in company councils, the other three needed him. They used shrewdly the information he furnished. Stringfellow puzzled the others. He gave his information freely and asked nothing in return, although he could have demanded and received a fourth of the profits from the loose partnership. It would have made his salary as chief clerk insignificant.

The four were meeting in Galloway's house; Shackleford had called him: his need was urgent. He had been delaying his whisky shipments nearly three weeks now, waiting on Blackford. His customers in Birmingham were clamoring and he could no longer keep his stills in operation and handle the growing stores of liquor.

Galloway was the least striking of the four; small, almost dwarfish, with nondescript light hair and peering eyes, his quiet demeanor gave no hint of the craft his unpromising exterior hid.

"What kind of a man is Blackford, Stringfellow?" Shackleford asked. "You must of learned somethin' 'bout him."

"Not a thing," the chief clerk denied. "All I know is what I have seen and that ain't much. Blackford has hardly opened his mouth to me. I asked him if there was anything he wanted to know and he told me if there was he'd ask me. That was

the first day he was here. He ain't never asked."

"How does he spend his time? What does he do?" This was Galloway.

Stringfellow shook his head. "Blessed if I know. He usually comes down in the morning and sits at his desk lookin' out the window for a while. Then he goes out; what he does or where he goes, I don't know."

"I do. He goes up the mountain and sits there," rumbled Shackleford. "Some of my folks seen him more'n once. Made me nerv'us an' I set a trap in the path right over the hill, but I never caught nothin'."

Lawler pointed at Stringfellow. "What was the idea in sendin' him down here, Lin? I was lookin' for another kind after the way Crosslands was handled. He seems easier 'n Crosslands."

They waited as Stringfellow deliberated. He was always slow of speech and Lawler moved impatiently before the clerk spoke. "I don't know exactly what did happen. I know one thing, though. The central office don't like him."

"How do you know that?"

"They've got it fixed to send Macklin Gower down here for an engineer."

"Who's Gower? I never heard of him."

"Gower is one of Fain's boys."

"In the safety department, eh? I still don't see how that means the main office don't like Blackford. He married the old man's daughter, I heard."

"Well, I may be wrong, but if it was a straight deal they wouldn't send Gower. He ain't no engineer; he's a policeman, an' he's comin' here to do a policeman's work. He may pretend to be an engineer, but that ain't what he's comin' for. You mark what I tell you. They're after somebody an' Blackford's the only one it can be. If it had been you, for instance, Ben, he would have come before this. I figure from the way he has acted there is something funny about Blackford's marriage. You know he was chief clerk in the mining division one day an' Cahaba superintendent the next."

Galloway again broke in. "I've heard enough of Blackford. I'm fair sick of him. Let's decide somethin'."

They all looked at Shackleford, and he spoke decisively. "There ain't no use waitin' no longer. Kin you take a carload to-morrow night, Charlie?"

"Hell, yes! I could have took it any night for the last three weeks."

"Then I'll git it over here by midnight. You want to watch out, 'cause it's goin' to be a whopper. Don't put it in one o' those dinky little gondolas."

"I'll fix it all right." Galloway looked at Lawler. "How 'bout you?"

"Guess I'll let her shoot, too. I'm tired of waitin' myself. You watch out for the car sheets to-morrow and don't get 'em mixed up."

Stringfellow stopped them. "Suppose Blackford should begin lookin' into things in the office; he'll find plenty. Thought about that?"

Shackleford was indifferent. "That's your job." And Lawler added: "If he gets too busy inside, I'll find plenty to bring him out."

The foreman was an entirely different person from the man who had talked with Blackford in his office.

Shackleford got up. "Guess that's 'bout all, ain't it? Split same way as before?"

The other two nodded and Stringfellow looked on regretfully. Shackleford was back where he had been before Blackford's arrival. Margaret would be disappointed, but it would have been useless to protest. It would only have inflamed her father. He must ask for more time to fulfill his promise. Big Shackleford was stubborn.

"Let's go down and look over the game," Lawler proposed, and when all but Stringfellow agreed they strolled down the hill to the building euphemistically called "The Club." Here Stringfellow left them with a muttered excuse. Inside they found the one big room filled with smoke and a fair-sized crowd at the tables.

Shackleford spoke to the lookout. "Anything doin'?"

"Pretty nice poker game, sir," the man answered.

The newcomers wandered to the dice game, but the stakes were uninteresting and Shackleford drifted to the poker table. Billy McArdle was dealing, and he looked up with a nod as the group sauntered in. Shackleford knew all but one of the players, a blond youth at the end who kept up a running fire of good-natured comment on his own poor fortune. The game was stud.

"Doggone! I can't get enough to see anything but the first card," the lad complained. He flipped over a trey and turned up a four-spot as his hole card.

Shackleford did not like strangers in Cahaba nor did Lawler. They questioned Landers Stow, who ran the house for Shackleford.

"Who is he?" demanded Shackleford, jerking a thumb at the stranger. "How come you let him in?"

"It's an open game," protested Stow. "Told me his name was Mudd, John Mudd. He is a company man."

"How do you know?"

"He's got on a company badge and he came in on a company ticket from Birmingham."

"Is he a special?" meaning a company policeman.

"Search me. He don't play poker like no special. Hear him raising hell about his luck? He's been playing all night on a twenty-dollar bill and I bet there's more'n fifteen dollars in his stack right now. When he gets low, he goes out and wins a pot."

"Listens worse and worse," rumbled Shackleford. "This ain't no time to have nobody buttin' in. We got enough on our hands. You try him, Joe. You're the mine boss. Better find out somethin' about him."

The three moved back to the table, and Lawler stood at the opposite end to watch Mudd's play. The boy was good. Lawler saw him turn over a pair of deuces back to back with a pair of kings hidden on his left. The men were playing in silence when the youngster straightened up after looking at his hole card.

"Well, gentlemen, this is going to be a B., S. and C. hand," he announced. "I feel it coming. Just gimme a pair to start with and let's go."

Lawler and Shackleford watched in silence. On his first card, a jack of hearts, the boy bet two dollars. Several small cards turned over and the rest stayed. On the next card, a queen of spades, the lad doubled his bet.

"It's going up every time as long as they fall like this," he said cheerfully.

A king of hearts raised him ten dollars and the boy back-raised five. Again there was a round of betting. So it continued until the last card when the boy had all his money in the middle of the table. He had a possible straight, queen high.

"If it's agreeable, I'll call all bets," he said, after peeping at his hole card again.

Lawler interposed softly. "You play poker like a railroad man."

Sensing something unusual coming, a hush fell over the game.

"Well, old-timer, what is it to you?" asked the stranger, again peeping at his hole card and not looking at Lawler. "I don't see any chips in front of you."

"I don't need any to play in this game."

"Own it, or something like that?" questioned the boy. "You must be Big Shackleford."

"Like hell he is," Shackleford interrupted. "That's me."

Mudd glanced at him. Then his eyes wandered to Stow, standing by nervously.

"Who are you, anyway?" Shackleford demanded suddenly. "And what are you doin' here?"

"Have to answer right out loud?" sparred Mudd.

"That's all right. We don't have any secrets here." Shackleford's tone was aggressive.

"I don't think I want to," Mudd said coolly.

Shackleford banged his one hand on the table. "Then this game is closed." He turned to Stow. "Cash 'em in, Landers."

The players knew Shackleford too well to protest and the dealer argued long in straightening the pot. Mudd thrust his money into his pocket and rose, still refusing to grow angry.

Shackleford and Lawler approached him. "Now, young fellow, just give an account of yourself. What do you want here? We are kind of particular about who lives in Cahaba." It was Lawler speaking.

The boy's eyes were beginning to kindle and his lips tightened. "Oh, I wouldn't say you were particular. You live here, I see."

Shackleford's patience ended and he raised his voice to a bellow. "I'll ask you one more time. Who are you an' what do you want?"

"And I'll tell you for the first time that it's none of your damned business," Mudd flashed back. "Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Run you out of the camp," replied Shackleford definitely. "You're too young to be goin' 'round loose here." He raised his voice in an inarticulate shout and a half-dozen men began edging forward. "Bounce him," he said malevolently, motioning toward Mudd. "And listen, young fellow, when you hit the ground, keep goin'. You ain't needed 'round here."

"This is Southern hospitality, I suppose," murmured the boy sweetly. Abruptly his voice changed; his eyes grew menacing. "Stop right where you are," he commanded the men who were advancing on him. "I didn't come here to start anything, but I guess I can finish anything that is started." He backed into a corner and swept his eyes over the gathering. "My name is Mudd," he cried defiantly. "I work for the Cahaba Company, and I'm going to stay here until the superintendent who hired me tells me to beat it. Now, if any of you fellows are looking for trouble, come right ahead."

The boy made no movement toward a gun. Apparently he was not armed, but there was something in his glance that held the others back until Shackleford sent them forward again.

"For God's sake!" he cried. "Do I have to tell you twice to get a man out of my own house? Get to it!"

At the word, Mudd leaped from his corner at Shackleford. He seized the big man by the neck, spun him around, and, in spite of his bulk, was back in the corner with him before any one could reach them. His hand brushed down across the front of his coat and a revolver was jammed into Shackleford's ribs.

"You sicked 'em on so fast, now call 'em off!" Mudd snapped. There was no lightness in his voice. "If I have to get somebody, I'll start with you. Now, talk quick!"

The mountaineer spluttered and his men halted irresolutely. Shackleford was not afraid, but he was no fool. He could spot a bluff, and he knew if anything happened he would have little interest in it; he would be the curtain-raiser. He twisted and squirmed, but could not break Mudd's grip.

"Wait a minute, boys, wait a minute. The gentleman seems to have me right now," he said.

"That's the way to talk," Mudd approved. "Suppose we discuss the matter a little. You have asked me some personal questions. S'pose I ask you some." The whole room was watching them as Mudd lowered Shackleford none too gently

into a chair and stood over him in polite inquiry. "What have I done? Your welcome to Cahaba is too much. I come in here to seek some innocent diversion, but my face don't make a hit at all. Wise me up! What's it all about?"

Shackleford squirmed uncomfortably. "We don't like strangers much."

"I'll tell the world you don't. But why?"

"We just don't."

"Don't you ever have any here?" Mudd persisted. "Am I the first man who ever came here who wasn't born in Cahaba?"

Shackleford did not answer, and Mudd considered him with a brightly cheerful air. Secretly he was wondering how he was to get out, when Shackleford spoke again.

"If I was you," he said judicially and entirely without rancor, "I'd sure catch that coal train out to-night. You ain't goin' to be pop'lar with me."

"Thanks for the advice," Mudd answered calmly. "I'll consider it. Something tells me, though, that I'm going to disappoint you. I just live on excitement."

"All right. If that's what you're lookin' for. You c'n stay if you're willin' to take the consequences."

Mudd placed an affectionate hand on the elder man's arm. "Let's me and you take a walk to the door. I'll go next to the wall if you don't mind."

Shackleford rose with alacrity and the two sidled out.

"Thanks for a very pleasant evening," said Mudd courteously as he disappeared into the darkness.

Shackleford turned back into the room. "Now, who in hell can he be?" he asked, but no one answered.

CHAPTER IX

APPLYING THE SPUR

Supper was finished, and Blackford sat silent before the big fireplace in the library. He had become a creature of habit; in the mornings he went to the office for a time and then to the mountain until evening.

Perhaps if Blackford could have talked out his thoughts, he would have been less morbid and more hopeful, but he could not. In his singleness of purpose he had deliberately put aside friendship, and now there was no one to whom he could turn, sure of tolerant sympathy and unselfish counsel. Blackford had been all things to himself and had not missed anything out of his life. He had never felt until now the need of a confidant to whom he could pour out his disgust with himself and relieve his mental strain with words.

For the first time in his life, Blackford was finding an interest in life outside of himself and his own ambitions, and it did not come easily. He struggled against it, but he could not turn his thoughts from his wife. She was all that greatly mattered, and yet he did not know how to ease the sting of her contemptuous dismissal of words that had come from him out of the wonder of his newly discovered feeling. The knowledge that she did not love him did not end her dominance of Blackford's thoughts—he loved her.

Alice hovered over the dining-room table, her face in the shadow of her hair. She had been a stranger to him since that first bitter night in Cahaba. He had willed it so because it hurt him less that way and he thought she preferred it. He told her nothing, touched her life as little as possible, but was unobtrusively thoughtful of her. He arranged her living expenses, found a servant for her, and was glad when Martha developed into a friend. But he never forgot himself. The very intensity of his feeling made him hide his love with sensitive fear.

Alice finished her work in the dining-room, tucked away the cloth in the buffet, and reached up to turn out the light. In her upturned face, Blackford saw that the days had taken toll of her, too.

"We shall not bicker," she had told him and she kept her word. There was nothing small about her: there were no pin-pricks.

Blackford each day saw new things in his wife that he loved. As the light went suddenly out, his mind retained the picture of her face, with dark hair around it and her lips parted in the suggestion of a smile. And he had once thought her plain!

As he looked, Alice came out of the dining-room and sat down opposite him. Instead of taking up a book, she considered him gravely. There was nothing friendly in her gaze. It was the appraising gaze of a woman who sees a man without the illusion of love or friendship. It disquieted Blackford.

She began without preamble. "Warren, I want to ask you something, but I'm afraid you won't understand."

Blackford's voice was cool as he answered. "Does it matter if I don't? Ask me, anyway."

"It's about Cahaba. Is this different from other camps?"

"Not particularly. They are all very much the same."

"You haven't noticed anything?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I have, and I wondered if you had seen and did not care."

"Please explain."

"The way people live here; the things they do. That is what I don't understand."

"What have I to do with that?"

"You are superintendent. Doesn't that make it concern you?"

"I have seen nothing that affects me."

"How do you spend your time, then? What are you doing?"

Blackford moved uncomfortably. He could not tell her of his perch on Double Oak. She would not understand if he could explain and he could not because it would involve a confession of how badly she had hurt him. It would please her to know that and Blackford had no intention of giving her that satisfaction.

"I am at the office some," he said finally. "And there are other places. There are many demands on a superintendent's time. The details would not interest you."

"Not the details, perhaps, but I am curious about what you do that you need to be told of these things. How do you spend your time? Not at the office."

Blackford was on surer ground there. "I don't need to be at the office at all; Stringfellow and Lawler are all right."

"How do you know? Have you made any effort to see?"

"The central office is satisfied; it has not complained. That is enough for me."

"You are easily satisfied. I know little about business, but I would not allow any one else to assume my responsibility."

Blackford stirred under the thrust and his lips compressed. "Do you know that I have?"

"You would not think Cahaba like other camps if you had not. Even I know better than that."

Blackford flushed. "I don't know anything about Cahaba and I don't care! I wish I had never come here!"

"That is what I thought, but now that you are here, you should at least do what you were sent to do."

"Oh! So I was sent to do something. What?"

"You said it yourself—operate the mine. And you are not doing it. You are allowing others to do it for you."

"Why should you care?"

Alice was very patient. She could feel his restiveness, but nevertheless she persisted in spite of the unpleasantness she foresaw might come. Her voice was quiet. "I don't particularly. As long as it was just the mine, that was something for you to decide; but this involves more than that."

Blackford ceased sparring. "Suppose you tell me plainly what you mean. I do not understand you."

Alice brushed her hair back and spoke decisively. "I hoped you would invite that. It isn't the mine that interests me; it's the people. Dr. Rawls says this is the worst camp in Alabama. Is whisky allowed in other camps?"

"Not ordinarily. It was not when I left Alabama."

"Dr. Rawls says there is so much of it here and I have seen some of the signs. And gambling ... and ... other things ... women. It's hard on the families of the men. I have seen that and I can't understand why you haven't."

"One minute. Who is Dr. Rawls?"

"He is the company doctor here, but he is helping every one whether or not they belong to the company. He says the whisky makes his work much more difficult."

"How does that concern me?" Blackford was being purposely dense. He was angry.

"You are superintendent, and you told me the superintendent here could do anything. You could stop it. Dr. Rawls says you could."

Her reiteration of the name stung Blackford. "Let Dr. Rawls mind his own affairs; he is only a company employee. What I do is none of his concern. I'll tell him what I think of his running to you with tales."

Alice stopped abruptly. "So you did misunderstand, after all. No, you won't say anything to Dr. Rawls. I saw some of these things myself, and I made him tell me the truth. But I have nothing more to say if that is how you feel."

Blackford was not satisfied with himself. "But you have! Go on and tell me what you think of me. What do you expect me to do? I——"

Alice interrupted him quietly. "I expect nothing of you and it's just as well. I'd be disappointed." She paused, and Blackford looked at her without showing the pain he felt. He could have borne it better if she had shown more anger. Alice was continuing regretfully. "You are very blind ... I was doing this as much for you as for myself ... Can't you understand? I'm trying awfully hard not to hate you. Things like ... this make it difficult. I thought you wanted to do something ... big. I could have understood that and in a way have forgiven you for what you did ... to get your chance. But you didn't ... It's too much trouble ... My father said ... I was trying to respect you in spite of everything. You have an opportunity here, a big one. I was looking for you to try to justify yourself. You could do so much, if you were ... different. I'm sorry; honestly, I am. It's your loss, after all." She looked at him, and Blackford dropped his eyes after a moment. "I won't bother you again. Good-night."

Blackford let her go without a word; it was true, he had done nothing, but he could not explain that his apathy came from indifference to everything but his love for her. That would please her, and he would not have her know how deeply she could wound him. Then a new thought disturbed him. Was she in earnest or did she guess shrewdly at his hurt?

The question was unanswered when he left the house next morning. Instead of going to the office, he walked slowly up Double Oak Mountain—he wanted to think. He could do things—for her, but he would be afraid of meeting disdain if he should tell her. Because he had done it, she would not find it good.

Blackford saw the flutter of a skirt as he walked over the lip of the crest and Margaret Shackelford faced him. He was not surprised; it was not the first day he had found her there since the time she had rescued him from the bear trap.

"I didn't expect you up here," she said. "Not so early. I came up to be alone."

"So did I. Just forget that I'm here. I don't want to talk, anyway."

Margaret broke the silence at last. "Dad is worried about you," she said.

"Why about me?" Blackford asked with raised brows.

"When you came, every one thought you were going to be a hell-raiser. Dad looked for trouble, but I guess he needn't have bothered."

The recurrence of Alice's thought irritated Blackford. "I've heard that before," he snapped. "What's the matter with the place, anyway?"

Margaret looked at him incredulously. "You have been here all this time and don't know? You are not in earnest?" Seeing Blackford's bewilderment she did not wait for an answer. "Cahaba is a hard camp. The tip went out some time ago that it was to be cleaned up. Fain was down here looking things over and, when you came, they thought you had been picked for the job. I told Dad he was wrong."

"Is that so! Maybe I'll surprise you."

But Margaret shook her head. "Oh, I guess not. You don't know what is wrong in the camp and you let Lawler run the mine."

"I haven't noticed anything wrong with him."

"You haven't looked very hard, then. I don't like him, and I don't like that little rat, Galloway, either. He and Dad are going to have trouble. I can see it coming."

"What has Galloway to do with it? A moment ago it was Lawler."

"You'll find out if you ever look into things, and I wish you would. I'd like to see things different down here. I don't like to live as I have been doing."

"I never heard you complain before. What's the matter, out of sorts?"

Her voice was resentful. "Who wouldn't be! I am no different from any other girl. You know what Dad is doing—making whisky. I know that you know. And I despise it—and the people he works with. Besides, Dad sent me to school in Birmingham. It was bad enough before, but when I came back it was unbearable. Dad will never quit of his own accord. I've been hoping somebody would come to Cahaba who would stop him."

It was the nearest approach to the personal they had ever ventured. "I've often wondered about you," Blackford said. "You are out of place. If you do not like it, why do you stay?"

"I can't leave mother. Some of these days it will happen to Dad, and then she'll need me."

"Not a pleasant way to live," Blackford sympathized. "Waiting for something to happen. How do you amuse yourself?"

Margaret gestured vaguely. "I have my books and my music. Dad did that for me; if I had never gone to school I should not have had those. I have wondered about you, too. Why are you here? You don't belong as much as I."

Blackford looked down at her, a queer gleam in his eyes. "I'm beginning to wonder about myself. But you are wrong, I do belong. I came from just such a camp twelve years ago."

Margaret glanced at his soft hands. "You've come a long way," she commented dryly. "You'll never get back."

Blackford shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe not, but I don't want to talk about myself. Haven't you any friends—friends from the outside, I mean?"

"Yes, I have, one. But he doesn't help. He only complicates matters, and makes it harder for me to stay because I know I could go."

"Doesn't he understand?" Blackford asked gently.

"I don't know, but he accepts it and is waiting. I ... I met him in Birmingham and he followed me here. I won't see him often. I couldn't, because, you see, he needs me and I want to go. But Dad needs me more. Not now, perhaps, but he will, and when he does I must be here."

"I'm sorry," said Blackford simply. "I wish I could help. I guess we all have our troubles. But I didn't think you——"

"You needn't pity me. I'm blue this morning, but I never lose hope. I'll get away. Some of these days Dad will meet some one who will make him change. I hoped you were the man, but you're not. I thought so at first. You looked like you were. It'll take a fight to clean up Cahaba, and I guess you don't like to fight. If it isn't your way, I don't blame you for walking around it. But some day, somebody will come who won't, and then Dad will get his lesson and stop his stills."

"Don't you ever make mistakes?" asked Blackford. She did not answer. Blackford saw himself through Cahaba's eyes, and it did not please him. His self-esteem suffered. "Don't you ever make mistakes?" he repeated. "You might be wrong about me."

Margaret glanced at him. "I don't think I am. You are too contented."

Blackford laughed harshly. "Contented! That's all you know about it. I guess I could fight for something worth while, but what's the use?"

Margaret's tone was regretful. "None, I suppose, if that's how you feel. After all, it must come from within. And if it isn't worth while to you, then you're right according to your standards. All I know is that it would be to me if I were a man."

Blackford saw her eyes fill. "Won't you let me help you if I can?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head. "There's nothing you can do. There is only one way you could."

"Would it help if I really took over Cahaba?"

"Yes, it would. Anything to change Dad. I know something will happen to him."

Blackford was lonely. "If I do, will you help?"

Margaret's eyes questioned him. "Do you really mean it?"

Again Blackford shrugged. "I don't make promises, but if I need you, will you help?"

"All I can, and maybe it will be more than you think. I don't want you to go into this for me. I wouldn't ask that because I haven't the right; it would be too much. But if you do, and you find I can help, I will. I shan't be able to do much. We shall be on opposite sides, because you and Dad won't get along if you really clean up the camp. But I'll do what I can."

"I don't know what you can do, but will you at least be friendly? No matter what I do or what happens between your father and myself."

Margaret spoke instantly. "I promise. I don't think you have any idea of what you'll find. I don't want to prejudice your mind, but remember Dad is set in his ways. He won't be easy to change." She glanced at the sun and rose. "I must be going."

Blackford put his hand out impulsively as they parted. "You are my first friend in Cahaba. I never quite realized how much a friend helped."

At the commissary door, Blackford met Lawler, and the man greeted him effusively. "When you comin' over to th' tippie?" he asked. "The boys all want to see you."

"Soon," said Blackford curtly and entered the office. At his desk, he almost repented of his promise to Margaret. Cahaba meant little to him. But Alice seemed to want him to do something; perhaps she had meant it and would approve. He would see what he could do. There was a cough and he found Stringfellow at his elbow.

"Well?"

"Excuse me, sir, but here's some things I didn't want to pass on myself. There's some letters from the central office you'll want to read. There is another thing, too—about the mine ..." Blackford looked up as Stringfellow paused and found the clerk's eyes on him earnestly. "I'm afraid we are going to have trouble, sir, and I wanted you to know what I am going to do."

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply. "What makes you think I won't handle it myself?"

Stringfellow hesitated, and then became apologetic. "You ain't taken much interest in things before. You signed everything without paying no attention, an' I thought you wouldn't want to be bothered."

"Well, let's have it. What's wrong?" Blackford said shortly.

"The men are complaining about the weights. They claim the weighman is cheating them. They say they don't get credit for all the coal they send up."

"Who handles that?"

"Lawler, sir."

"When did the complaints begin?"

"There's been mutterin's a long time, but they didn't get ugly till a few weeks ago."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't think you would care anything about it, Lawler seemed to take it for granted he was to run things. I told him."

"So you went to Lawler, eh?"

"Yes, sir, but it didn't do any good. I hated to bother you with it after I saw how you felt. I kind of hoped when you come you'd look 'round a little. I ... I expected it. I can——"

Blackford interrupted him. It was the last straw. First Alice, then Margaret, and now his own clerk had shown him his duty. His smoldering anger burst out.

"I'm superintendent here," he cried savagely. "You come to me in future, understand! So they want a little hell-raising. I'll give it to them. Bring me the production records for six months and I'll find what they are all hinting at."

CHAPTER X

BLACKFORD TAKES HOLD

Blackford calmed after his outburst of temper and took up the figures before him. He was handicapped because he did not know what he sought and soon found that to understand conditions he must check from the beginning. He spread out the sheets Stringfellow placed on his desk and began his long task.

As Blackford read again the familiar forms he felt the call of work. He was thinking of something besides himself. He got down the blue-prints and profiles of the mine and the geological map showing the formation of the coal under his feet.

Cahaba was on a switch of the Henry Ellen seam lying under Double Oak Mountain. This seam had largely been worked out, he saw by reference to his maps. It was the seam nearest the surface and only eight hundred feet down.

Three hundred feet lower was the Montevallo seam, which also had been worked out. Four hundred feet lower still was the Warrior seam, on which the men were working. It was a six-foot seam and production should be at top figure.

Cahaba was a shaft mine with the main shaft in Cahaba Valley, and another shaft, seldom used, on the other side of Double Oak Mountain. The latter shaft was merely for emergencies and kept in repair only by inspection.

As he worked, Blackford subconsciously checked the production. It was around a thousand tons a day. With one hundred and fifty picks, this would give each miner an average of seven tons a day. Pretty fair for picks, he concluded, and was puzzled that he could find nothing wrong.

Painstakingly he checked the figures and verified the signature of the weighman on each sheet. The mine, he noted, was operating twenty days a month on an average. Again it was about the normal figure.

He laid down the last of the sheets from the top-house. The coal was mined; now what had become of it?

"Oh, Stringfellow, have you the weight sheets from the Mineral Railroad?" he called.

"I have the duplicates," answered the clerk. "This is a spur of the Mineral and we are the only mine served. Our coal is not weighed on our own tracks, but at the junction at Coosa."

Blackford was immediately suspicious. "Why is that necessary? That gives considerable chance for juggling the coal. Why hasn't the rate bureau a weigher here?"

"Because this is only a spur of the Mineral and doesn't serve any other mine. At Coosa, the coal from Avondale, Altamont, and Boyles is all assembled for the main line and they have the weighing bureau there. Besides, the company owns the Mineral and it doesn't make much difference where the weighing is done."

The explanation was plausible, but Blackford did not like the arrangement. "Very well, where are the duplicates? They furnish you copies of the weights of your cars?"

"Yes, they send us duplicates. The original goes to the Birmingham office and is attached to the invoice for the coal we ship."

"Where do we send our coal?"

"Most of it goes directly to the company's mills at Ocampo. They use it for the blast furnaces and other plants at the mill. We get very little domestic coal and all of that is sent to one yard in Birmingham. We dig steam coal, and Ocampo depends on us to keep the mills running."

Blackford took up the file of duplicate weight bills without further comment. Stringfellow's words had allayed part of his suspicion. If all the coal went to the company's plants, it was company coal and no money was passed. The Cahaba operation was simply credited with so much coal at the market price for steam coal and the financial adjustment and charge was a matter of bookkeeping in the central office at Pittsburgh. In that way, the local offices handled no money and there was no opportunity of scalping contracts and getting a bonus for diverting the fuel.

Blackford found more of his suspicion allayed as he scanned the figures painstakingly. Day by day he compared the railroad weights with those from his top-house and they tallied almost to a pound. In six months there had been a variance of less than ten tons.

Blackford concluded he was looking in the wrong place and decided to turn his attention next day to the outside. It was growing late and his head ached from the strain. He had decided to think it over for the night when he heard a crash at the shaft followed by the jangling of machinery and the screams of a man in fear.

Trouble at the shaft brings a mining engineer to his feet instantly. Anything wrong there touches every part of the mine and the lives of the hundreds of men underground.

Blackford dropped his papers and started out at a run, Stringfellow close behind. He heard men shouting and the hiss of escaping steam. His pace slackened when he heard the steady cough of the engine at the fan-house and knew there was nothing wrong with the air. The heart of the mine was beating steadily. But when he reached the top-house, he found it bad enough.

The cage had been pulled entirely through the top of the staging that supported it. The hoisting machinery was hopelessly jammed, the steel supports bent and broken. Peering into the engine-house, he found the hoist engineer dazedly surveying the ruins.

"What happened?" demanded Blackford curtly. "How did you do it?"

The man did not answer for a moment, and the superintendent sprang past him to cut off the engine that was still pounding wildly. Then he stepped back to the engineer.

"Come on! There's nothing to get paralyzed about," he said impatiently. "What happened? Something break?"

"She ... she ... got away," the engineer said thickly.

"I can see that. How did it happen?"

The man muttered incoherently, and Blackford caught a whiff of his breath. Whisky! Seizing the engineer by the shoulder, the superintendent hustled him outside, reached for a hose and turned the stream full into the man's face. The shock of it knocked him off his feet, but Blackford continued to play the icy stream on the struggling figure. When the prostrate man began to splutter and protest, Blackford threw the hose aside and pulled him to his feet.

"Sober?" he asked.

"Yes," gasped the man, dragging a wet sleeve across his face.

Blackford stood waiting for him to get rid of the water and saw the fireman staring at him with wide eyes.

"Do you know what happened?" Blackford asked. "What is your name? Do you know who I am?"

"You're the new superintendent, ain't you? No, sir, I don't know what happened. My name is Evans."

Blackford turned to the engineer. By now the engine-house was surrounded by the surface workers, who looked on with impassive faces. They waited to see what the new superintendent would do with his first emergency.

"What is his name?" Blackford asked Evans, nodding toward the engineer.

"Archie McNew," the boy told him.

"Where were you when the cage started up?"

"I was slacking down the ashes. I heard the bell ring and he threw on the power. I didn't notice anything else until I heard the cage hit the top and he yelled. Then I started in to shut off, but the engine broke the clutch and the drum was racing before I could get to it."

McNew had settled down shivering, and Blackford turned to him as Evans ceased speaking. "What have you to say about it? How did you come to pull the cage through the top?"

"I ... figured wrong ... I didn't know how close it was ... I thought it was coming from the third level."

McNew was stammering and his teeth chattered. "They came from the second and ... and ... when I found it out ... it was too late."

"You were drunk, weren't you?"

McNew stuttered and finally admitted: "I had a drink."

"Only one?" Blackford persisted.

"Yes." McNew put his head on his arms and began to sob.

Blackford waited. He sensed the watching figures at his back. He should be setting them at work to repair the damage, but he persisted because he wanted to impress them. So he waited while they watched silently. McNew sobbed undisturbed, his sandy head with the walrus-like mustache hidden in his arms.

Blackford finally spoke. "Do you want the hose again? You only had one drink, eh? Since you came to work?" McNew nodded, and Blackford's anger rose. "You're a hell of an engineer! I suppose you know you are lucky you didn't kill somebody. Where did you get your liquor?" McNew was silent, and Blackford's face hardened. "All right, you'll either tell me where you got it or you can go to Stringfellow for your time. Right now, too."

Still McNew did not answer, and Blackford opened his lips to send him to the office when Lawler spoke behind him. "I gave him the whisky."

Blackford turned to find the foreman on the tipple track. The superintendent did not try to hide his astonishment. "You gave him the liquor!" he exclaimed. "And then put him on the hoist engine! Were you crazy?"

Lawler walked toward him. "I had my reasons," he said; and then, dropping his voice: "I don't think we ought to talk this out 'fore the men. I'll tell you 'bout it later."

"Right," said Blackford instantly. "Get a gang and clear this mess away. When you are through we'll take this up."

The superintendent looked on without comment as the foreman set about clearing the wreckage. He rigged a temporary hoist and connected it with the second cable drum. By using the fan-engine, it would serve to bring the men below to the surface and lower the night workers. Lawler moved with swift certainty: every man jumped when the foreman spoke. Soon Lawler had a crew dumping the coal that had been spilled. They snaked the trip out of the mass of twisted steel and sent it to the blacksmith shop. The splintered planking of the top-house was replaced. Every move brought order out of the confusion.

Most serious damage was to the engine, which had sprung a cylinder as it raced.

"How long will you be down?" asked Blackford of Lawler, meaning how long the mine would be idle. If coal could not be brought to the surface, the men could not dig it.

Lawler squinted at the engine. "Depends on how soon we can git her goin'. I'd say we ought not to be down over a couple of days."

The job was about through for that night. They had done all they could until the engine was ready. The mechanic from the little machine shop began dismantling the engine to get at the sprung cylinder. The men left the tipple, and Lawler was turning to go when Blackford stopped him.

"One minute. We haven't settled about the whisky yet. I am still waiting for your explanation. It should be a good one."

Lawler seated himself on a timber. "I give it to him because he needed it," he said placatingly. "He was just comin' off an awful bender and needed a shot to set him up; he had to have some kind of a bracer. You don't realize how things are here in Cahaba, Mr. Blackford. We have to put up with a lot. Ain't like it is in the East. He's the only engineer we've got."

"So you gave it to him. Where did you get whisky in the first place? Do they allow it in the camp?"

"Ain't never heard no rule agin' it. It's been drunk since I been here and'll probably be drunk here after I'm gone."

"Where does it come from?" Blackford was puzzled. In the mining camps he had known in the old days whisky had been barred. Violation of the rule meant heavy fines.

Lawler waved his arm toward the mountains. "Woods is full of stills. Ain't no trouble gittin' it, 's far as that goes. They makes it out there. Been doin' it ever since they found out how, an' I don't know's they'll ever stop."

Blackford was emphatic. "I don't care what they do out there. But how does it get in the camp? Don't our special officers watch for it?"

Lawler winked at the superintendent. "Go on, Mr. Blackford. You know better 'n that. You see, Mr. Blackford, things here ain't like they is in other camps. Bob Allen ain't never done much an' I don't s'pose he ever will. I don't know where he gits his orders. From the office, I guess. Anyways, that ain't never been none of my business."

Blackford's surprise increased. "Comes in pretty freely, does it?" Lawler nodded assent. "I see. All right. Where did you get yours?"

"Down to the club."

"You gave whisky to McNew and then put him to handling the lives of men working under you. Is that your idea of responsibility?"

Lawler spread his hands. "I had to have an engineer. He's the only one. What would you of done?"

Blackford did not answer the question. "We'll let McNew go," he decided. "You can tell him since you seem to be so careful of him. I can get another man from Birmingham by the time things are ready to run again."

Lawler protested. "I wouldn't let McNew go if I was you. You ain't been down here very long and you don't know him. He's a good man 's long 's he stays off the stuff. It wasn't his fault he got started."

"I suppose it wasn't his fault he pulled the cage through the top-house," interrupted Blackford.

"No, it wasn't. I—" Lawler began when Blackford interrupted again.

"You are quite right. It was not his fault, it was yours. Never mind about anything more. McNew is no man to have charge of the hoisting engine. I have nothing against him. Give him something else to do where he won't play with men's lives when he forgets."

Blackford for some time had been conscious that a third man was standing near and listening to their conversation. His irritation grew as he talked and his mind was preoccupied with it as he listened to Lawler's excuses. Now he turned and snapped:

"Well, what do you want?"

"Thank you, I've been waiting for you to ask that question for some time," responded the man airily, as he moved out of the shadows. He was a well-set-up chap with a clean-cut face and sparkling blue eyes. "My name is Mudd," he announced cheerfully. "Now don't laugh. Even if it is, I seldom get left. The Birmingham office told me to report to you. Lafayette, we are here!"

Blackford had recognized him when he came out of the light and his face brightened. He glanced aside to find Lawler watching Mudd. Acting on impulse he decided against allowing the foreman to know that Mudd had come to the camp on Blackford's orders. He chose to dissemble. Perhaps it would be useful in the future, and what Lawler did not know would not hurt. Therefore his face was blank as he answered the lad.

"Mudd? I guess I can use you, though I didn't expect you. What do you do?"

"Most anything," answered Mudd, still with his cheerful grin. "But I run a hoisting engine best."

"Fine! That's what you'll do here," Blackford exclaimed with satisfaction. "There's your office, get busy. I want the old girl running to-morrow."

"Give me a decent helper and I'll have her for you unless her boiler's dropped out," promised Mudd.

Blackford turned to Lawler. "That solves your engineer question." Lawler had been looking on open-mouthed as he recognized Mudd. "Send Allen to me at my office."

Blackford left and the foreman moved over and looked in at Johnny Mudd. The lad had already begun to shed his clothes, preparatory to his all-night job on the engine, which he cheerfully christened "Elizabeth Ann."

"Are you really goin' to stay?" Lawler asked.

"Surest thing you know, sweetheart," replied Mudd. "I hope you don't object."

"Big Shackleford will be glad to hear it," the foreman said acidly. "He told me last night he didn't want you to get away until he had seen you again."

"Office hours six until six," responded Johnny. "Tell him so, will you?" A new thought struck him. He leaned forward and asked solicitously: "You didn't want to act for him, did you?"

"Hell, no!" said Lawler and left.

CHAPTER XI

IN POSSUM VALLEY

Blackford was preoccupied at supper and spoke little. Alice watched him covertly for some sign of resentment, but there was none. She sensed a difference in him, although she could not define it: his manner was no longer listless nor were his eyes vacant. He was thinking definitely, but of what?

Alice planned to question him, but she waited for him to speak if he would and the silence was unbroken. Blackford should not be comfortable in his inaction, on that Alice was determined: the issue between them should not end so indefinitely: he must justify himself to her father whether he would or not. If he loved her, she could drive him to do as she wished. Alice planned coolly. She did not consider her husband greatly: the past excused her course and she felt no qualms about him. After all, his suffering was not real, it was only his vanity that had been hurt; but sometimes vanity is more powerful than deeper emotions.

Blackford's blunt words interrupted her thoughts. "Lawler is no longer running the mine."

Alice looked up surprised. It was almost as if he had read her thoughts. "Then who is?"

"I am."

His words made her plans purposeless; it had not been difficult after all. But the mine was least important to her; it was the people; he must not stop at the mine.

"What are you going to do?"

Blackford shrugged his shoulders. "I don't make promises. Wait and see."

That was all he said, and Alice did not question him further. She was content to wait; later she could speak to him about other things. But her victory was too easy; Blackford yielded too readily. She was vaguely dissatisfied. His feeling might be deeper than she suspected. That night marked the beginning of a change in Alice's attitude toward her husband.

Blackford came down from the Residency the next morning with brisk, purposeful tread, quite unlike his ordinary listless gait. He was tired of idleness and yesterday's work had roused him. He had shaken off the numb feeling of despondency that had gripped him so long.

Even if love was not for him, there were other things. Work in itself would be a compensation. The mine called to him and the camp; there was so much to do. She would not believe if he told her that he was doing this for her, but he would do it, anyway, and hope that she would understand.

Blackford knew he could do it; memories of other days in similar camps came back; he recalled bits of lore that had lain dormant in his mind the years in Pittsburgh. He snuffed the fresh morning air with a new feeling: there was a hint of proprietorship in his bearing.

Instead of going directly to his office, Blackford turned aside and strolled through the camp. It was early, but the men were about because the mine was idle. They greeted him with sour looks and he wondered at their hostility. He had known camps where the company was hated, but there seemed nothing to justify it here.

Blackford frowned over many evidences of slackness. The houses were unkempt, the yards frowsy and frequently he saw the glitter of bottles—whisky bottles—discarded carelessly after being emptied. He passed a long building, from which came bursts of laughter. The club. He must look into that; perhaps that was the seat of the trouble; but it would keep until another day.

When Blackford arrived at the office, he found Bob Allen waiting. Allen was the company special officer at Cahaba.

"Come in, I want to talk to you. I've been expecting you for some time," Blackford greeted him.

"Mr. Lawler said if you wanted me you'd send for me," Allen explained. "You ain't never sent till now."

Allen sat on the extreme edge of the chair Blackford indicated. His prominent eyes shifted nervously.

Blackford began. "Allen, how is it that you allow whisky to come into the camp?"

"Ain't never been told not to. We have to be kinda careful and wait for orders, Mr. Blackford. Mr. Crosslands knew likker was comin' in an' he never said stop it. When he left, Mr. Stringfellow never said he wanted it stopped an' neither did Mr. Lawler. I been kinda waitin' to see what they did want."

"Good bit of it coming in now, isn't there?"

"Right smart," admitted the officer.

"Know who's getting it?"

"I ain't tried to find out."

"Think you could?"

"Reckon so."

"Know who's making it or where it's coming from?"

"I ain't tried to find that out either."

"Got some ideas, though, haven't you?"

"Some."

Blackford had noted with amused eyes Allen's nervousness. Now he spoke sharply. "Allen, I don't want another drop of liquor brought into this camp."

Allen stared at him bung-eyed. "Goin' to saw right square off?"

"Right square off," asserted Blackford.

With reluctant fingers, Allen unpinned the star from his coat. He laid it lingeringly on Blackford's desk and rose. "Me and you parts right here."

Blackford laughed sympathetically, but his voice was serious. "What's wrong, think it is too much for you? I will give you help. I wouldn't be too hasty, if I were you. I count on your help in getting the hang of things."

Allen shook his head decisively. "No, sir! Much obliged, but I think I'll look for me another job. I don't want no fight with Big Shackleford an' I ain't goin' to have nothin' to do with it. I aims right now to put out over there an' tell him it wa'n't me that started it."

Blackford ceased to be amused. "You'll do nothing of the kind. If anything is to be said to Shackleford, I'll say it myself. You scare easily."

"Well, now, Mr. Blackford don't you think too hard o' me," Allen pleaded. "I was raised right 'round here an' I been livin' here all my life. I hopes to go on livin' here the rest of it, an' 'twouldn't be nowise certain if I got Big Shackleford down on me."

"I guess the company is big enough to handle him. It usually——"

"Yes, sir, the company's all right. You can't hurt th' comp'ny," broke in Allen. "Me, I'd a whole lot rather be safe 'n sorry. I don't mess with Big Shackleford a-tall."

Blackford was a little contemptuous and disappointed as well. He had looked to Allen for help. "If you want to quit your job, I guess I can't stop you. But you needn't worry. I'm not going to have trouble with Shackleford."

"No, sir, you ain't, but he's shore goin' to have trouble with you," assured Allen mournfully.

"I'll argue that with him, not with you. Determined to quit, are you?"

"I be," said Allen definitely.

"Very well. And since you want to clear yourself with Shackleford, suppose you drop over there this afternoon and tell him I would like to see him."

"I'll do that very thing right now," agreed Allen in relief.

He walked out. Blackford looked after him with a quiet chuckle. He found Allen's terror of Shackleford's wrath amusing. Secure in the knowledge of the power of the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company, he gave scant consideration to a man whom he contemptuously dismissed as a bootlegger.

He turned back to his desk and continued his search for every scrap of information about the working. Hours later he was interrupted by the entrance of a tow-headed youngster.

"Be your name Blackford?" the lad inquired, and when the superintendent nodded, the youth handed him a note, adding: "Mister Ben says for me to show you the way."

The superintendent shook out the paper and read:

Mr. Shackleford has received Mr. Blackford's message. He will be glad to see Mr. Blackford at his convenience.

A formal note from a bootlegger! Blackford grinned. Then he saw the note was in a feminine hand. Margaret. So she had a sense of humor. He left the office with a word to Stringfellow. Lawler was to push the work at the top-house so that, if possible, only one day's operation of the mine would be lost.

The boy stood silent while Blackford made his brief preparations and then set off at a pacing trot. The superintendent could do no more than keep a step or two behind him; no breath was left for conversation.

They went up Double Oak Mountain, past the towering signal trees, over the crest, and into Possum Valley. Going down, the boy still did not slacken his speed. With a glance of recognition, Blackford hurried by the place where he had been caught in the trap. The path dropped off almost sheer, and Blackford wondered how any one ever climbed it. In the valley was a wider trail and along this his guide hurried without a backward glance or word. They approached the bottom lands and broke into open spaces. Stretching away in the opposite direction were fields of young corn. In the distance was a grove, and toward it the lad waved a hand.

"There 'tis," he remarked, and vanished down an opening in the woods behind him.

Blackford continued until he reached the house. It had seemed small: now he saw that it was a large structure, though built of logs. It was surrounded by dense-foliaged china-berry trees. There was a large veranda before which stretched the lawn that sloped to the river. At a tiny wharf, a small launch rocked.

Blackford stared at the evidences of prosperity and comfort. Sheep grazed on the well-kept lawn, and in the yard were carefully tended flowers. Under a shed he saw a tractor. About him was the drowsy hum of bees, and from the stream, which he knew for Little River, came the musical tinkle of water. Could this be the hills of Alabama?

As Blackford stood at gaze, Shackleford was observing him from the porch. He was a monstrous figure with a huge head that shook ever so slightly in some kind of palsy. The eyes were colorless: fish-like. The iron-gray hair was thrown back from a wide brow: over him was the calmness of conscious power.

"Come in! Come in!" boomed his heavy voice.

Blackford started and turned to the porch: he knew that this was Shackleford. Ben waved a hospitable left hand and rumbled another invitation to enter. Still mentally rubbing his eyes, Blackford took the cane-bottomed rocker indicated.

"Wasn't expectin' nothin' like this, was you?" said Shackleford, a shrewd smile creasing his face. "Pretty good for the backwoods, ain't it?"

"Pretty good!" said Blackford. "It's ... it's palatial."

"Yep. Cost me a sight of money, but 'twas worth it." Shackleford's tone was one of comfortable gossip. "I kin afford it."

You see, I got a girl growin' up an' I didn't want her brought up like I was, so I done the best I knew how by her. Sent her to school at Birmingham and done what she told me. It's turned out a right pretty place."

"Yes, I know your daughter," acknowledged Blackford. "I met her on the mountain. She got me out of a fix."

"Sho! I allus aimed to send you word 'bout that. I was right glad she happened 'long when she did. I was glad it was her, too, 'stead of some of the others. She knowed what to do."

Blackford continued to gaze about; chickens dusting themselves in the shade of the china-berry trees; neat stables in the rear; ducks waddling solemnly down to the river. Reluctantly he turned to his errand.

"There is no use in pretense with you, Mr. Shackleford," he said frankly. "If you have talked to Allen, you know what I want."

"Bob did kind of let on somethin' you said put him out mightily. I'd ruther hear it from you, though, seein' things is like they is."

"Good! I told Bob Allen I wanted all liquor kept out of the camp. He seemed to think that would involve him with you. I didn't want you to think I was doing anything underhandedly."

Shackleford spat reflectively at a chicken to the fowl's loud indignation. "Well, my experience's been likker's 'bout the hardest thing they is to handle," he observed mildly. "Don't help noways to rush in brash-like."

"I am not rushing in, but I'm superintendent at Cahaba. The men in the mine put their lives into my hands and it's up to me to protect them. Yesterday afternoon we had an accident because a man was drunk. It was just luck no one was hurt. A good bit of misery in the camp can be traced to liquor. I want to do everything openly, so I thought I'd come over and have a talk with you about it."

"Right glad you did." Shackleford nodded approvingly. "Allus likes to see what is what."

Blackford found himself disarmed by Shackleford's slow speech and mildly friendly bearing. He hardly knew what he had expected, but certainly not this.

He glanced at Shackleford's handless right arm inert on the chair. "They tell me you've been a miner. If you have, you know what whisky means in a mine. You can't let men who handle others' lives and their own have whisky."

"You're beatin' 'round the bush, son. Come to the p'int. What do you want out o' me?"

"I don't know exactly. You see, I'm kind of new to this country. I came back after being away from Alabama for years. I only know what people tell me. They said, whether rightly or wrongly, that most of the liquor in camp came from your place. I haven't tried to find out. I am coming to you, man to man, and asking, if this is true, that you shut it off."

Shackleford surveyed him benignly, his gaze unwavering despite the oscillation of his head. "Son, what I does don't noway concern your camp. I don't never aim to interfere in other folks' bisness. I don't do nothin' I'm 'shamed of an' I ain't askin' nobody no questions. When a man comes to me an' wants to buy somethin' I got an' he makes me a offer that interests me, I figger to sell. I been doin' that a right smart while. I reckon I'll keep it up."

Blackford recognized the refusal. "That isn't a very humanitarian way of looking at it, do you think?" he asked placatingly.

Shackleford ruminated a moment. Then, raising his voice slightly: "Oh, Peg! What does human ... humanitarian mean?"

Margaret's clear voice came from inside. "Means looking after other folks, Dad, so they don't get hurt."

Shackleford rumbled approvingly. "Smart girl, that. I sent her to school an' now she knows ev'rything, pretty near. Ain't a bit too good for her daddy an' mammy, neither. Ain't every girl that goes off to school an' comes home like that."

Blackford assented. Shackleford and his daughter resembled each other. Both were strong personalities, and he recognized in Shackleford something of the high spirit that flamed so near the surface in his daughter.

"Watchin' out fr other folks, eh?" Shackleford rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "An' keepin' 'em from gettin' hurt. Son, I don't

aim to do that for three reasons. First, what other folks does ain't none of my bisness; second, they don't 'preciate bein' kept from gittin' hurt, and, third, that perfession's already crowded. I'm just a ignorant hill-billy, but I reads some. 'Pears to me like that's the way a considerable portion o' th' folks that hates to work is gittin' 'long right now."

Blackford shifted his ground: there was a little ring in his voice. "I'm not going to argue the ethics of making whisky. You have your ideas about that and I have mine. Personally, I don't care how much whisky you make if you keep it out of my camp. Now the law——"

"Guess we kin leave the law out of it," Shackleford interrupted. "That don't 'mount to nothin'. You know yourself, son, that these here mountains back up Little River is so God-forsaken the law ain't botherin' 'bout 'em." He laughed appreciatively. "Besides, the law's occupied closer to home. If you kin git your three dollars catchin' your likker right in town, what's the use of comin' way over here in Possum Valley an' gittin' the same three dollars. Th' State pays th' bounty no matter where they finds you. They've found it kind o' dangerous 'round these here coves on Little River."

"Fair enough," Blackford admitted. "You and the law can settle your own affairs. I don't care and I shan't interfere. But, Mr. Shackleford, I'm not going to have whisky in Cahaba."

"Easy to say."

"I'd like to reach an understanding with you if I can. But keep your liquor out of Cahaba."

"When anybody wants to buy of me, I sells," said Shackleford imperturbably.

"We won't argue that, but the next time I find liquor in Cahaba I'm going to pour it out."

"Ain't no way to treat good likker. Is that a threat?"

"Not a threat. A warning. You know what the Cahaba Company is. I am not boasting, but I am the company in the camp."

"Figger to scare me?" inquired Shackleford, still calm.

"Of course not!" Blackford's voice was sharp in his effort to make the other understand. "I'm just trying to keep out of a fight where some one is sure to be hurt."

"Ever thought it might be you?" asked Shackleford softly.

Blackford recognized the menace. "Some," he admitted. "That's why I'm here. I don't want trouble. I came here to run a mine, and the only reason I am interested in you and your liquor is because it interferes with my mine."

Shackleford's voice was earnest. "Son, I been livin' on this here farm 'bout fifteen years. I been doin' what I pleased with my land an' with the things I've growed. I don't figger it's your bisness or nobody else's bisness what I do with my things, leastwise nobody ain't never got real interested in it yet. I been doin' this goin' on fifteen years an' I figger I'll be doin' it when nobody don't remember who you was."

"I suppose that means that you——"

Shackleford wagged a hortatory finger. "Wait a minute, son, it ain't me at all: it's you. I don't aim to do no diffrent from what I been doin'. My ways right now suit me down to th' ground." His voice grew placative. "Now sev'ral folks one time an' another have tried to crowd me an' somebody allus got hurt. I kind of like you, cottoned to you soon's I set eyes on you. Now don't let's me an' you fuss 'bout a little thing like likker."

Blackford laughed rather hopelessly. "Can't you see I don't give a damn about liquor? It's what liquor does to my men. They aren't like ordinary folks. If a man wants to take a drink and kill himself, that's his affair. But if he wants to get drunk and kill a couple of hundred men I'm looking out for, that's my business and I won't have it."

Blackford rose to go, and Shackleford, his massive head shaking, held out his left hand cordially. "I'm right glad you come over, I am so. We allus have a little ceremony 'fore friends part. Just a minute." He raised his voice. "Peg, bring me my jug and a couple o' gourds."

Margaret smiled at Blackford when she came out carrying a gray jug. "So you have come over at last. I hope you and Daddy are getting along all right."

Blackford dissembled. "Your father and I understand each other, Miss Shackleford. I have done what I came over for."

"That's fine. Have you reached a common ground?"

"N-o-o, I can't quite say that, but I still expect to convert him to my way of thinking."

There was veiled meaning in the words of both. Margaret made a covert offer. "You'll need help to convert Daddy. It's been tried before." She held out the jug to her father. "This is all we have."

Shackleford pulled out the corncob stopper with a hollow "pung" and sniffed appraisingly. "Prime stuff. Hold your gourd."

Blackford stretched out the long-necked gourd that had been cut into a dipper while green and then dried. Shackleford poured out a generous portion of the white liquid. Blackford looked around for water, but there was none.

Shackleford turned up his gourd and drank with a sigh of satisfaction. "When you gets old, that puts fire in you," he said.

Blackford drank. It was the first time in years he had tasted mountain dew. A heavy hand was laid on the back of his neck: his eyeballs grew hot: his throat closed and, despite himself, he strangled and choked. "Lord, if that's the stuff they drink, no wonder McNew was crying," he thought as he fought for breath. He saw Shackleford watching with smiling eyes.

"Mite strong, was it?" he asked, and laughed when Blackford answered weakly:

"I guess that's what we'll call it—with ladies present."

Shackleford spoke again. "Come over any time, I'll allus be glad to see you an' I 'spect Peg'll like to talk to somebody what's somebody."

"Thank you, Mr. Shackleford. I hope I'll be able to accept your invitation. But getting back. What I said goes. No more whisky in Cahaba."

Shackleford leaned forward and laid his left hand on Blackford's shoulder. "Son, you want to be right careful you don't get hurt," he said kindly. Blackford caught the warning under the friendly tone. "I'd shore hate to see anything happen to you."

"You won't. I can take care of myself." Blackford's tone was smooth. Then he warned in his turn. "I'm in a hurry and any one who gets in my way will be run over. I haven't time to go around."

And with that he went thoughtfully up the hill toward Cahaba.

CHAPTER XII

PREPARING FOR THE STORM

Blackford's respect for Shackleford was vastly increased as he went up the mountain. Big Shackleford was not at all the man he had expected to find. There was no bluster about him: there was even something likable in his calmness and comfortable certainty that he was right.

Blackford, however, recognized that a struggle was inevitable: his spirit lifted as he considered the future. He did not minimize the possibilities of what might happen: he had best prepare for it while he had time. Blackford reached his perch under the shade of the Double Oak and sat down to consider. He had back of him the power and authority of the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company: that was his biggest asset. His word was law in the camp so long as he could enforce it. How long could he do that? Not long, he reflected, remembering the men he had seen coming from the mine. Cahaba workers had been gathered from the surrounding hills. They were difficult to control under ordinary circumstances: he had known that without being told; now, after months of disorganization, the task would be doubly hard. At home, in familiar country, they felt independent and would chafe under restraint. The Cahaba Coal and Iron Company meant little to them except something to hate.

The superintendent resolved to go warily. It occurred to him that he was not so high in the good graces of the Cahaba Company himself. He remembered Reubens. Blackford rejected his original plan to send to Birmingham for company police. He would have his own men, who would look to him and not to the company. He already had one and knew where he could get more.

His thoughts were interrupted by Margaret Shackleford, who came hurrying up the path. Her pace slackened as she caught sight of him. "I'm so glad you waited," she panted. "I tried to tell you, but I didn't know whether you understood or not." Margaret was a little nervous, he thought, but she spoke quietly enough. "I didn't want you to misunderstand Dad. He doesn't bluster, but he means what he says. You know what you are going into, do you?"

Blackford smiled at her anxiety and Margaret saw it. "I think I can——" he began when she broke in.

"I promised to help when I could and this is one of the times. It's nothing to smile about. If you're wise, you'll listen to me."

"Forgive me," said Blackford quickly. "I don't underestimate your help. I told you once you were the only friend I had in Cahaba. I should be foolish not to listen. What is it you wish to say?"

Blackford was glad to see Margaret again: he had missed her companionship. There had never been any sentiment between the two, but she was a woman and Blackford had craved the feminine touch. This she had given unconsciously, and not until he had no longer been able to see her had he guessed what it meant to him.

"I know just what you're thinking," Margaret said. "You think, because Dad didn't try to throw you off the place or threaten you, that he didn't mean what he said. I can see you don't understand what will happen if you do what you said."

"Pour out the whisky, you mean? Well, tell me what will happen, because that's what I shall do."

"You will be in danger; it's a hard thing to say, but you'll be in serious physical danger. Not from Dad, perhaps, but from some of the men who work for him. He isn't going to hold them back: he never has and he doesn't care any more for the Cahaba Company than he did for the other forces he has dealt with."

Blackford threw out his hands. "Well, what shall I do? I can't very well make the first move."

"Get your wife out of Cahaba. Dad's going to make it hard for you in every way he can. I see trouble ahead for every one. Do you know why I am telling you all this? I know you think it is queer that I am seemingly siding against my own father, but I'm doing it for him. That was another reason I came after you. I don't want anything to happen to Dad: I want to stand between him and anything that might come. He's had a hard life. He only had one hand when he settled in Possum Valley, and he didn't have much money, but he's done right according to his beliefs and he won't stop—not for you or any one else. But Dad's no fool. He'll stop when he comes up against something stronger than himself. But I don't want him hurt when he does."

"I'm glad you told me this," said Blackford. "I wondered a little, but now I understand better. I'll do what I can, Miss Shackleford, but he must do something, too. You can't resist a superior force without being hurt. You warn me that I am going into a fight. I have about reached that conclusion myself. Now in a fight, you can't always do what you'd like. It's every man for himself and devil take the hindmost. I'll do what I can; honestly, I will, Miss Shackleford, but that's all I can promise."

Margaret sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't expect more. But about your wife?"

"I agree with you. I'll try to get her to visit home until this blows over."

He was curiously reluctant to speak of his wife to Margaret. Even though there had not been even a hint of sentiment between the red-haired girl and himself, it savored of disloyalty to Alice.

"It isn't a question of trying, you must," Margaret urged. "You don't realize yet what you are going into. You will be the target for whatever is done in the camp. Her being here will handicap you and then ... then ... you never can tell what will happen."

Blackford felt the urge to confide in some one: Margaret was a woman, perhaps she would understand. "I'm going to be careful," he said. "I don't think it is because I am physically afraid, but there is something I want to do more than anything else in the world. And I'm saving myself until I do that. I can't tell you any more, but I'll be careful and I appreciate what your father meant. Now I'll tell you something of what I plan——"

"No, I'd rather you wouldn't," Margaret interrupted and held out her hand.

Blackford rose regretfully. "This isn't good-bye," he protested.

"I'm afraid it is," Margaret said. "I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. Things I can see coming will make it impossible."

They parted. At the office Blackford found Stringfellow, as usual, bending over his books.

"Heard you went over to Big Shackleford's," the clerk said. "How'd you come out?"

Blackford sat down and put his feet on the desk. "Not so good. I believe the old fellow thinks he can beat me and the company and every one else. Told me to watch my step. Has the company ever had any trouble with him?"

"Nobody ever tried to start anything with Big Shackleford. He always had the reputation of being a good man to let alone. You see, he's practically king in Possum Valley. It ain't that he's so hard to handle by himself, but he's got a lot of men living up those little creeks and draws off the river. If he told 'em to go get the gov'nor, I reckon they'd just about try."

"Has he any particular grudge against the company? What did it pay him for that hand?"

"I never heard he got anything. The company's lawyer come over to see him. The company paid his doctor bills and the lawyer said it was his own fault. He never did sue."

Blackford was busy writing a letter. It was to the Balin-Quinn Detective Agency at Birmingham and it asked for the immediate dispatch to Cahaba of seven of their best operatives. Blackford described very specifically the kind of men he wanted and told briefly what he wanted them to do. Dropping the letter in the outgoing mail-basket, he left with a word to Stringfellow and went over to the tipple to inspect the work on the engine and the shaft overhead.

Stringfellow listened to his retreating footsteps for a minute and then picked up the letter. "Balin-Quinn Detective Agency," he murmured. "Wonder what that means."

He ran a letter-opener under the flap and read Blackford's request. Then he addressed a new envelope, sealed it, and sat back to think. He knew where he could peddle this news to advantage.

Meanwhile Blackford found Mudd with the vitals of the engine all about him. He was working away cheerfully, grease-covered from head to foot. In the corner lay his helper, snoring faintly, but Mudd seemed tireless.

"Going to have her ready to-morrow?" the superintendent asked.

"Ain't going to do nothing else," returned Mudd with a grin. "But, oh, boy! This baby hadn't been gone into for an awful long time."

Blackford watched him silently for a moment and then glanced around. They were alone and he leaned closer.

"Get it done quickly, John," he said. "I want you for something else, what I brought you down for."

Mudd straightened up with a sigh of pleasure. "Just what did you bring me here for, chief? You was in such an all-fired hurry in Pittsburgh, you didn't tell me a thing but to come to Cahaba and not let on I knew you."

"I didn't tell you because I didn't know myself except that in a strange camp I wanted some one I could trust. It was good of you to quit your job just on what I told you. I haven't had a chance to thank you, but I appreciate it."

"Oh, it's all right about that. I needed a change and I was getting kind of tired of Pittsburgh. I didn't like the office, anyway. Besides, I'd of gone anywhere for you."

"I'll have another engineer over from Birmingham to-morrow. Tidmore's his name. You turn over to him whenever he shows up and then come to the office. You're going to be chief of police in this camp and I want to tell you what to do."

"Lord, what'll Lawler say to that!" Mudd grinned. "I ain't popular with him right now. Wait till he hears this." He smacked his lips. "Couldn't of suited me better. I crave excitement and I sure ought to get it."

Blackford listened for a moment to the soft sough of the fan as it pulled the air from the mine, allowing fresh air to rush in and keep up the circulation. The fan fascinated him: here was the heart of the mine, beating close to the surface. He walked slowly up the mountain to the Residency, a bit fearful of the coming interview with his wife. He found her in the front yard, digging like a terrier pup: she waved a grubby hand at him.

"Oh, Warren, come and look," she called. "Mr. Stringfellow sent me up a whole wagonload of leaf mould and I'm going to have the finest flowers in town. Mrs. Lawler has promised me some rose cuttings and Dr. Rawls says he has some lovely honeysuckle."

Blackford squinted over the yard. "You've plenty of room here for a fine garden. Roses ought to do well and you can get ferns on the river. Down there they are as big as small trees. Do you want me to lay it out for you?"

"I wish you would; I can't decide where I am to put everything. It's such fun digging: I don't think I ever saw such nice fresh dirt."

Blackford laughed. "I suppose it's because it's spring. Every one likes to plant things when the trees begin to leaf out. Come up on the porch; I'd like to say something to you. Maybe you won't want to plant your flowers after you hear."

She wiped her hands on her big apron and rose obediently. They sat in the swing that gave them a view of the whole valley. They had sat there that first morning at the Residency. Blackford glanced at his wife. He wondered if she were thinking of that morning, too, but he forced himself to speak calmly.

"Wouldn't you like to go to Birmingham for a little visit or perhaps run up to Pittsburgh to see your father? Haven't you been homesick at all?"

"If I have, I haven't let it matter," she replied evasively. "I don't think I should like to leave Cahaba right now. I am curious to see what you will do. You forget I have an interest in this, though I can understand why you do not wish me to be here."

Blackford declined the challenge. "I'm sorry you feel as you do, for it isn't that at all. In fact, I should very much like for you to be here for the reason you mention. I want you to see what I shall do. I've wanted to speak to you about that and to thank you."

"To thank me? For what?"

"For waking me up. You were right. There is plenty to do right here and I was ignoring it."

"Are you asking me to believe that you are doing something for me?"

"I am asking you to believe nothing. I know your sentiments toward me and it is a subject I shan't discuss—now. Later, perhaps, I may have something to tell you, but not in advance. I'm not surprised that you question my motives, but I'm being honest with you."

Alice was still incredulous. "Then why should you wish me to leave?"

"Because I'm frankly expecting trouble. How it will come I don't know, but when it does, it will not be nice, either for me or for them. And I don't want you involved. If you stay, you will be because you are my wife."

"Suppose you tell me what you intend to do and allow me to judge for myself."

"I shan't go into details. I'm going to bit and curb this camp: naturally, having run wild so long, it won't come easy. Then I shall prevent outside interference: that won't be accepted without trouble. Altogether, the prospect isn't peaceful right now."

Alice's voice had changed when she answered. She was thoughtful. "You mean they will try to do ... do something to you?"

Blackford shook his head impatiently. "Don't be melodramatic. I'm not trying to pose, but I'm not closing my eyes to possibilities either. I don't think it will be dangerous. Unpleasant, perhaps, but that is all."

"Then I shan't go. I see no necessity for it, and, as I told you, I'm anxious to stay. Pittsburgh doesn't appeal to me any more: it couldn't after all that has happened, and here it is at least quiet. No one interferes with me and, besides, you and I ... That is still to be settled."

Blackford's voice was curt when he spoke. "If you put it on that ground, I can say nothing further. I'd like you to remember, though, that I warned you."

Blackford was angry as he left: she always put him in the wrong. He would not again give her a hint of his feelings. He would do his best, and if she understood finally he was doing it for her, she would speak; if she did not ... He did not pursue the thought.

But Blackford was secretly glad she refused to go. While they were in daily contact, he still had a chance to disarm her bitterness. Once away from him, with her father in Pittsburgh, it would be the end, and Blackford shrank from that. Though every day it grew fainter, he still hoped—in spite of himself.

Blackford found work to do at the office. Mudd was there and with him seven men the superintendent had been expecting from Birmingham. They were his special police.

"Your new engineer come in," Mudd said. "I turned over to him and he ought to have her runnin' to-morrow. These boys were lookin' for you and I brought 'em along."

"Come in, all of you," said Blackford, scanning them in turn. Evidently they were picked men, as he had asked. Young, tall, lithe, with sun-darkened faces, they regarded him alertly. He waved his hand at Mudd. "Meet your chief, boys. His name's Mudd."

Mudd's eyes sparkled. "Doggone! I thought I was goin' to have to do it all myself. I never said nothin', but it was the biggest chew I ever bit off."

"Any of you boys ever been on special before?" asked Blackford. All of them had. "Good! Then I shan't have to wise you up too much. You understand that on the reservation you will be special deputy sheriffs and commissioned as such. I may want you to go off the reservation. I don't know yet what I want, but the company will stand back of you in anything you do on my orders. You understand that?"

"I'll bet we go over Double Oak Mountain before it's through," commented Mudd. "Go on, boss. Make it definite. You want us to watch out for something special? Lookin' for a strike?"

"This isn't a strike—yet. And understand this, John: Don't interfere with people on the reservation—that is, unless you find them doing what I'll tell you about presently. I don't want any bulldozing. You are not guards, you are police."

"I never thought I'd be a policeman and like it," said Mudd. "I wouldn't anywhere else but Cahaba, but it sure appeals to me here."

Blackford turned to the new men. "Mudd will tell you about the kind of people you'll deal with. You had better go in pairs. Do you need guns?"

"Boss, the first thing I bought when I started for Cahaba was a gun." Mudd was grinning broadly as he looked around and the others nodded. "I got a good one, too. It comes in mighty handy."

"All right, you attend to that," Blackford directed. "You'd better get rifles, too. Here are your badges, and you can get uniforms at the commissary." They rose, but Blackford held them. "Just a minute. There's just one thing I shan't stand for in this camp, and that's whisky. It's coming in here: I have a pretty good idea where it is going and why. That's what I want you to stop. This afternoon notices will go up that no more whisky will be allowed on the reservation. Enforce that. When you find whisky—as you will—seize it, and let me know. I'll tell you how to dispose of it."

"How about searching the houses?" asked Mudd.

"Nothing doing," said Blackford shortly.

"All right, but that's the quickest way to find it."

"Never mind, don't interfere with the people here more than necessary. I don't want to stir them up and I'm not after individuals. I'll leave it to you, John. You can have a vacant cottage to yourself or you can stay at Saints' Rest and mess with the stags. Which will you try?"

"Guess we'll take the cottage," said Mudd promptly. "I ain't overly pop'lar with some people in this camp right now, and I got a hunch that they like me compared to what's comin'."

Looking after them, Blackford hoped the knowledge that he had brought them would have a salutary effect. The superintendent felt better. He had at least eight men in whom he could put confidence: he no longer felt absolutely alone in the camp: he had a reserve he could summon at need. He cast up his situation in his mind. He could only wait for the overt act that would bring hostilities.

CHAPTER XIII

SETTING THE STAGE

Reubens was miserable: he admitted it to himself as he sat at his desk and thumbed Alice's meager letters in which she gave brief descriptions of life at Cahaba, but told very little of her own.

DEAR DADDY: You didn't want me to come down here, but if you could see me grubbing among my flowers and see how positively fat I'm getting, you would be convinced. I miss you dreadfully and maybe this summer I will run up and see you. The flowers ...

Reubens had never forgiven himself for allowing Alice to accompany her husband. It was only by appealing to his pride that she conquered him. He yielded, but he was not convinced. He turned again to Alice's letters. They were brief and unsatisfactory; they told him of the Residency, of her flowers, of the valley, of Double Oak Mountain, but of her own sensitive inner self there was only a hint, and of her husband nothing. Reubens again read her letter.

DEAR DADDY: You didn't want me to come down here, but if you could see me grubbing among my flowers and see how positively fat I'm getting, you would be convinced. I miss you dreadfully and maybe this summer I will run up and see you. The flowers ...

All her letters were like that: inconsequential, giving no hint of her real feeling. Reubens felt an intangible barrier between himself and his daughter: he no longer shared her thoughts and he chafed against it.

He pressed a button, and when the door opened: "Tell Fain I want him."

The big policeman came in, treading lightly, his eyes flicking here and there. He saw the pile of thin, gray letters on Reubens's desk and anticipated his question:

"Well, what do you hear from Cahaba?"

Before answering, Fain drew a letter from his pocket. "Blackford's first report came in this morning."

"Took him plenty of time," said Reubens. "He's been down there over a month now. Well?"

"He asks for an engineer who will be his assistant, says he can push production up with certain steps which he is taking. I'll read it to you:

Things have been without a center of authority here for so long there is little discipline among the men. They are good workmen, but very careless. There are disturbing outside influences which I am taking steps to remove.

I am assuming that you wish me to handle such problems as come up on my own judgment and that any requisitions I make will be honored at the Birmingham office. Do not be surprised at some rather unusual requests, as the situation here is difficult.

I have discharged the hoist engineer, but have secured another from Birmingham. This operation requires an assistant superintendent who is familiar with practical mining. The administrative details confine me so closely, another engineer is needed. If you have such a man, please send him immediately. If not, I can doubtless secure a man from another camp or train one myself. Please advise me at once.

The report was addressed to the mining division superintendent and bore date of two days ago."

"We'll honor any requisition he makes," Reubens observed. "Don't give him a chance to say we would not back him up."

"I think so too, chief," said Fain. "But this gives us the exact opening we wanted. I have already picked Gower for the job. He leaves this afternoon. You remember what we planned for him. I have given him very specific orders."

Reubens drew down his brows. "Has he any discretion? He'll be pretty much on his own down there and, if anything goes wrong, help will be a long way off."

"I think he can handle anything that comes up. He has a pretty long head, but if necessary I can go down myself and help out."

Reubens picked up Blackford's report. "He doesn't tell much. 'Conditions somewhat peculiar.' Wonder what he means by that? You notice he hasn't complained."

Fain nodded. "Seems willing to work out his own salvation. That makes it easier for us. If he won't ask for help, he's that much easier to handle. Chief, I've been thinking of what you said. You want him out of the way: I think I have a plan. We have been waiting for something to turn up. We haven't done anything. I know you are in a hurry, but you can't always hurry these things."

"I know it," fumed Reubens, "and dammit I am in a hurry. I want my girl back at home, and I want her back satisfied. There must be no doubt that Blackford has fallen down. I would like to make him quit. Think we could?"

Fain shook his head dubiously. "I don't know. He never impressed me as a man who quit easily. This very affair proves that. You may break him, but I don't think you will make him quit voluntarily."

"We'll see. Discouragement is hard to bear alone and I don't suppose he is very happy at home. What was the plan you spoke about?"

"Blackford must be given a specific job. Impress on him that it is vital to the company. Let his wife know of it. Get from Blackford a definite agreement that he will do it and, if he doesn't, make him admit his failure."

Reubens considered briefly. "Sounds good, and I'd go a little further than you suggest. I'd offer him a good-sized bonus if he puts it over. That will make it look good."

"That's all right, but suppose a miracle should happen and he makes good on it?"

Reubens smiled grimly. "It will be your business to see that no miracles happen. It's part of your job."

Fain's tone was supremely confident. "Fair enough. Leave it to me. You can forget it."

They were silent for a moment, and Reubens spoke. "Now what would you give him to do?"

Fain was dubious again. "That's out of my line. I'm no mining engineer, I'm a policeman. You decide that, and I'll figure how to block him."

Again the two were silent. Finally Reubens threw away his cigar.

"It must be something about the mine and something that isn't technical so she can comprehend it," he said thoughtfully. He pressed a button and told the answering secretary: "Send in McDonough." McDonough was chief of the mining division, and when he came Reubens asked: "How are you fixed at Cahaba?"

The grizzled superintendent peered over his glasses reproachfully. "Poor!" he answered promptly. "The mine has never been modernized. You know, I've wanted to put in electricity, cut through a slope, and get away from the long haul. That would be a fine place to try out the new lake system of coal cutting. I can——"

"I know all that," Reubens broke in. "But I have had uses for the working as it was. I didn't want it changed."

"But it's a disgrace to the company, sir," protested McDonough. "It's the worst mine we have and barely pays overhead. I could put——"

"Never mind! That was not what I asked. It's a bad mine, then?"

"It is."

"What is it producing now?"

"About a thousand tons a day."

"How is that?"

"Rather low. It is a six-foot seam and they work about a hundred and fifty picks."

"Could it be made to produce more?"

"As it is?"

"Yes."

"Not over two or three hundred tons."

"Could production be pushed up to two thousand tons a day?"

"Not without a night shift."

"It is not working a night shift now?"

"No, only days. We've always had trouble keeping enough men for that. They work ten hours, I believe."

"What would you say is the absolute maximum of coal that can be gotten out under present conditions?"

"You would be lucky to get an average of fifty thousand tons a month, and everything would have to break with you even to do that. I don't believe you could keep it up any length of time. You would have to put on a night shift and the machinery wouldn't stand it."

"Could you average seventy-five thousand tons?"

"Not even with a night shift. Not even one month. Not by twenty thousand tons."

"Sure about that?"

"Absolutely with the working in the shape it is now. But if——"

Reubens waved his hand. "Some other time. Not now," he said, and McDonough, dismissed, left them. "That's what we'll do," Reubens said to Fain. "Wait. You listen to the letter and if I leave out anything remind me."

Calling a stenographer, Reubens leaned back to collect his thoughts and then began:

MR. WARREN BLACKFORD,
Superintendent, Cahaba,
Cahaba, Alabama.

DEAR SIR: We have received your letter of April 28. In reply will state:

1. Any reasonable requisition by you will be honored both by the Birmingham office and our Birmingham bank.
2. You are to have an absolutely free hand in developing the situation in Cahaba in any way you see fit. It has never been the policy of this office to interfere with the interior arrangements of the various camps. Having been in this organization a number of years, you are, of course, familiar with the broad policies of this corporation. We shall, of course, expect you to carry out these.
3. You will make immediate arrangements to increase your shipments of coal from Cahaba. This is imperatively necessary and of the highest importance. You will no longer ship to Ocampo, but will divert all your cars to Dolomite. The traffic department has been so instructed and will notify the Mineral Railroad and your own shipping clerk.
4. It will be necessary for you to put on a night shift at the earliest possible moment. The personnel department has been instructed to send you forthwith two hundred and fifty men, one hundred and fifty of whom will be miners. This is a duplication of your present force. You will arrange housing for them immediately, lodging them in temporary quarters until permanent housing can be arranged by you.
5. It is vital that you increase your shipments of coal to seventy-five thousand tons monthly not later than June 1. This coal will go to the mills at Dolomite. The Henry Ellen operation has been drowned out by tapping an

underground basin of water and is out of commission for the time being. As you know, Henry Ellen supplied the fuel for the mills and furnaces at Dolomite. It is impossible that these should be idle a single day. The fuel reserve has been allowed to run so low that you must be prepared to increase this at the rate of twenty-five thousand tons a month, pending the resumption of operations at Henry Ellen.

6. This company is engaged on a contract for two hundred thousand tons of steel rails for the Japanese Government. The contract was accepted with a time limit and heavy forfeits were provided for each day over this limit. It is vital, therefore, that you supply the fuel for the mills.

7. Should any contingency arise whereby you would be unable to maintain sufficient coal as indicated above, you will notify this office immediately. It is necessary that the mills be continued in operation even if we are forced to buy coal in the open market. Coal from our other Alabama operations is under contract with forfeit clauses and is therefore not available.

8. In response to your request for an assistant, we have assigned Macklin Gower of this office to the Cahaba operation and he leaves to-day. Should you find further need to increase your executive personnel, please advise us immediately.

Reubens looked inquiringly at Fain, who nodded. "Covers all cases, I should say. But you haven't told him what he'll get if he puts it over."

"That's so," said Reubens, and to the stenographer: "Add this:"

9. In the event of your carrying out satisfactorily these instructions for six consecutive months, this office will grant you a bonus equal to fifty per cent of your salary for one year and will favorably consider your application for transfer to any other working in the operating division in the same capacity you now hold at Cahaba.

"That's all," said Reubens to the stenographer after a look at Fain. "Bring it to me for my personal signature."

Reubens turned to Fain. "See what I am driving at? Now this is going to be your part. I could have sent him the crew from Henry Ellen, but that didn't suit me at all. They know the country and the people and the mine, and they would fit in with Blackford's men without difficulty. I want you to find me the sorriest men you can put your hands on. Make 'em hunkies if you can. And see that there are plenty of company-baiters among them. Understand?"

"You don't care what you do to the mine," commented Fain. "Sure. I'll send him a bunch that'll make him tear his hair."

"Here is another thing," Reubens continued. "He's going to want some more engineers. He'll need a night foreman and other executives. See that they look to you, not to him. Understand?"

"I'll do that, and I'll have the word passed that they need not break their backs digging coal."

Reubens was marking a blotter with a pencil. "I think that will be about all," he said slowly. "I don't want any slip in this, not even if you have to go yourself to see about it."

"I am going to Dolomite next week," said Fain. "I may go to Cahaba and look it over. Blackford will have his hands full. First, he will have to arrange quarters for the new men. He can't mix them with his old crew, not the ones I'll send. The old men will resent the hunkies. They haven't many of 'em in that country. Run mostly to niggers and wops. He'll be so busy arranging quarters and getting their pay straight and all that he won't have time to bother about the mine. That's where Gower comes in; he'll look after that. Sounds good, eh?"

"You look after it and I will see that my daughter is told. I want Blackford out by the end of June."

"He will be," promised Fain. He stepped lightly to the door and glanced obliquely at Reubens. "He'll be good and done by the end of June."

He went out, leaving Reubens at his desk. What Reubens did not know was that Gower was going south with instructions that, if an accident happened to Blackford, it would cause Fain no anxiety.

"Won't do to talk too much," Fain had told him. "Never know when the old man will get squeamish."

Fain was a simple soul. If he wanted any one out of the way, it offered no great difficulty. He had met such obstacles before.

Behind him, Reubens was writing to Alice giving her a glimpse of his loneliness.

DEAR GIRL: You talk a whole lot and don't say a thing. I've all your letters right before me, and, honest, I don't know any more about how you are living than I did before you went there.

What do you think of Alabama and mining camps? You are seeing a side of life that you never saw before, I suppose. You haven't told me anything about how you live, who you know, and how you pass the time.

When are you thinking of coming back for a visit? I am mighty lonesome for you. The house doesn't seem the same without you and I miss you at night in the library. I have no one to tell what I am doing. Don't you miss your Daddy, too?

Perhaps you will not have to remain in Cahaba very long. An emergency has arisen which gives your husband the very opportunity he was so anxious to secure.

If he can do what I have asked, I have promised him a substantial bonus and a transfer from Cahaba, which I judge will be the part most welcome to you.

We have a big order from the Japanese Government and must finish it on time. Cameron at Henry Ellen found all the water there was in the world. That made us look to Cahaba for coal for Dolomite. I've told you all about that, so you know what it means.

If your husband was sincere, he has a big opportunity.

Remember, your Daddy is lonesome for you. The nicest surprise he could imagine would be for you to peek in the door and interrupt him. But that would be hoping for too much.

I may get down that way to see you soon. The Dolomite superintendent wants to see me.

Remember, if you need me, call me immediately by phone or wire....

CHAPTER XIV

THE DECLARATION OF WAR

EFFECTIVE this date, John Mudd is appointed chief special agent for Cahaba and is responsible for proper enforcement of law and such company and camp regulations as will from time to time be posted. He will employ such assistants as he deems necessary.

WARREN BLACKFORD
Superintendent

Blackford himself tacked the curt announcement to the bulletin board outside the commissary. Then he stood back and read it with a grim smile. Savoring the power in the blunt sentences, he sobered with the realization that the lives and happiness of all Cahaba people lay within his fingers. The responsibility checked his elation and he turned back into his office determined to accept it.

Blackford knew his brief announcement would cause surprise in the camp; probably, also, it would bring resentment: the men would know what it meant: plainer words would not be necessary. It was a warning that the easy days were over.

It was Blackford's first public action as superintendent of the working and he felt that it identified him definitely with Cahaba. He had now become a part of the community; he was no longer a disinterested spectator.

Blackford knew Mudd and his men were at work. He caught frequent sight of the khaki-clad figures in the hilly streets of the town. He liked the looks of the men. They were fine-tempered and hard, which was exactly what he wanted. The job he had assigned them was not one where diplomacy would be useful. He knew Mudd and the men looked as if they could strike swiftly should the need arise. Blackford had been brought up with this kind of officers working under his eyes. Now that he was an executive, he was glad that his education in the system had been so complete. He knew exactly what must be done to control a camp.

Blackford expected some one to be hurt before the camp realized the old loose days were over; before his police were respected and their orders obeyed. They, as well as he, must prove themselves. The only proof the camp would accept would be action.

Blackford was not inhumane. It simply did not occur to him that a mining camp could be managed in any other way. He had always seen it done so and, when he came to do the thing himself, he followed naturally the lines of his own experience.

Watching from inside the commissary, the superintendent observed the groups about the bulletin board and the low-toned discussion. He saw and interpreted the curious stares at his office; the cautious nudges and hasty whispers.

The men reacted differently. The older ones read the notice with clearing faces, and Blackford saw in them the justification of his belief that a good workman does best under a firm rein. He must learn his men and now was a good time to begin. Mentally he took note of them and their manner as they scanned the board.

A few were negroes. These were the drivers and the helpers, the blacksmiths and the tipple crew. Few of the negroes were miners.

Handling the negroes he dismissed lightly; that would be little trouble. It would be necessary to identify the "boss-negro" and convert him, either by force or argument. He would handle the members of his own race by some mysterious freemasonry that needed no interference from the whites. Such is the way of the mining camp negro.

As Blackford gazed, the largest man he had ever seen approached. Six feet, seven inches he loomed before the superintendent's astonished eyes. The whole of the man's magnificent body was patterned after his height; massive shoulders, dangling arms, a bullet head, long legs, and a flat, straight back. The face of the negro was what held Blackford's eye. It seemed to radiate good humor. The forehead was receding and the man seemed to thrust forward the lower part of his face. An enormous mouth revealed dazzling teeth, while a ridiculously small, conical hat sat askew on his head, touching the sharp-pointed ears. He walked with the loose, easy stride of perfect health.

"Oh, Stringfellow, who is the big negro?" Blackford called.

Stringfellow looked. "That's Blue Gum Jim Rhodes. He is Joe Lawler's boss driver and a good one, too."

"He's boss-nigger, too, isn't he?" Blackford asked as he watched Rhodes reading the notice, spelling out the words with difficulty.

Jim's face cleared as understanding reached him and he laughed, throwing back his head and opening his mouth wide. "There! Hell's fryin' an' no grease hot," he said. "'Em white folks is sho' gwine miss their likker."

He shambled off and Blackford looked after him, already considering the problem of winning him. "Why do they call him Blue Gum?" he asked Stringfellow, forgetting a legend of his own childhood.

"'Cause his gums are blue," explained the clerk.

Blackford laughed, harking back to his boyhood. "Oh, yes! And the bite of a blue-gummed negro is supposed to be poisonous. So that's why he is boss-nigger. What kind of a man is he—pretty fair?"

"Never made any trouble at all. 'Tends strictly to his own business."

Blackford continued his observation of the men. They were native-born, and, he guessed shrewdly, most of them mountain-born. All walked with the shambling, loose-kneed step of the mountain man, who goes downhill as easily as up. The superintendent presently turned away from the window to find Mudd at his elbow.

"Found anything?"

Mudd winked at him. "Not yet, but there's plenty of signs. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about."

"Never mind the signs. I want to know where the stuff is coming from and who is getting it in the camp. When you find that out come and tell me, then we'll decide what to do. What did the people say to you?"

Mudd yawned indifferently. "Pretty frosty, but, hell, I didn't expect no welcome. I'm going up and get some sleep. Guess we'll be out all night." He stretched his arms and smiled at Blackford. "You know, I'm kind of disappointed in this job. I ain't had a single fight yet."

"You will have," Blackford said. "Better be ready when it comes. They don't use fists down here."

Mudd patted the bulge of his pocket. "Big Willie is right there, ready to come out an' play any time. I can sort of feel 'em gettin' kind of nervous. We're close behind 'em."

"Go to it," ordered Blackford. "Don't do anything unless they force you to, but when you find out where the whisky is, come and tell me."

Mudd strolled out jauntily in spite of his weariness and Blackford turned back to his desk; he had declared war; the next move was up to the other side: he could only sit and wait for results from the watch kept by his police.

There were not long in coming. Three mornings later, Blackford came down to find Mudd waiting for him. He was grinning happily.

"I've got it," he said cheerfully. "Know where it come from; know who's got it and where it's goin'."

"Good! Go ahead and tell me about it."

"I'd rather show you. Last night we was up on the Double Oak Mountain trail. I been inquiren' 'round a little and didn't figure none of it was comin' from Birmingham. It was a long time 'fore we heard anything. Then a string of men come along. They was between us and the sky-line and we could see each of 'em was carryin' something. They had a stick 'cross their shoulders, like you see in the g'ography pictures, an' something swingin' from each side. 'Keno, this is it,' I says to myself, and sure enough it was. We waited right quiet till they had all passed and then we joined the party, steppin' mighty slow. It was darker 'n hell and they didn't know there was more in the bunch than was due to be."

Blackford listened with satisfaction. This was confirmation of what he had known. "Where did they go?"

Mudd rose. "That's what I want to show you. You and me is going to take a stroll. I want to show you 'cause I don't think you'd believe it if I told you."

Blackford followed Mudd as he led the way straight to the Mineral depot. "We watched 'em 'most all night," the policeman volunteered as they walked rapidly down past the tipple. "It took 'em that long to get it stored."

Mudd walked up to the Mineral depot, where Charlie Galloway stood eyeing them sourly.

"Here comes trouble, Charlie," Mudd hailed. "Come, go with us. I want to show you something."

"Buzzard!" answered Galloway venomously. "That's what you are. Just like all company police."

"S all right, darling, just come and walk with me," Mudd insisted equably.

Thrusting his arm through the agent's, he pulled the smaller man toward the siding where a string of loaded coal cars waited for the morning train.

"What cars are these, Charlie?" asked Mudd, pressing the little man's arm affectionately. "Whisper it to me?"

"You know what cars they are!" snapped Galloway. "What's the use of me tellin' you."

Mudd patted his head. "Don't get peevisish, sugar. I just wanted to hear your dear voice."

Whistling softly, Mudd walked down the cars inspecting numbers and paused before one. He called and a head peered over the top. "Everything all right?"

"O.K., Chief," was the answer and Mudd motioned for the two men to precede him up the side.

Blackford looked over, but saw nothing unusual; it was an ordinary coal car, lightly loaded with lumps that still dripped water from the washer. Behind him he heard Galloway's sudden snarl and Mudd's easy voice.

"Pretty slick," said Johnny. "Looks all right to you, don't it, Mr. Blackford?"

"Why, yes, I don't see anything wrong. It looks all right."

"It was meant to. Go ahead and dig, Harry."

Together the two tossed aside the coal at one end of the car, working for perhaps five minutes. They uncovered a can, presently another, and then a third. Mudd straightened up and wiped the sweat from his face.

"They're all just alike," he said. "There ought to be forty of them in this car and they each hold five gallons of whisky."

Blackford turned on Galloway. "Did you know about this?"

"I did not," snapped the waspish little agent. "It's all new to me."

"Naughty! Naughty!" cautioned Mudd. "How come you to give them the number and help load it? Sleep-walkin', I guess."

Galloway was silent, and Blackford asked: "But where was the stuff going like this?"

Mudd sat down on a side of the car and pulled out a stubby black pipe which he filled before answering. "I don't know for sure, but I've got my ideas. I figure it this way: Galloway, here, knew what number of car had the liquor and where it was goin' and when it was goin' to get there. He could send word on ahead, see."

Blackford was puzzled. "I don't get you exactly. This coal is consigned to a private yard in Birmingham."

Mudd gestured contemptuously. "The coal don't amount to nothin'. There ain't more'n thirty tons in this car. It's steam coal and you can figure it worth three dollars a ton. That's about a hundred dollars. Now there's two hundred gallons of liquor in this car and it's worth easy eight dollars a gallon in Birmingham. That's sixteen hundred dollars. What do you suppose they care about a little coal?"

Light broke on Blackford. "I see. The coal dealer is in on the scheme and is selling whisky instead of coal. It's a good scheme."

"I'll say it is. Here's the way it works. I been doin' a little pryin' up at the depot that Charlie, here, don't know nothin' about. I found we didn't ship coal to but two firms in Birmingham. One of 'em always took straight domestic lump, but every now and then the other switched in a car of steam coal. I got suspicious when I found they was payin' the same for steam coal as they did for the domestic. All the rest of our steam coal went to Ocampo, and when I saw 'em loadin' this car last night and found where it was goin', it all come to me."

"Damn you," said Galloway suddenly. "I'll get you for this."

Mudd patted him absently and it seemed to increase his rage. "Now, sugar, don't get bad, won't do you a mite of good. You see, Mr. Blackford, the big problem is gettin' liquor into Birmingham. Nobody ever thought of lookin' in a coal car an' all the officers let it get by, I guess, without ever suspicionin' what was goin' on. Don't nobody look for a blind tiger in a coal yard, nohow. I figure that Galloway gets real newsy whenever a car with eggs in it like this goes out of here. The man who sent it has his man at the yard to collect for it before it's delivered and it goes slick as a whistle. Real good scheme, too." Mudd's tone was admiring.

They climbed down, Galloway still clutched in Mudd's affectionate grip. Blackford issued his orders. "Bring that stuff down to the commissary and pour it out there. Chop up the cans, too. Somebody in Birmingham is due for a disappointment."

Galloway cried out in rage and surprise. "You—you—goin' to pour that stuff out! It don't belong to you!"

Blackford spoke coldly; "It doesn't belong to any one; there is no ownership in unlawful property. This was seized by a lawfully commissioned State officer and he will pour it out."

Galloway's voice was shrill. "Legal, hell! What you reckon Big Shackleford is goin' to care about legal? He——"

"So it's Shackleford," Blackford interrupted. "Well, I warned him. Now a word with you, Galloway. I won't ask your part in this, but no more of it. No more liquor goes out of here in company coal. Understand?"

"You can't give me orders," the agent shouted, bristling up to Blackford who topped him by six inches. "I don't work for you. I'll do what I please. You can't order me around."

"Maybe not," said Blackford calmly. "But I'm doing it. You'll be wise if you shut up. I could hand you over to the State authorities."

"Go on and turn me up! Go on and tell 'em! See what good it'll do you! Don't you come a-snoopin' 'round my office no more nor none of your dirty policemen."

Mudd looked down on him smilingly, and then turned to Blackford. "Want me to handle him, boss?"

Blackford's answer was to seize the little man by the shoulder and whirl him around. "March up that track and close your mouth!" he ordered crisply. "You heard what I said. The next time I'll put you on a Mineral train and throw you off the reservation. I can do that! You'll take my orders about this or I'll run you out of Cahaba. Now move!"

He shoved Galloway from him and the little man started to run. "You wait! You just wait!" he said thickly over his shoulder. "Wait till I tell Big Shackleford and see what he does. I'd hate to be you."

Blackford turned an indifferent shoulder on him and spoke to Mudd. "That wasn't all?"

"No, they stopped awhile down in the camp."

"Where?"

"At the place they call the club."

Blackford started down the hill, beckoning Mudd to follow. "We might as well clean that up now. Get a couple of men and come on."

Mudd was singing under his breath as they walked to the long building that sheltered Shackleford's gambling rooms. They entered without ceremony to find the place practically deserted. A sleepy-eyed porter was languidly sweeping. Mudd and his men scattered out to search. It was not difficult to find what they sought: it was in plain view. Blackford

called to the porter.

"Any one else in this building?"

"Yassuh. They's sev'ral gen'l'men upstairs."

"Get them."

The negro disappeared and returned with Landers Stow and Billy McArdle. Blackford looked them over, his eyes cold.

"No time of day to be sleeping. I'll give you ten minutes to get what personal property you want out of this place and twenty-four hours to get out of Cahaba. We don't need you."

Stow blinked at the early sun. "Who the hell are you? Suppose I don't want to travel?"

"I'm superintendent here and my name is Blackford. I don't care whether you want to leave or not. Get ready or I'll pitch you out as you are."

Stow recognized Mudd. "So you was spyin' the night Shackleford throwed you out," he said savagely.

"No, playin' poker," answered Johnny. "Always like to play poker. When you open another game, lemme know and I'll sit in if it ain't too far to walk."

Blackford pulled the door closed and locked it with the key he demanded from Stow. Then, taking a blue pencil from his pocket, he wrote on a panel:

Closed by order of the company.

WARREN BLACKFORD
Superintendent

Blackford faced the angry gamblers. "I know what you are going to say. Go tell Shackleford about this and tell him it was one of the things I overlooked. This is the end of this place."

The men trudged away in silence. They were employees only and of no mind to brave the smoldering wrath they sensed in Blackford's voice.

"Mudd, take the rest of this stuff and the whisky from the car and destroy it in front of the commissary. Don't say anything. It won't be necessary."

Blackford returned to his office to find Reubens's letter waiting for him. He was re-reading it when Stringfellow fluttered in.

"I've just heard about the raids." The clerk's voice shook. "You know what you've done, I suppose. Something no other superintendent ever did here."

"Then it is time one did," Blackford said. "Sure, I know what I've done: I've stopped something that should have been stopped long ago."

"But, Mr. Blackford, what about Shackleford?"

"Well what about him?"

"He'll ruin the camp if he doesn't kill you. He's dangerous, Mr. Blackford; dangerous, I tell you. There ain't no tellin' what he'll do."

Blackford was indifferent. "There's another side to that. He can't tell what I'll do either. Besides, I've something else to think about. Read this."

He tossed over Reubens's letter demanding that Cahaba production be tripled. Stringfellow read it with little moans of agitation.

"This makes it worse," he grieved.

"How?"

"Shackleford will stir up the men. They live around here and they all look to him. He's sort of head of the clan. He'll give you trouble with them."

"We'll see about that when it starts: I don't want to bother with it now. This is going to be hell. I've got to double the population of this camp overnight."

"You can't get seventy-five thousand tons out of here in one month to save your soul."

Blackford's reaction was instantaneous. He sprang to his feet and slammed a fist on his desk. "Can't, hey! All right, watch me! I'll have that coal if I have to rip this old mountain wide open. Wait three months and tell me I can't!"

But Stringfellow shook his head mournfully and murmured forebodingly of Shackleford.

CHAPTER XV

ACCIDENTS?

Blackford stood on the outskirts of the slowly gathering crowd for a few minutes and watched Mudd and his men pour out the liquor. Then he dismissed it and hurried back to the office to begin preparations for the new men.

Blackford judged the morning's events would have a salutary effect on the camp. His stormy interview with Galloway had been overheard and would become known. All in all, he was well pleased with his first positive move. Of what Shackelford would do he thought little: time enough to consider that when it became necessary. Sooner or later he must face the issue with Shackelford, but secure in his new feeling of confidence in his own authority, he gave it scant consideration.

Blackford was chiefly interested now in the problems raised by Reubens's letter. He read it carefully and began to figure. He was faced by two tasks: the immediate increase of production was one difficulty, but not his biggest; housing the new workers would offer the most obstacles.

The camp was now comfortably housed and had normal accommodations for about a thousand people. The central office was demanding that he triple his production; Reubens had written that the personnel department was duplicating his organization. If he was sent two hundred and fifty workers, with their families, it would mean he must provide for seven hundred and fifty people. Blackford was groping because he had not been able to get from the letter any idea of the people being sent him. Would they bring their families? If they did, it would increase his worries; if they did not, the difficulty would be lessened.

Studying the letter, Blackford decided to dismiss the mine for the present and permit Lawler to continue in control. He had intended inspecting the headings, but he had not time for that now. First he must be prepared to handle his people.

If one thousand men, women, and children were dumped into Cahaba on short notice, it would cause endless complications. The miners must be provided with supplies, explosives, tools. That meant increase in the commissary stock. There was the question of food. But the most acute demand would be housing. Where could he put them when they arrived?

Blackford went out to look around. If he had a couple of weeks before they came, he could throw up temporary structures that would serve. He noted sites for buildings as he walked: a bunk-house for the unmarried men near the head of the valley: a mess-house close by: a big family place here, lower down toward the river. Other construction also would be necessary. A new wash-house would be needed: the present one was totally inadequate: possibly another locker-room.

Absently Blackford strolled about, heedless of where he went except as it related to the problem he was studying. He wandered to the tipple, where the railroad dipped down, and gazed speculatively at a spot that would be suitable for a new wash-house. It must be close to the top-house so the men would not have far to walk when they came up.

Blackford stood leaning against the trestle as he planned his new buildings and worded in his mind the telegrams to Birmingham. He must have every carpenter he could get: he must see the chief electrician about stringing new wires. He moved back under the tipple scaffolding to gaze at the site where he wanted his wash-house.

As he moved, an iron crowbar struck the ground at his feet, missing him by inches. Only his sudden withdrawal under the trestle had saved him from a crushed skull.

With a shout of warning, he sprang around the pillars and ran up the steps to the tipple track. Lawler was talking to the weighman as Blackford looked around.

"Did you see any one else up here, Lawler?" he questioned.

"I just come up," Lawler answered. "Wa'n't nobody here when I left a few minutes ago. Why?"

"Nothing much," said Blackford, speaking casually in spite of his pumping heart. "I was standing down there and a crowbar nearly fell on me. I was wondering about it."

Lawler moved over by his side and, looking down, saw the crowbar. He swore. "I told Lipscomb that thing was going to fall through the tracks and hurt somebody. That's what he uses to block the wheels of his cars while he weighs them."

They walked up to the scales where Lipscomb was smoking peacefully while he waited for another trip from the cage.

"Milt, you'd better go down and get your crowbar," said Lawler. "It fell through 'while ago and nearly hit Mr. Blackford. You better use something that won't fall through after this."

"Ain't nothin' else as handy as that crowbar," grumbled Lipscomb. "Tell you what I'll do, I'll put a chain on it. How's that?"

"All right, but see that it don't fall any more," cautioned Lawler.

"Yes, the next time it falls you'll be looking for a job," added Blackford. "I won't have carelessness endangering lives here."

As the three stood talking, a trip of cars came up from the mine. On each car was a brass check with a number. That was the number of the miner who dug the coal. Lipscomb weighed each car, hung the check on the empty, and entered the weight on the sheets in the scale-house. The engineer, who had been watching to get Lipscomb's signal, ran the cars out on the tippie where they were dumped above the crusher-conveyer and the empties moved back into the cage by the tippie crew. The cage was lowered and the cars were on their way to be distributed by the drivers from the chain-yard at the bottom of the shaft.

Blackford saw the cars were well loaded. "What do you use?" he asked, meaning what capacity.

"Two tons," answered Lawler.

The superintendent looked his surprise. "Aren't they light?"

"We have to have 'em light, 'cause it's a long haul. The track ain't in very good shape an' heavier cars'd break it down."

Blackford did not argue with him, but he decided that here he could pick up on production. A miner's capacity to send coal to the surface is usually governed by the number of cars supplied him. If he is only given four two-ton cars a day, he can load only eight tons a day. But if he gets four cars and they are three-ton capacity, he can probably load twelve tons with a helper.

Blackford decided it would not be difficult to increase the cars' capacity another ton: it merely meant raising their sides. He made a mental memorandum to have it done. As for the track, that was the foreman's affair and it was up to him to keep it open. That could be handled later. Right now he was absorbed in his surface arrangements.

As Blackford leaned over to examine the cars, Lipscomb looked at Lawler and slightly raised his eyebrows. The foreman shook his head. The superintendent missed the byplay and continued his examination of the car. Then he went to the engine-house to talk a moment with Jack Tidmore, the engineer whom he had brought from Birmingham.

"How much can you lift?"

"I haven't tried her out much yet, sir," Tidmore said. "Haven't had no occasion to. On a bet, though, I think I could pick up around ten tons."

"Your cable would hold?"

"Sure. That ain't the weak part of this outfit, it's the scaffolding at the head-house. You fix up the head lift and I'll raise fifteen tons from the bottom without a buzz from her."

Margaret Shackleford opened the door to the office in the rear of the commissary and peeped in. Stringfellow was humped over a table with columns of figures on the sheets before him. Margaret looked at him and her eyes were soft.

"Come in and shut the door," he said at last, without looking up. "What do you want?"

"Please, sir, I want to speak to you," said Margaret in a small voice and laughed as Stringfellow sprang up.

He turned on her and his face whitened. Margaret, too, was a little breathless, but she came further into the room and took a chair without invitation. "Don't look at me like that," she protested. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Stringfellow came around his desk and stood over her. His rather stooped form seemed to straighten and he spoke with visible restraint. "I'm just wondering ... if ... if your coming here means anything," he said slowly. "You remember you said that you would not see me again unless you ... changed."

Margaret laid a hand on his arm. "You make it hard for me, dear. I'm sorry if you misunderstood. I was afraid that you would. You know I haven't changed and that I love you. I would marry you to-morrow if the choice lay with me, but it doesn't. Don't be discouraged."

"I suppose I shouldn't," said Stringfellow moodily. "But it's hard to see happiness almost in your hands and not be able to take it."

"You are never the worse for doing your duty," Margaret said. "Don't lose hope. You know I can't leave father; I told you that before you left Birmingham and you said you would be patient. Father needs me, and if I went with you I should not feel that I was doing right. You would not want me if I felt that, would you?"

"I'd want you under any conditions." Stringfellow looked down at the floor and his face was dark. Margaret was almost maternal as she leaned against him. She did not interrupt as he spoke again. "It isn't as if I could see any change. It's easy to say don't lose hope, but ..."

"Did you ever think that it might be hard for me, too?" Margaret asked gently. "I can imagine no greater happiness than being your wife, but I want to come to you wholly, without regrets. You know I'm not doing this because I don't care ... It's because ... because ... well, there are certain things I just can't do and be happy. Dear, dividends from a clear conscience are very great."

Stringfellow suddenly stooped and kissed her. "You are always right. I'm getting older and it seems the months slip by mighty fast. But I don't want you until you are ready to come. I wish I could help, though."

Margaret's hand went up to caress his cheek. They had forgotten where they were, remembering only that they had not seen each other for weeks. "But you can help, dear. That's why I came."

"Tell me," he said simply.

"It's about Mr. Blackford. He is planning to clean up the camp. You know what he has done already. He will stand by himself; he told me of it up on the mountain. You must help him."

Stringfellow drew away a little at Blackford's name. "You really came to see Blackford, didn't you? You know, I've often wondered about him, why I was not jealous."

"Silly," Margaret smiled. "You aren't because there is no need." She looked fearlessly into his eyes. "You know I love only you and you can judge whether or not I care lightly. Mr. Blackford is lonely; I can sense that, though he has never told me why. And, dear, I think that through him will come my deliverance from Cahaba. That is my interest in him."

Stringfellow was still inclined to be sulky. "I don't see that. Don't you know that Blackford is going to have trouble with your father? Are you asking me to side against him? I've been trying to help your father, not work against him. I promised you I would."

"But, dear, you aren't helping him when you make it easier for him to deal with Charlie Galloway and those people in Birmingham. Daddy isn't going to stop making whisky until some one convinces him it is dangerous to keep it up, and that he will lose if he does. If you help Mr. Blackford do that, don't you see Daddy will have to leave Possum Valley? And there isn't any reason why he shouldn't. He doesn't have to stay here. And when we leave, you know what that means to you and me."

Stringfellow drummed on the table with his fingers and avoided her eyes. "I've told you how things were here in the camp," he said. "You know who Fain is and under what arrangements he hired me. I've closed my eyes to a lot because he told me all he wanted from me was to know what went on. That was the way I got the job here. I've always tried to

help your father and I've never brought his name into things. You really want me to work with Blackford and against him?"

Margaret pulled his head down until he looked into her face. "Don't you think it will be much better than as you are? You don't like to be a spy. You can still help me with Daddy. Don't let him get hurt. Mr. Blackford isn't as soft as he seems. You take care of Daddy over here and I'll do what I can at home and we'll get him away somehow. Will you?"

Stringfellow straightened and moved back to his desk, his face sober. "Suppose your father learned what I was doing, wouldn't he be turned away from me?"

Margaret dismissed his objection lightly. "I can manage Daddy about that. If he knew I——"

She broke off as Blackford entered. The superintendent glanced at them surprised. "Why, hello, Miss Shackleford. I didn't know you and Stringfellow were acquainted. Did you want to see me? Bring me a declaration of war or something of the sort?"

Margaret shook her head and glanced at Stringfellow. "N-o-o, not exactly that, but father is terribly angry because you poured out his whisky."

"Too bad," said Blackford absently. "But I warned him. Stringfellow, have you heard anything from the central office about those new men?"

Stringfellow was again his taciturn self. Without a word he handed Blackford a telegram.

Special train with new shift reach Cahaba May 5. Have quarters ready.

It was from the central office. Blackford whistled. He had forgotten Margaret.

"Ain't that hell?" he said. "Three days to get ready for that crew."

Margaret rose. "I must be going, Mr. Blackford. Don't forget what I told you. Father is ... very angry."

"Thanks, I shan't forget," said Blackford, one hand on the telephone. Margaret left with a nod to Stringfellow, who was standing beside Blackford as the superintendent asked for Birmingham.

When the Birmingham office answered, Blackford questioned sharply. Did they know anything of his miners? They knew very little. From where were they coming? They were being assembled at Bessemer. The personnel office was handling it. Were they married or single? Were they bringing their families? Birmingham didn't know. Blackford swore and hung up.

He called Bessemer and learned little more. Finally, after appealing to the personnel chief himself, he established that the first shipment would consist of seven hundred and fifty persons. Bessemer understood there was to be another shipment shortly.

With that information, Blackford had to be content. He would be forced to wait until the train arrived to learn more. But he could not wait. There was no place in Cahaba for them and temporarily, at least, he must abandon the idea of building. Temporary quarters were the first consideration.

Blackford sought in vain for a way out and finally whirled on Stringfellow. "Well, what would you do?" he demanded. "Let's see you earn some of your salary. Suppose I weren't here and they put a thing like this up to you. How would you handle it?"

Stringfellow thought of his promise to Margaret. This was his first opportunity. "If you can get the Mineral to help, I think you can manage it," he said. "At least, it has been done before down here."

Blackford looked up interestedly. "How could the Mineral help?"

"You can get plenty of houses at Coosa. I heard the company had shifted a number of men from there. I know two big mess-halls are vacant. Could you get them? Then the men could come over in the evening and go back in the morning."

Blackford snapped his fingers. "You're right! I can get the Mineral to change the time for sending the Coal Special

through. Let it come in the evening and back in the morning. It's only about thirty-five miles and they ought to make it in an hour. That solves the question of families, too. They can leave 'em over there."

"What about the houses? Are you sure you can get them?"

"Get 'em? I'll take 'em." Blackford laughed exultantly. A moment before he had seen no way out, now he had a chance. He rose. "I've just time to get the train for Coosa now. I'm going over to see for myself. I'll let you know about it when I get back. In the mean time, get all the carpenters you can; pull 'em out of the mine, if necessary, and get busy on a wash-house and locker-rooms for the new men. They can't use the old place, they're too crowded now."

At the Residency, Blackford found Alice busy in the kitchen. "I'm going to Coosa," he said hurriedly. "I'll try to get back to-night, but I may not. If I don't, ask Mrs. Lawler to come up to be with you." He could not forbear adding: "You won't be lonesome without me."

"Why are you——" Alice began, but he interrupted.

"I'll tell you when I get back. I haven't time now."

Blackford left, and Alice looked after him wonderingly. It was the first time in Cahaba that they had been separated and she wished he had not taken it so casually. If he had waited she might have ... told him good-bye. She wondered if he were changing ... no longer interested in her. Alice went into the house feeling suddenly lonely. But it had been kind of him to tell her he was going away and not leave her to wonder ...

At Coosa Blackford found Stringfellow's words were true. He had a rapid-fire interview with the superintendent there. Blackford bullied and entreated until he convinced the Coosa superintendent he must have the houses. Then the Mineral superintendent on the phone. More pleading and bullying. But Blackford overbore resistance by sheer insistence and won the change in train schedules that he desired.

Riding back on the Cahaba train, Blackford began to wonder. That telegram from Pittsburgh. It was contrary to all mining camp practices. He should have had at least three months to prepare for the expansion and then would have found it too short. If the Cahaba Company really wanted coal, would it invite confusion by dumping a new crew on him without warning?

With legs outstretched on the opposite seat, Blackford watched the landscape flit by the windows of the single ramshackle coach and thought hard. When he had first come to Cahaba, he had not expected the support of the company, he had even prepared for active hostility. He had forgotten and been lulled into a false sense of security. Was this the first move against him?

But for his good fortune in securing the Coosa quarters temporarily, he would have had chaos on his hands. Also he would have been spending fifteen hundred dollars a day for nothing. The men had been hired; they would expect their pay. It was up to him to provide work; if he did not, then the Cahaba Company would hold him responsible.

Blackford grew wary. He had almost forgotten his suspicions, but they sprang up again, full-grown. He resolved in future to trust no one save those he knew were loyal to himself alone. And he would prepare against future moves by the central office. Having missed once, it would not find him napping again.

He was still thinking of this when the train reached Cahaba. He walked slowly down the hill and across the valley to the commissary. There he found a short, alert, stocky figure, with bristling close-cropped hair, waiting for him.

The man introduced himself abruptly. "My name is Gower. Mr. McDonough picked me when you sent up for an engineer."

Blackford's tired face lightened. "Lord, I'm glad to see you. I'll tell the whole wide world I need you. I suppose you know what they have wished off on me?"

"McDonough told me the Dolomite mills were looking to you for coal because Henry Ellen has been flooded out. I understand they're shipping you more men."

"There's something funny about that, but I'll explain it to you later. I'm going to handle that end and turn over the inside to you for the time being. For the next three or four weeks, I'll have all I can do getting things straight on top."

"Want me to push production, of course."

"You bet I do. You understand, don't you? The central office has told me I've got to triple the capacity of this mine in a few weeks. All they give me to do it with is two hundred and fifty men. There's a hell of a lot more to digging coal than just men."

Blackford leaned back and shaded his eyes. He was prepossessed toward the young engineer, in spite of the latter's slightly aggressive air and clipped speech. The superintendent continued his explanation.

"I expect you will find things pretty much at loose ends down there. The foreman has been running it on his own for the last few months. I haven't had time to straighten it out, but you push hard on developing every ton we can from our present force. Leave the rest to me."

"Going to put on a night shift?"

"Sure, as soon as I get things a little better arranged. I heard from the central office that it was sending me a duplicate organization. I'll probably want you on the night shift as soon as it is running smoothly, but work with Lawler on the day side until you are familiar with the working. Not married, are you?"

"No, so the night shift will suit me."

"All right. Suppose you go down and look around to-morrow and let me know what is the situation. Then we'll get together on production after I sift out the new crew."

Gower rose with a yawn. "Where do you want me to stay?"

"I suppose you'd better go to the bachelor quarters. Call 'em Saints' Rest here. Understand they're a pretty live bunch. Wouldn't want a cottage, would you?"

"No, I guess I'll get along up to the Rest. Sounds good 'cause I'm pretty tired from the trip. I'll find my way all right. I've been talking to your chief clerk and getting the lay of things."

"Good-night; make yourself at home and if you need anything let me know. You'll go down in the morning."

Blackford turned back to his desk and began again to figure on production problems. He believed he could make best progress if he drew up a definite schedule of what he must do and the time limits imposed in Reubens's letter. Busy with this, he nodded an absent farewell to Stringfellow. It grew later; the commissary had long since closed, but Blackford worked on. A face was pressed for a moment against the unshaded window at his back. It disappeared soundlessly and almost at the same moment there was a rap at the front door.

"Mr. Blackford! Mr. Blackford! Come! Quick!" a voice cried.

Blackford recognized Margaret Shackleford and sprang to his feet at the urgency of her voice. "What is it?" he called.

"Here! Down the street! Some one is hurt! Run!"

Blackford set off at a sharp trot after the voice. Almost as he did so, there was an explosion behind him and the building shook, while glass shattered all around him. The superintendent stopped, torn by the desire to go back and the urge of Margaret's appeal. The latter won and he dashed up to her.

"Who is hurt? Where is he?"

"No one," Margaret said calmly. "I just wanted to get you out of the office quickly. I suspected what was coming."

Blackford stopped abruptly. "Ah! Then your father is getting busy. Thank you."

He said nothing further, but turned and walked slowly toward the commissary. Margaret found his silence disturbing and kept at his side.

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously.

Blackford's voice was curt. "I think I'll see your father. I can't have this sort of thing."

"I was afraid you would say that. Mr. Blackford, you mustn't come into Possum Valley. Not after the other day. It wouldn't be safe."

Blackford shrugged his shoulders. "Then he'll have to come and see me."

"You should know better than that. He won't."

"I think he will." Blackford's voice was grim.

Margaret's calm broke. "Mr. Blackford, please don't do anything to my daddy! Please don't!"

"Well, my dear Miss Shackleford, I can't have people setting off dynamite under my office on the chance that I might be inside. Really I can't. I might be hurt, and I'm rather important to myself right now."

"But you weren't hurt."

"Not this time, thanks to you. I'll know how to take better care of myself in the future."

Margaret's voice shook. She had always seemed older than Blackford, but now it was he who was the stronger.

"I'm afraid of you when you talk like that, Mr. Blackford. And I'm afraid of what you represent. Remember, I promised to help. Let me handle it, please. I can do so much better than you."

Blackford yielded grudgingly. "Can you promise this will not be repeated?"

"Yes, I'll go to Daddy myself."

"Perhaps it would be better that way. But, Miss Shackleford, you once warned me I underestimated your father. I know you haven't thought very highly of me, but don't make the same mistake about me."

"Thank you, Mr. Blackford. Don't send those men you have brought here into Possum Valley. You told Daddy you didn't want trouble. That would——"

"I shan't send them unless it is necessary," Blackford interrupted. "I make no promises about that."

Margaret was puzzled. Blackford was different; he had seemed soft before, now he was hard. And she was afraid.

"Don't be too hard," she pleaded. "Can't you see things from Daddy's viewpoint?"

"I can, but don't forget that I also see them from my own. I don't want to be hard, but I can't be interrupted."

"I'll promise that you won't be again. It was just an accident I found out this to-night. I received a message. I'll go to Daddy."

"Very well. Shall I take you home?"

"Oh, no, I have some one waiting. Thank you. Good-night, and remember I promised."

Blackford went back to the office to straighten the confusion. The explosion had done surprisingly little damage. It had blown a hole in the floor and shaken down the accumulated dust of years. But that was all.

Blackford pulled his desk away and resumed his work. He had accepted Margaret's promise without question of her ability to carry it out.

As he worked, the thought of the crowbar that had just missed his head came back to him. Had that been Shackleford, too? With a shrug, he shuffled the papers before him wearily. Then he bent to his task, disdaining to pull the shades before the brilliantly lighted windows.

CHAPTER XVI

ALICE LEARNS OF LIFE

Blackford's absorption with the business of the mine was quickly reflected in his attitude in his home; no longer was he sullen or morose.

Alice sensed it early and was glad. Cahaba was changing under her eyes and it was her husband's doing. Mrs. Lawler told her that, and Mrs. Glisson and the women she met about the camp. She could feel the difference they found hard to put into words. Mrs. Glisson came nearer expressing it than any other.

"Mis' Blackford, all the children's got new shoes at the same time," she said in homely simile. "An' that ain't happened since we bin in Cahaba. Things shore is changin' in this camp. Ain't like they used to be."

Dr. Rawls added his word of praise. "I don't know what you did, Mrs. Blackford, but it was enough," he said one afternoon when he met her at a home in the camp. "I say this because of what I said previously. Your husband is changing things rapidly."

Alice thrilled a little over it and found herself studying her husband and herself. She recognized the change in herself no less than in him.

Blackford was giving every moment of his time to the mine and its demands. He was still reserved and silent and Alice longed to break down the barrier he raised between them.

Blackford's hours at home were no longer regular. He came in at all times, white-faced, weary, frequently discouraged, but beneath his despondency Alice saw a new side of him.

Blackford was discovering in himself qualities he did not know he possessed: he did not look back: he decided he was right and drove straight to his goal. His mistakes he thrust aside, repairing them as best he could.

Studying him, Alice found much to admire. She recognized the characteristics she had idealized in the beginning. After all, she had not been so far wrong in him; he had only needed to be awakened. Her manner softened and there was faint eagerness in her eyes when she talked with him, but her husband told her nothing of his difficulties; unaccountably she wanted to hear of them from him.

Her suppressed tenderness took the form of attention to Blackford's personal comfort. She waited for him no matter how long he was delayed: there was always a warm meal ready when he came in late, his head aching fiercely from long poring over figures.

She served him daintily, in the dining-room, on spotless napery and with gleaming silver, softened by the rose light from the hanging chandelier. This quiet hour rested Blackford and he grew to wait for it through the day.

Alice would open the door and welcome him with a smile. "Hungry?" she would ask. "Tired? Come right in; I've your supper waiting for you and hot coffee."

Blackford never grew sentimental, but deliberately he courted these meals together. Sometimes he could have gotten home for supper and gone back to his work, but he preferred to wait for the figure in the opened door as his foot touched the steps. He brought his work home with him and toiled late over the library table.

Alice watched him covertly, knew when he went to bed and judged his weariness by his step. One night, when she did not hear his slow progress up the hall, she went to find him. He had fallen asleep as he worked, his head on the table, one arm hanging down. Alice looked at him a moment and then sat down in a low rocker.

There was something appealing in the relaxed figure. It was symbolic of the new man he had become. Blackford, exhausted from long labor, asleep in his chair, was not the indifferent man who had let his opportunity slip from listless fingers.

Alice faced the issue courageously. It was idle to pretend longer—this man she loved. His very sincerity had disarmed her and no matter what he had done she loved him. Alice's face was white. It was no light admission. Once Blackford

stirred, and she rose hurriedly in sensitive fear that he would find her watching beside him, but he merely sighed and did not rouse and she sat down again.

She must think this out. Her impulse was to go to him frankly and tell him, but she knew she could not. She shrank from the rebuff her instinct told her she might expect. Blackford would not believe, he would be incredulous and would think that she was again ... He had said that he would never forgive her ... Alice shivered at the memory of that first night in Cahaba ... She had loved him even then; that was why she had been so cruel ... If only she had not, how simple it would be to go to him! But now ...

Alice forgot that her husband had sinned against her and remembered only that she loved him. She felt that she was remote to him and it hurt. She wanted to stand with him in the work that was taking all his strength. She longed to give him of her own courage and optimism. She wanted him to feel that he was doing these things for her.

And then came doubt. Her husband had said he loved her, but that was before she taunted him. Had he put his love aside, crushed it as she had tried in vain to do? He was stronger than she; perhaps he had succeeded.

She knew he never forgot, but she could tell nothing more from his manner. It was perfect. There was no sulkiness, only a very quiet reserve, instant response to her whims and an unvarying respect of her individuality.

Presently she grew more hopeful. He would forget his bitterness in the joy of his work and then she could speak; the sting would be removed from her reproach. Meanwhile she would help all she could and show that she could forget. Surely he could, too!

Alice rose and stood over him. Her hand crept up to his hair for an instant; she could not leave him to his cramped sleep. Her fingers tightened.

"Warren!" she called softly in his ear. "Get up. You have gone to sleep in your chair."

Blackford opened tired eyes and saw her bending over him, two long braids of hair over her shoulders.

He rose. "I'm sorry I bothered you," he said thickly, for he was very weary. "It was good of you to call me."

Alice wondered as he turned quickly away. Blackford was thinking of that other night. Was she luring him again? Well ... she would not have another chance. His resolution hardened. He would never forgive that ... but she seemed ... Delilah?...

Alice waited patiently in the days that followed, but if Blackford saw a difference in her manner he gave no sign. It did not occur to him that his wife had changed even as he. He had accepted her words as final and her faint advances toward a more sentimental footing glanced unnoticed off his reserve.

Alice learned much of life in Cahaba. Her nature expanded under unaccustomed contact with real people. She was more tolerant. She understood and sympathized and she liked every one and was interested in them all. It was not hard for Cahaba to love her and she had many friends.

Because of this friendliness for all the camp, once it came to know her it took its hurts to her, told her its fears and its pleasures. And to her at last came Mrs. Lawler, confused and hesitant. Alice had rocked the smallest Lawler to sleep when the child's mother laid a hand on her arm.

"You sure is queer, honey. I don't believe you are worried a mite about your man."

Startled, Alice looked at her. "Why should I? What has he done?"

"It ain't what he's done, it's what is goin' to be done to him 'bout this whisky business with old Ben Shackleford. We all 'greed 'mongst ourselves we wouldn't say nothin' to you to skeer you, but I ain't got the heart to let you sit there unbeknownst."

"I don't understand, Mrs. Lawler. If there is something I should know, tell me."

"Ain't you heard what happened down t' the commissary the other night?"

"No."

"Somebody tried to blow up the commissary with your man in it. If he hadn't been called out, it might of got him. Then there was that thing on the tipple. They threw a crowbar at him an' if it had hit him ain't no tellin' what it would of done. They say it was an accident, but they can't make me believe nothin' like that."

Alice drew the sleeping youngster to her so closely he woke with a cry of protest. "Why should they want to do anything to him?"

"Honey, you know old Ben Shackleford is a mighty wicked creature. I reckon he'd do most anything for money. Your husband has stopped him from makin' 'n awful lot o' money. Now he ain't goin' to let nothin' like that be done 'thout fightin'."

"Then you think Mr. Blackford is in danger?"

"Honey, I knows he is. You tell him to be mighty careful of what he does."

"Then it was because of what I asked."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout that, but he shore put a crimp into old Ben's likker business and closed up his gamblin' house, too. Fust and last, he must of cost old Shackleford a heap o' money. You speak to him, honey, hear? He don't come noways near takin' good 'nough care of hisself."

"I will," promised Alice. "I didn't know about this. I knew things were different in the camp, but no one said anything about this."

"Yes, I know. We 'greed we wouldn't say nothin' to bother you. But you ought to know. You tell him not to go out nights by hisself."

Alice reproached herself as she hurried home. She blamed herself for her husband's danger; felt that he had incurred this danger because of her. And Blackford had left her to learn of this from another! It emphasized his remoteness and she was hurt.

"He thought I didn't care and went right ahead without telling me," she almost sobbed. "I wish he had told me. I do care."

She waited impatiently for Blackford, and he came in early. She did not hurry matters; she waited until he had eaten and then sat stirring his coffee and gazing thoughtfully at the table. There were lines in his face, which was drawn and tired.

"Warren, have you had trouble with Mr. Shackleford?" she asked abruptly.

Blackford smiled slowly as he raised his eyes. "Not to say trouble. I told him he couldn't hide his whisky in our coal or sell it in our camp. He told me he could and there things have rested."

"How is the mine work?"

"Not so good and it's funny about that. There are too many little accidents right at this time."

"Why do you say right at this time?"

"Well, your father has given me what I asked. It's a chance to do something big."

He told her of Reubens's letter and the alternative it offered. She did not show by word or sign that she had known it: it was good to have him tell her.

"Can you do it?"

Blackford, having finished his coffee, rose with a sigh. He stretched his arms above his head and yawned.

"Come into the living-room and I'll tell you all about it," he invited. Settled in the big chair facing the window, Blackford relaxed. He was dead tired: it had been a hard day at the mine. Alice came in noiselessly and took the chair across from him. She switched on the tall floor lamp that threw a soft glow over the room. A breeze came through the open window.

"Tell me; I'm interested," she said. "Can you do it?"

"The men all say I can't, but I'm going to: I've got to," he said soberly. "It is the only way I can regain my ... self-respect. Somehow or other, I feel that it is the only way I can show you how sorry I am for what I ... for things. After I have done that, we will see. Perhaps you will feel differently then and be willing to take your freedom. I hate to think of your being held here against your desire and all through my doing."

Alice looked at him and her lips opened, but instinct kept her silent. His words had given the key to his thoughts. She would wait until he had done the task her father had set and then she could go to him. To speak sooner might make that impossible.

Blackford spoke again after a moment's thought. "Can I do it? Well, I'm either going to make good in a big way or I'm going down as the biggest bust in the history of the Cahaba Company. Frankly, I don't know which. If I don't make it, I shan't have any regrets. It won't be my fault that I wasn't big enough. I shall have done my best."

Alice responded instantly to the throb of real pain in his tones. "Mrs. Lawler gave me a message for you this afternoon," she said.

"Yes?"

"She told me to tell you to be careful."

"Was that all?"

"All the message? Yes, but she told me you had not been careful."

"Careful enough." Indifferently. "I'm here."

"She said some one had tried to kill you."

"Well, I was lucky."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Blackford glanced at her curiously and smiled. His voice was a little ironical as he answered. "Your question is unnecessary, as the answer must be obvious to you. Why should I worry you? It was only a small thing, just a little dynamite under the commissary. I was not there and there was no damage."

Alice was dashed at his matter-of-fact acceptance of what was intensely dramatic to her. They had drawn closer to each other. Blackford's tone was more gracious when he spoke again.

"These things are to be expected. I am not surprised and if it becomes too much of a nuisance, I can stop it. I know who _____"

He was interrupted as the window on his right fell into tinkling fragments. There was the whine of a bullet as it buried itself in the opposite wall and simultaneously the distant report of a rifle.

For a moment Blackford and Alice sat gazing stupidly at the shattered window and the fluttering curtains where the pane had been broken in the upper sash. Then Blackford sprang toward the door, but Alice threw herself against him as his hand was on the knob.

"No! No!" she cried, snatching his hands away. "Don't open it!"

"Nonsense! I must find who did it." He struggled to free himself, but still she prevented.

"They will shoot again!" Alice warned. "Can't you feel them waiting out there for you? You will be in the light and he won't miss again. Don't! Oh, please don't open the door!"

Blackford stood for a moment. Instinctively his arms tightened about his wife as she still pressed him back, her body flung against his. Did he dream it or was there an answering pressure? Did she nestle a little closer? He fought against the impulse to draw her into his arms: even in this moment, the memory of another night intervened: the perfume of her hair recalled it. Blackford was unmoving for a heartbeat, and then calmly disengaged himself. Alice dropped back with a long breath, and her husband half-led, half-supported her to a chair.

"Come, don't get excited," he said easily. "It is all over."

Alice sat up with a cry, pointing to the unshaded window. "Pull the shade down! He might shoot again!"

Blackford obeyed. She shuddered and gripped the arms of her chair in fear as his figure was outlined against the window when he reached for the shade. But nothing happened and he came back to pat her hand.

"You think fast," he commended. "I should have opened the door. Thank you."

"I am so frightened," Alice shuddered. "The bullet went right between us and it popped just like a firecracker."

"Yes, bullets do that. Don't be frightened; he's a poor shot."

"But I am frightened." Alice was a little hysterical. "Suppose——"

"You mustn't start supposing or your nerves will go to pieces. You can suppose anything might happen."

Alice lay back in her chair, biting her lips to keep back the tears. How could he be so indifferent! Apparently he cared for nothing.

Blackford walked over and looked at the window somberly. Then he strolled back and stooped with an exclamation as his foot struck an object.

"Here, keep this as a souvenir," he called lightly to Alice. "Now you can say you've been under fire."

Blackford tossed the flattened bullet into her lap, but she shook it out with a little scream. "I don't want it! I don't need it to remember this."

Blackford came over to the table and stood looking down at her. "I said I could stop this if it became too much of a nuisance. I can and I will—to-morrow. So don't be afraid. Go on to bed and forget. It has been hard on you, but it won't happen again."

Obediently she crept off, hurt at his curt dismissal. Her doubts returned. He could not love her and be so calm. She had deliberately appealed to him and he had been indifferent. She was a little bewildered as she entered her room and left her door wide.



CHAPTER XVII

AN ULTIMATUM

Blackford's purpose had hardened when he came down next morning. He had no time for anxiety about his personal safety: it was a distraction he could not afford—and above that was consideration for Alice. He would not have her imperiled. As well to face the issue now and have it over. He would put the fear of the Cahaba Company into Shackleford.

He stopped one of the carpenters working at repairs to the office, necessary after the explosion earlier in the week. "Go over to Shackleford's and tell him I want to see him in my office at once," he said curtly and the man departed. Blackford sent for Mudd. "Trouble," he said briefly. He had already told the policeman of the two previous attempts on his life. Now he added details of the bullet fired into his home. "Get your men and bring them here. This is a show-down."

Mudd's eyes snapped. "I like this job better every day. I shan't be a minute."

Blackford's heart warmed; he always felt better when he talked to Mudd. Difficulties had a way of smoothing out before the lad's cheerful optimism.

Blackford busied himself at his desk. His nerves tightened as he awaited Shackleford. He forgot Margaret and his promise not to send for her father. The bullet intended for himself might have struck Alice. Attacks on himself, he might have passed over; he was not very fearful of his own safety. Indeed, Blackford marveled at his own lack of reaction to the knowledge that he was in physical danger. By this time he did not discount it. But he would protect Alice at any cost.

Mudd and his men filed in silently and the chief loitered over and sat in the window where he could see the path over Double Oak Mountain. Blackford was busy with papers: time was too precious now to waste even a minute.

Presently the door opened and the carpenter returned. "Shackleford said tell you——" he began and then hesitated dubious of his message.

"Go on," Blackford commanded. "Never mind what it was, tell me exactly as he said it."

"Shackleford said tell you it wasn't no further from here over there 'n it was from there over here. Said if you wanted t' see him, you'd better come over there, 'cause he wasn't doin' no visitin' a-tall."

Blackford was not greatly surprised; he had summoned Mudd expecting this, and now he prepared to use the force he had been gathering against the eventuality. He rather welcomed Shackleford's defiance.

He met Mudd's eyes and nodded. "Go get him. I want him. Bring him here."

Mudd slid off the window-sill. "I been waitin' for them very words ever since I come to Cahaba. Go get your rifles, boys. This ain't no job for pistols."

"Oh, John," Blackford called from the door, and Mudd paused as he added significantly, "Watch yourself."

Mudd grinned back at him. "You got it wrong, boss. If any watchin' 's to be done, he better do it."

Blackford saw them take the Double Oak trail. Instinctively they spread out and he thought of a hound-pack, running fan-shaped on the scent of the quarry. No need to ask about these boys' metal.

Again there was a wait: this time it was not so easy to endure. Blackford forced himself to go through his correspondence, but he was paying scant heed to it. Gower! He should be in on this. He sent for him.

"Sit down. We are about to hold a sort of court," the superintendent explained rapidly. "I want you to know about it because it will give you a line on things in the camp. Then you could carry on if anything should happen and we were separated. How are things below?"

"They could be better. I found them pretty well shot," Gower said. "Things are run slackly. There must be a big change before we can get the coal this working should produce."

They discussed briefly the conditions underground, and were interrupted by the tramp of feet outside. The door flew open and Shackleford came in. His pale eyes were blazing and his mouth was tight under his hooked nose. Behind him came Mudd and his men, rifles in the crooks of their arms. Blackford could see no sign of a conflict and smiled his thanks at Mudd without asking the arguments he had used to bring Shackleford.

Blackford whirled in his chair: his face was bleak and his gaze did not waver as he met Shackleford's colorless eyes.

"When I go into a man's private office, I take off my hat," he said deliberately.

Shackleford spoke thickly. "I didn't come; I was brung. An' if any o' the boys had been to home——"

"Never mind what might have happened. I am not interested. You are here. I have something to say to you."

"I got somethin' to say to you, too, and——"

Again Blackford interrupted. He was striving to over-awe Shackleford by every artifice he had seen used at Pittsburgh. "Perhaps you have," he said, without troubling to make his voice courteous. "I'll listen when I'm through myself, but I'll do the talking first." He leveled a finger at Shackleford, who continued to stand before the desk. There were no other chairs in the room save those occupied by Blackford, Gower, and Stringfellow. The superintendent had seen to that. Blackford spoke calmly. "There happens to be a very particular reason why I can't be troubled with you right now and I'm going to stop you. When I first came here, I went to you and I put it as decently as I could. I gave you fair warning. I won't have you selling whisky in my camp. You made some threats and you've come mighty near making good—nearer than was comfortable. Now you're going to stop—if you're wise."

Blackford looked steadily at Shackleford. The superintendent's hands, fingers together, were under his chin and his foot tapped the floor in steady cadence. Shackleford waited. "I'm listenin'. I'll do my talkin' when you get done," he said.

"That is good of you—and wise. Two days ago a crowbar was thrown from the tipple; it missed me by inches. The next night dynamite with a lighted fuse was thrown under my office. Fortunately, I was called out ... maybe you know about that and maybe you don't ... but I was called out. Last night a bullet was fired at me through the windows of my home. It passed between my wife and myself."

"You can't prove I had nothin' to do with that," said Shackleford, who was beginning to subdue his anger. His mouth straightened and his eyes grew less lambent: he resumed his slow paternal drawl, but Blackford did not find him less menacing.

"I know I can't prove that you did," said the superintendent, "and I shan't waste time trying. I don't need proof. Now I haven't time to bother with you. I don't give a damn how much whisky you make, but I won't have it sold to anybody from this camp—whether they ask for it or not," he added as Shackleford opened his lips. "Oh, I know your code; you told me. Well, you're going to modify it so far as Cahaba is concerned. I won't have my camp disorganized; it's too expensive."

Shackleford's manner grew defensive instead of arrogant. It was new treatment and, looking into Blackford's chilly eyes, he changed his tone.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with none o' them times. I never even heard of nobody throwin' at you from the tipple. My own girl called you out o' your office the night somebody set off that dynamite——"

"Yes; if you had nothing to do with it, how did she know it was to be done?"

Shackleford stammered over the question. "I dunno. I asked her and she wouldn't tell. But I never had nothin' to do with it. I never done it nor I never had it done. As fr shootin' into your house, I ain't never shot at no women yet, and I reckon I'm too old to start now."

Blackford struck the desk with his fist. "We are wasting time! I didn't bring you over here to argue with you. I sent you a message for your own good." The superintendent rose slowly and shook his finger in Shackleford's face. He did not raise his voice. "The next time anything happens to me you'll be held responsible. Understand? You'd better see that nothing happens." Blackford looked from Shackleford to Mudd, cuddling the stock of a rifle in his arms and watching them with intent eyes. "Mudd," called the superintendent. "Do you see this man?"

"Boss, I been lookin' at him and for him some time."

"He is Ben Shackelford. You know him?"

"Boss, me and him's real old acquaintances by now." Mudd was smiling and his eyes twinkled.

"If anything happens to me, don't waste time trying to find who did it. Go get Shackelford. Understand?"

"I sure hear you plain and you needn't wait that long on my account."

"Don't bother about appealing to the sheriff or the coroner. Just go get him. I'm the law in this camp."

Shackelford broke in. "Now, by God! That's goin' too far. I've got a little of that kind of law myself. Always cal'lated to, anyway. Now you've done considerable talkin' an' I listened to you. I ain't a man to threaten much: allus believed in doin', not talkin'. I don't know 's I'd be so awful quick to sick them bullies of yours onto me. 'F anything happened to me, you know what'll become of this camp? My boys won't leave one stick on another."

Stringfellow had been standing unnoticed in the rear of the room. Now he interposed. "He's tellin' the truth, Mr. Blackford. Those boys over the mountain——"

"Keep out of this," Blackford ordered, and Stringfellow, rebuffed, fell silent. He had spoken for Margaret, but the time had not been propitious. Blackford spoke to Shackelford. "What they did wouldn't help you. We'd have you. Better pass the word along to let me alone."

The two measured each other: neither was talking idly and both knew it. Shackelford spoke passionately, his head swaying and his voice shaking.

"You tell me I can't sell what I got when somebody wants to buy, an' I tell you, with all your dam' gunmen right behind you, that I'll sell what I please where I please when I please. You do what you kin about it an' see what it'll git you."

Blackford leaned forward and asked a smooth question. "You know the answer to that, don't you? If you sell any more liquor to my men, whether they ask for it or not, I'll comb those valleys of yours on the river and sweep them as clean as the palm of your hand."

"Come an' try it!" Shackelford challenged. "Come an' try it, and see how far you get! Th' State of Alabama ain't been able to do that."

"The company can and will," Blackford warned. "We know how. I'm no stranger to the mountains."

"Dam' the Cahaba Comp'ny an' what it kin do." Shackelford thrust his handless right arm under Blackford's face. "It can't gimme back my arm. I gave it for them an' what'd they do but kick me out an' leave me to make the best o' what I had left! I figgered out my own way an' I'm makin' it. I ain't interferin' with nobody that don't interfere with me. You come along an' tell me I gotta stop. I won't, an' you can't make me. I'll——"

"I don't care what you do as long as you don't sell to Cahaba or use Cahaba coal to hide your shipments," Blackford interrupted. "You can't use our trains and you can't use our men."

Shackelford bellowed defiance at Blackford. "I bin livin' over in that draw fr twenty years. I'll be livin' there twenty-five years after you leave, if the Lord is willin'."

"I wouldn't bet on it," said Blackford coolly. "I'll take my chances on that. I've heard something about that hand of yours. I don't think you got a square deal, but I wasn't responsible for that. Now I'm a fair man. I'll meet you halfway. How much do you want to square you with the company?"

"I wants to be let alone."

"That's fine; it's exactly what I want. We ought to get together. Do you mean you want to be let alone to sell whisky in this camp?"

"I want to be let alone to do what I please with my own stuff."

Blackford gestured impatiently. "We aren't getting anywhere. How much money do you want to call it square with the company and let us alone?"

"I don't want none of your money."

"Then you want a fight?"

"I don't want nothin'. If you've said all you've got to say, I'll be gittin' back. An' I'll tell you one thing—you keep your gunmen off my land or some of 'em 'll stay there. Hear me?"

Blackford was unimpressed. "Come over when I want to see you, then. You can go, you know your choice. If anything happens to me ... Better pass the word."

The old man rolled out of the office, his head shaking, and trudged up the street, his handless right arm swinging free. He was greeted right and left by loud shouts.

Stringfellow followed him out unobtrusively and met Margaret as he hurried toward the tipple.

"Where is Daddy?" she asked anxiously. "I was away from home. I heard they came after him."

"Your father is all right," Stringfellow said. "I was just going after him to see him out of the camp. Perhaps you had better do it. Tell him the next time Blackford sends for him to come. It's good advice."

Stringfellow told her what had happened. Instead of being fearful, she was relieved.

"That's just what Daddy needs," she said. "I think this helped."

"Listen, are you sure you know what kind of man Blackford is?" asked Stringfellow dubiously. "You told me he was soft and needed help. Ask your father. Sure you want me to work with him?"

"Of course," said Margaret. "I didn't expect this to be easy. Helping Mr. Blackford, you are working for me. You have never understood my problem. Mr. Blackford has promised me Daddy will not be hurt."

"I wouldn't rely on that too much. Better close-herd your dad for a while. I can't help much; Blackford shut me up quick. This ain't as easy as you think."

With that they separated, Margaret going for her father and Stringfellow returning to the office where Blackford and Gower were still talking.

"Did you mean what you said to Shackleford?" asked the newcomer incredulously.

"I did. You saw he believed it."

"You as good as told him you'd have him killed if he didn't let you alone. Aren't you afraid of getting hung?"

Blackford laughed contemptuously. "You must think you are in Pittsburgh, boy. This is a mining camp. It was the only way I could reach him."

"And you'd really have him killed?" still incredulous.

Blackford's face was hard. "Any one who gets in my way now will be hurt. I've something to do, and I'm going to use every means at hand. I can't be too particular about what they are. I didn't bring Mudd and those men here for ornament, I brought them to use, and if I must I will. It's all right to be nice and ladylike if the other fellow is willing to play that way. If he won't, then you're a fool if you do."

He was voicing Gower's own creed so exactly the man started. "Have you been down at all since you've been here?" he asked.

"Not to speak of; I haven't been able to make a detailed inspection. I've been thinking of that, and as soon as I get these new people settled, I'll go over it with you. We'll have to parcel out the headings and the rooms. You had better go with me to do that."

"When do you think that will be?"

"Probably one day next week. I'll be in Coosa two or three days getting the trains running smoothly and the new people

started. Then I'll take up production. I wish you'd have a report of what is needed by them."

"If you'll name a definite day for the inspection, I'll have things kind of ready for you," offered Gower.

Blackford calculated mentally. "All right, call it next Thursday."

After Gower left, Blackford relaxed from the strain and was satisfied. That night at the Residency he told Alice about it and she listened eagerly. It was the first time he had volunteered anything.

"That trouble is over," he said. "You'll see. I went to the source with Shackleford. I'm telling you this so that you won't worry. In——"

"But I do worry, I can't help it. I've worried about you all day."

Blackford glanced at her keenly, but she would not meet his eyes. "Don't be a fool," he thought. "This means nothing. She's not sincere." Aloud he said: "Forget it. It isn't worth your anxiety."

Unable to read his thoughts, Alice heard only the cold words.

CHAPTER XVIII

PRODUCTION

Days now seemed too short to Blackford. Never before had hundreds of men been dependent on him for instructions in the slightest emergency. It changed the man completely. He threw himself into the multitude of details incident to the reorganization of the camp with an enthusiasm that inspired even listless subordinates.

Blackford's duties took him out of himself. He ceased to be concerned with the smaller details of the project and devoted himself to thinking and planning for the work as a whole. As much as he could, he delegated responsibility to the various sub-foremen and under-executives. He called on Gower to push production below; Lawler he charged with seeing that the way was made smooth.

It was to Mudd, however, that Blackford turned in his greatest and most pressing emergency—the arrival of the new workmen. They were due to-day on a special train at Coosa. Blackford had not notified Pittsburgh of his intention of quartering them there, bringing them over every evening and sending them back in the morning. He reasoned that it was no concern of the central office. It had dumped the men on him at forty-eight hours' notice and told him to handle them. The personnel office knew there were no facilities at Cahaba for a suddenly doubled population. If he found a way out, it was his own affair, whether or not it suited the central office. It would be known eventually, but the expedient would give him breathing time that he must have.

Blackford had already planned for the permanent housing of his new workmen. He sent to Birmingham for carpenters and ordered enough lumber for the construction of rough bunk-houses. These would be completed as fast as nails could be driven.

To do what Reubens demanded had become an obsession with Blackford. It represented to him all that he had sought in the old days—and now it was coming to him legitimately. All his men had told him it could not be done. He had been set an impossible task, they said. Impossible, was it? His spirits rose. He would show them, and when he had done this thing he would have justified himself.

Blackford did not try to analyze his feelings beyond this point; he was working for Alice. Her contempt had stung him worse even than his own thoughts. There had been days when he despaired, but these moments were less frequent now. He had little time for introspective thought; he only knew he wanted Alice to realize that when his chance had come he had been able to meet it.

With such a stake, the superintendent overlooked no move in the wary game he was playing. First, the demand for coal when for years the working had been operated in a lackadaisical manner; the sudden increase of workmen; his inability to get information regarding them; all this warned him what to expect. He recognized it was to be war between himself and the central office, and he did not shrink from the contest.

Blackford had seen similar things happen to other men. He had followed the unequal fight and had watched its progress from the reports that went through his hands on to the mining division chief. He had seen the result, inevitable usually, a man thrown aside—broken. The field man relied on the central office for help and coöperation; the poor devil did not recognize war until too late. He would make no such mistake.

Blackford was willing to go it on his own; he preferred it that way. If he won, so much the more credit for himself. He expected nothing from the central office.

Blackford did not feel that the contest was unequal. He knew that, while he might expect nothing from the central office, his signature as director of the Cahaba colliery would be honored. The central office would make no move to help him, but that did not frighten him. All he asked was a free hand.

Instead of going to Coosa to meet the new crew, the superintendent sent Mudd. There was too much to be done at Cahaba for Blackford to be away. Mudd had been instructed to send the new men over the following day, when they would be issued their mining supplies, assigned to their lockers in the wash-room, given check numbers, and all details settled incident to beginning production the following day. Blackford was thankful that he would not have them in camp. It would mean less confusion and prevent early conflict with the men already in Cahaba.

Confident of Mudd's ability to settle affairs at Coosa, Blackford plunged into the reorganization of his forces. His goal was, briefly, tripling the production of his mine. The superintendent did not believe it would be as difficult as it sounded, and he did not allow the pessimism of the others to throw him into a panic. Sitting now in his office, he went over a column of figures he had set down to put the problem concretely before him.

The mine was now running twenty days a month. It had a hundred and fifty picks at work, averaging seven tons a man a day, by no means a large figure on a six-foot seam. That was approximately twenty thousand tons a month. Familiar with production at other mines in the Alabama field, Blackford believed that the average production per man could be pushed to ten tons a day. The big seam of coal favored him.

He knew a miner rarely sends to the surface as much coal as he can cut, shoot, and load. This is for various reasons. Sometimes the company does not wish production to go beyond a certain point; then it does not supply the miner the number of cars he needs if he is to send up all the coal he can get out. If the company wants the miner to produce only six tons that day, he is supplied with sufficient cars to carry only six tons.

In this way the company controls the production of the men and their pay without an actual shut-down of the mine and the consequent scattering of the miners. If it wishes the payroll cut, it reduces production by failing to supply the cars.

The converse of this is true also, as Blackford knew. Consequently, he had told Lawler to increase the mine cars from two tons to three, and yet supply the miners the same number. By doing this, Blackford hoped to get at least three tons a day more from each man and perhaps more than that.

If he did that, instead of producing a thousand tons a day, his hundred and fifty men would mine at least fifteen hundred and the total for the month would jump from twenty thousand to thirty thousand tons.

Blackford intended his night shift to be an absolute duplication, man for man, of his day workers. That would double his production and his monthly figure would go to sixty thousand tons and he still would not be badly pushed.

He would then need but fifteen thousand tons a month to meet the seventy-five thousand tons demanded by Reubens. He did not believe this would be hard to secure. In his inspection of production reports, he had seen that the mine rarely operated over twenty days a month. He believed he could get enough additional days and nights of operation to provide the tonnage still required.

Counting out the four Sundays, there were twenty-six working days in a thirty-day month. Six days a month the mine was now idle when it should be working. At double turn this would give him twelve additional working days. At fifteen hundred tons a day, he could produce eighteen thousand tons a month. Then there were the four Sundays: he could operate even then if necessary.

The superintendent made a note to confer with the engineering staff. It must be increased, for the physical mine properties must be put in the best shape possible. He could not hope to operate double turn twenty-six days a month without some break-downs. There would be scant margin for any emergencies. In fact, Blackford recognized that he must have more than the three thousand tons allowed under his present estimate.

The superintendent was prepared for this, too. He expected to drive his headings on the third level where he was now working a couple of hundred feet in either direction from the shaft. He would thus open sufficient new rooms to give him more coal faces. He estimated he needed at least twenty-five more rooms where miners could be put to work. That would give him two hundred and fifty tons a day additional and, even at twenty working days a month, he would have five thousand tons more. If necessary, he could gain further margin by driving his headings still more and opening new rooms.

Blackford checked his figures carefully. He could not see where he had reason for anxiety. He promised himself that, no later than the following week, the mine would be producing at the rate of seventy-five thousand tons a month. He would then be prepared to hold it at that figure indefinitely.

Blackford was also considering another angle—expense. A mine's money is made only by those men who are digging coal. The remainder are known as "dead workers," not because they are not absolutely necessary to keep the mine in operation, but because they do not produce directly. Blackford believed that the proportion of dead workers in Cahaba was needlessly high and that, by reducing this ratio, he could materially decrease the expense of the mining and make the

operation more profitable. If he could accomplish this, he would be directly producing himself.

Blackford found one comfort—he had no worry about railroad cars. In a commercial mine, this would have been a grave problem in tripling production. In such a mine, the capacity is governed by the ability of the mine to get cars from the railroad that serves it. The periodic car shortages, when there are none to be had, force many mines to shut down at the very time operation should be at the maximum to profit most by the market.

This difficulty Blackford did not have, for the Mineral was owned by the Cahaba Company. It meant that in inter-plant transportation there was no question of car shortage. He mined the coal: if the traffic department furnished him cars, he loaded them from the tipple; if the cars were not furnished, he dumped the coal into the bins after it had been crushed and washed. If the coal was not loaded from the washer, the traffic department must load it—that is, pay for having it done by crews working under Blackford. The superintendent worried little about cars or loading. He knew most of the loading would be done from the washer. If he accumulated any reserve in the bins, he would be lucky.

He sent for Lawler and began immediately on his programme to insure uninterrupted production. Lawler came in diffidently and took the chair Blackford indicated. The superintendent had found him over-eager to fall in with his suggestions. But he could not censure him for that, Blackford told himself justly.

"It has become necessary to triple our production almost overnight," Blackford said. "Naturally that means every man must extend himself to the limit. There are certain things all of us must do, but I think your part is the most important because you are closest to the men and to conditions in the working itself. I should like to feel sure of your coöperation. I have wondered if there was any resentment on your part because you were not made superintendent. It was not my fault that I was sent here over your head. If you feel that you should have had the place, I want to know it and get it straightened out, either by transferring you, if you wish, or otherwise. What do you say?"

"I don't want no transfer," said Lawler quickly. "There ain't nothin' the matter with me. I'm pretty well satisfied here. I've worked for four superintendents and been here since the shaft was opened. I know my job, and I don't have to worry about it. I'd ruther have it that way."

"Good!" heartily. "I'm glad you feel as you do, because this means that every man in the camp must give everything in him. I haven't been down yet really to look around and I wanted you to tell me what conditions are. Of course, I'm going down Thursday and then we can talk more intelligently, but I've a few questions now. You work a hundred and fifty picks, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many dead workers?"

"About a hundred."

"Does that include the people on the surface, too?"

"Yes, sir, everybody; but most of them are down."

"That's about one dead worker for every miner and a half. That's pretty high, it seems to me. What do you use them all for? Understand, I'm not criticizing your work or your distribution of your men; I'm simply trying to find out what they do, because I think we can reduce that proportion."

"Well, there's the fire boss and his men and the sprinkling crew and their foreman and the drivers and the trap boys and the pumpers, and we have to keep a force of men building brattices."

"In the East they think one dead worker for every four picks is the proper proportion. Under conditions in Alabama, I am afraid this is a little low, but we certainly ought to be able to bring our proportion down to one in three. I wish you'd be thinking about that and, as soon as the reorganization is over, I'll take it up with you again. You spoke of sprinkling; is the dust bad here?"

"I've seen it worse in other places. We have more trouble with gas 'n anything else. Never is no tellin' when you'll run into it in a pocket, an' then there's trouble. The dust ain't so bad, but we have to sprinkle once a week. You're goin' to put on two shifts, ain't you?"

"Yes; I want them working by to-morrow night at least."

"I got those cars fixed so they can carry three tons an' I'm puttin' 'em to work in the mornin'."

"Good; and you had better arrange to have more built, because working twenty hours a day we must expect a certain amount of breakage and we don't want to run short."

"All right; I'll tell the carpenters. It ain't the cars as is goin' to give you trouble. It's the track. You've got a long haul here, and that track ain't goin' to stand up under no three-ton cars long 'thout trouble."

"I expect to have some trouble at first, but it shouldn't last. I want you to go over the tracks with a crew to-morrow and look for places that need strengthening. Fix them up. We'll just have to wait until anything else develops and fix it as we go."

Blackford sought to inspire the foreman with his own enthusiasm and energy. After Lawler left, he told himself he had succeeded. The mention of a fifty-dollar a month raise in salary had added considerable to Lawler's feeling.

Blackford was well satisfied with his foreman. He knew little about him, it was true, but he gave every evidence of ability. Mine foremen—good ones—are hard to find. The foreman must know a mine; he must know where to look for trouble and how to meet it. He must anticipate emergencies. He must be an umpire of differences among the men. He must decide their problems for them. He must voice their grievances and decide their disputes. He is the connecting link between the workers and the executives, and is himself the most important executive in the mine. On his favor depends the assignment of men to working faces. He directs the dead workers. He has the planning of the daily work of the mine and the follow-up to see that it is done. A capable mine foreman is beyond price, for on his ability depends whether or not the working runs smoothly.

Blackford discussed with Stringfellow the question of a stand-by engine and then plunged into his correspondence. The hours passed unnoticed and he was still absorbed in his work when Mudd opened the door and walked in to fling himself wearily into a chair. Blackford looked up in surprise at the expression on his face.

"Well, did you get them all settled and are they a pretty likely bunch?"

Mudd opened tired eyes. "Who picked them for you? Just lemme meet him, that's all I ask. What did you do to him? It must of been plenty."

"Oh, well, good miners are hard to get on short notice," said Blackford. "I didn't expect much."

"You didn't get it neither, I'll tell the world. They must of searched the East to get 'em. Ain't an American in the whole crew. All hunkies and wops, and no wonder there was seven hundred and fifty of them." Mudd grinned reminiscently. "Lord, but they've got children! I don't believe you'll get over a hundred picks out of the whole works."

Blackford looked at Mudd in dismay. Here was something he had overlooked. Score for the central office. "Can't they speak English?"

"I finally found half a dozen who could manage it, and a sweet time I had doin' it. They milled 'round like a bunch of cattle—everybody talking at the top of their voices. I liked to never got 'em quiet, an' I pretty near went crazy 'fore I found any of 'em who could understand. I made them kind of foremen and finally got the mess untangled. They ain't goin' to let that bunch stay in Coosa long."

Blackford didn't think so either. "Well, I'll have bunk-houses under way here to-morrow; I've got carpenters and lumber coming in on the morning train. We'll beat 'em to it somehow, John. You know some of these hunkies make the best miners there are."

"Maybe so, but you sure have to put the fear of God into them first."

"That's what I'm expecting you to do."

Mudd groaned, but there was something cheerful about it. He was not really discouraged, and Blackford did not worry over the pessimism of his words.

"Say, you know you can get too much of a good thing. That goes for me an' policin'. But I'm game and I sure see trouble ahead. You mix those hunkies with your hill-billys and you'll get an explosion that—that—well, that'll be hell."

"Maybe, but I'm not worrying about that. As long as they don't take it in the mine, it'll be all right."

"But, hell, boss, that's the first place they will take it. You know that."

"Then here's the answer. We must have foremen and bosses who are absolutely loyal to us. Let 'em be hard-boiled boys, but, John, I want them square. It's been my experience that a fellow can be hard as hell, and if he's square he'll get by without any trouble."

"You want me to pick 'em out?"

"You choose the most promising from the crowd and send them to me. Dammit, I wish they spoke English! That will give us more trouble than anything else."

Mudd chuckled. "Wrong, boss. If they don't understand each other, these bullies can cuss each other 'till they're blue and nobody will know." Mudd rose and his weariness had dropped from him. "I guess I'll go up to the cottage and get some sleep. That trip sure took it out of me, and I've got to go back in the morning and see that they don't run wild. You say you're goin' to get more?"

"Yes; I understood this was only about half of them."

Mudd groaned again and went out. Blackford was not particularly impressed by his forebodings. He had great confidence in Mudd, and he believed that he could handle the foreigners just as he had the negroes. Get hold of the boss of the outfit and the rest would follow. He was willing to trust Mudd's shrewdness to select the bosses.

Blackford was frankly uneasy about the attitude of the men already at Cahaba: he knew the American miner hates the hunkie who swings a pick because he is a cheap competitor.

Blackford could not afford to have trouble with his men; his margin of safety against the production he was forced to maintain was too small for that. He feared that sooner or later he would have to face the issue and choose between the newcomers and the men who had been in the camp for years. He considered the possibility of a strike and admitted it would be likely if he refused to accede to the demands of his present force. Characteristically, he began planning to meet the emergency: it might not arise, but it would do no harm to be ready.

Electricity! That was the answer: it should prove no mean reserve. But he must avoid the conflict as long as he could. He sent for the chief electrician.

"Your name," he asked when a dour Scotchman presented himself.

"Angus Cameron, and I'm chief electrician."

"You're Scotch, I see," Blackford observed.

"Nae, I'm Dutch," returned the other soberly. From that moment Blackford liked him.

"Where do you get your power for the mine?"

"We make it at the power-house here."

"How much can you develop?"

"About twenty thousand kilowatt hours a day."

"How much are you using now?"

"About five thousand."

"What for?"

"We run the crusher and the washer and could hook up on the fan. We are a stand-by for the fan."

"Have you any juice in the mine?"

"No; they came down here and made a survey once and mapped it all out, but they never did anything."

"Have you those maps?"

"Yes, I saved 'em."

One difficulty gone. There would be no delay for surveys and specifications. "Fine; that makes matters simpler. How soon could you electrify this mine?"

"You mean the haulage and everything?"

"Yes, assuming, of course, that you had all the men you wanted."

"It would take at least three months."

Blackford's spirits were dashed. He had not expected it would take so long by a third. So long a delay made his plan useless.

"How quick could you give me power in every room—just the wire with a connection?"

"That ought not to take over a couple of weeks if we had plenty of material. You'd not want any lights or anything? Nor trolleys? That's what takes time."

"No; only a power wire in each room with a transformer. You have to step that stuff down when you use it, don't you?"

"Cording to what you use it for."

"For mining machines."

"Yes; the high voltage don't give you enough resistance for your drills."

Blackford did not hesitate; he acted with a mental resolve to consult the central office later—if he was forced into it.

"All right, go to it. Let me know in the morning what you want in the way of men and supplies and I'll have them for you. Then I want a wire in every room in the quickest possible time."

"Very well, sir," and Angus Cameron went back to his dynamos.

"Now let them strike!" said Blackford to himself. "Just let them try it! I've the answer for it now."

CHAPTER XIX

DANGER-BOARDS

Blackford had less trouble with his new people than he anticipated. Before many days passed, they settled into the routine of their work and dug coal so industriously he ceased to worry.

Mudd imperceptibly graduated from his police work to become night foreman. "Your boys will get along all right unless something special comes up, and then you can help," Blackford told him. "I need you more in the mine than anywhere else."

Mudd assented. "We've got the camp pretty well in hand. Ain't had no fun in a long time and the mine'll suit me. That's where the big doings are comin' off."

Blackford found Mudd had a first-grade mine foreman's certificate. When he had chosen him at Pittsburgh to come with him, he had not known it, but it simplified matters. Blackford had been drawn to Mudd then by his cheerful imperturbability, for he judged rightly that underneath the easy surface there was cool courage.

Blackford had chosen Mudd suddenly in his first fear of Reubens and what he might do. They met at the technical night school both attended, and Blackford helped the boy when he found that his mother was ill and they had no money. She died, and after that Blackford secured a place for Mudd in the mining division of the Cahaba offices. He could do that; he was chief clerk and McDonough seldom asked questions.

Blackford felt that Mudd's gratitude was out of all proportion to what he had done. Mudd did not refer to it, but Blackford knew it was there and that it would be translated into loyal service. So, when he had found that he was going to Cahaba, he had sought Mudd with an offer to take him also. Mudd had assented and Blackford told him to follow him at an interval of a week. In his caution, Blackford warned Mudd not to reveal their friendship until he should give the sign. Blackford then had had some vague idea of using Mudd to keep informed of what was being done against him. But he had changed his mind when the need developed and now when a different call came he relied on Mudd.

He felt better for having Mudd in charge of the night shift—the foreman's certificate removed that difficulty—as it would give more freedom for the work as a whole to himself. Blackford had intended letting Gower handle the night crew, but he changed his mind, and the engineer was charged with supervising the engineering for the whole works.

Mudd soon found the leaders among the newcomers. These he so thoroughly awed that they transmitted their feeling for the slight foreman to their fellows.

Foreigners are adaptable to labor conditions: the worst in this country is so much better than the best in the old that rarely do they complain unless incited.

Blackford was so busy he almost slept at the mine. There were the rooms to assign, night inspection crews to select, duplication of the top-house workers, increase in the brattice forces. Gradually, however, he and Mudd brought order out of the confusion and the night side settled down to dig coal and save money.

A week after the new crew was received, it was sending up as much coal per man as the day side, although unfamiliar with the working. Blackford was uneasy about the day shift: he had devoted his attention so exclusively to the new men he had had scant time for the organization already perfected: that had been left to Lawler and Gower.

The day side, however, did not satisfy him. Once he could shift some of his burden to Mudd, he discovered something was wrong. Blackford pressed Lawler for speed.

"Needn't worry 'bout that," Lawler said. "They ain't got used to havin' a new shift in the mine yet and they're cautious. Besides, I ain't had much time to see to it. I been leavin' it pretty much to Mr. Gower, an' I don't expect he knows their kind."

"We must have more coal from the day side," Blackford said. "That's flat."

"Sure, don't worry. I'll take hold now and you'll see things begin to move."

Lawler had been working at night almost as steadily as Blackford and Mudd. Now he began coming down early and spending the mornings and afternoons in his office at the foot of the shaft and on the various levels. Results were immediate.

Blackford was still too busy with administrative details to deal with Gower. He left the new engineer to Lawler to break in, content if Gower did even passably well until he could get more time to gear him up.

Anticipating the central office's demand that he remove his men from Coosa, Blackford early got under way his Cahaba construction. Bunk-houses, mess-houses, and temporary shacks in which to handle his men if he were ordered to bring them into Cahaba were already taking form. He pushed the carpenters ordered from Birmingham at top speed. Simultaneously, also, he kept an eye on Cameron and prodded him for power in the mine.

Blackford was planning his campaign with an eye to every possibility. He counted on no help from the central office and made his dispositions with this thought constantly before him. He had not seriously begun to push production as yet and would not until confident that nothing would happen thereafter to interfere.

Every night the scales reports were brought to him. He watched as production steadily crept upward, chiefly from efforts of the night shift, which Mudd was pushing to the limit.

The mine had been producing a thousand tons a day. The figure had been pushed up to fifteen hundred tons a day through the increase in the size of the cars. The night side was producing at the rate of a thousand tons a shift. That was twenty-five hundred tons for each twenty-four hours and with even twenty days a month, the mine was now doing fifty thousand tons a month. A twenty-six-day month would push it to sixty-five thousand.

The superintendent was content with that record for the first week of the new arrangements. Once he had gotten all surface details completed, he would turn to the mine. He could get another five hundred tons a shift out of his crews—of that he was sure. Besides, he still had more men coming.

Conditions in the camp had materially improved since banishing whisky, Blackford found. Shackleford made no further attempt to smuggle liquor on the coal cars and Mudd's police reported that none was coming into camp. Blackford caught a healthier atmosphere in the place and a more cheerful feeling evident among the women. Trade picked up at the commissary, and he found it necessary practically to double the supplies.

If Blackford was cheerfully content, however, Gower was not. Gower had come to Cahaba with a totally erroneous idea of the man he would encounter. Fain had not told him of the driving power in Blackford or the tireless energy that kept him at his desk fifteen and eighteen hours a day, nor of the wariness that left nothing to chance.

Gower had been instructed not to proceed to drastic steps unless he found it absolutely necessary. He began to see that it would be necessary if he was to accomplish what his chief wanted. Blackford thought Gower was busy improving the interior of the mine; instead, Gower was trying to devise every scheme he could to retard production and hold up the steadily mounting total of cars that went up the shaft.

Gower soon perceived that in Lawler he had a kindred spirit. Lawler puzzled Gower and he was a little in awe of the foreman. There had been some difficulty at first in the two reaching an understanding. For a time, Gower accepted as genuine Lawler's attitude of eager compliance with Blackford's suggestions. Then he had seen things that made him wonder, but it was not until he suspected another side of the foreman that he made his first tentative advances.

It happened in the main heading. Lawler stood inspecting a wretched bit of track and looked up as Gower approached. The light on his cap threw Lawler's face into the shadow.

Gower also looked at the track. "Pretty bad shape, isn't it?" he asked.

"Ain't near as bad as it's goin' to be after they've been haulin' three-ton trips over it awhile," answered Lawler. "There is so many of these places I can't fix 'em all."

"If they had a break-down right here it would block the work in this heading," Gower said thoughtfully.

"If it was the right kind of a wreck," Lawler replied.

"What do you mean by right kind?"

"Well, a spike right here would throw the trip cross-ways. Might knock out a timber and bring a bad fall from the roof."

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Gower, mindful of his instructions, was seeking an ally. He could not secure a better one than the foreman, who would have countless opportunities of doing the very things he wished to do, but could not without arousing suspicion.

"I've noticed you and Mr. Blackford don't seem to be good friends," he began tentatively. The foreman spat scornfully, but was silent. "I don't think he's very competent myself," Gower continued. "As a matter of fact, I was sent down here by the central office to take his place if—if—well, if he didn't suit them." Lawler straightened up and listened attentively, but said nothing. The engineer spoke again, still feeling his way cautiously. "You can readily understand that the quicker things are settled, the better I shall be pleased. He has to keep this mine up to seventy-five thousand tons a month or something will happen to him. Now it strikes me that you'd make a good assistant superintendent. What do you think?"

"That's what I've been in everything but name and the pay," Lawler growled. "I sure would. There ain't many men in this workin' knows more 'bout it 'n I do."

"That's what I thought," Gower went on smoothly. "Naturally when I become superintendent I shall want some one with me who knows the working. I can't do anything until I am superintendent and I can't be superintendent until Blackford lets things get away from him—or—or something happens."

Lawler stood a minute in thought, and then said slowly: "There's plenty that could happen, you know that. We can't get no seventy-five thousand tons outa here less'n everything goes smooth. It don't take much to tie things up. Do you want the work stopped?"

Gower reached a quick conclusion. "I don't care what happens to the mine. All I want is to see Blackford out of the way."

Lawler's answer was emphatic. "You and me both. He snoops too much to suit me."

In the quiet conversation, neither man had given full play to his feelings. Gower already despised Blackford from what Fain had told him and the superintendent's brusque manner had aggravated it. Lawler feared and hated Blackford for reasons known only to himself and Lipscomb up on the tipples. If he could use this boy to further his own ends, Lawler was eager to do it.

The two conversed in low tones. There was muttering of "more pumping," "need more men for brattices," "hang up in the chain-yard," as the two talked. Once each had felt the other out, they cast aside reserve and frankly began to plot against Blackford.

"Ain't he comin' down this week?" asked Lawler.

"He was supposed to come down Thursday with me, but he's been too busy with things on top to come down in the daytime. I think he's coming soon, though. Stringfellow tells me that he has about caught up with things in the office." "Can you let me know a little while before he comes down?"

"Sure. I think I can get him to come any time I go to the office and make a play for him."

"Was you talkin' straight about wantin' something to happen to him particular?"

"I wouldn't cry about it."

"Is he comin' by hisself or is that infernal Mudd goin' to be hangin' on his heels?"

"I don't know, but I expect it will be alone or with me. Mudd is sleeping days."

"And you shore 'nough want something to happen to him? You goin' round with him?"

"I suppose so, why?"

"Well, I was thinkin'. If you're in a hurry there's more'n one way of killin' a dog 'n chokin' him to death with butter."

"I don't get you."

"What kinda lights you goin' to carry?"

"I don't know; the usual kind, I guess. There isn't much use for safety lamps, is there?"

"Not if the fire boss is on the job an' he most generally is. S'pose he wasn't! There's plenty of gas pockets forms in this mine same as any other. S'pose he walked into a gas pocket with a open light. What'd happen?"

"But the fire boss would have a danger-board up and he would see that."

"S'pose the danger-board was tore down and he didn't know there was nothin' in the room. What'd happen?"

Gower was silent, staring at Lawler, his eyes striving to pierce the shadow cast by the lamp on the foreman's cap. He knew what gas did to men caught in a sudden blast: it stripped the flesh from their bodies, burst their lungs with the awful rush of flame, and left them a human cinder. He shrank a little at the thought. This was going further than he had expected or desired. He did not understand Lawler's vindictiveness.

"You mean let him walk into a gas pocket with an open light?" he stammered. "But—but—what about me?"

Lawler laughed scornfully. Though inferior in position, he suddenly became the dominant of the two. "Never mind, then, if you're 'fraid," he said sneeringly. "You said you didn't care what happened an' I thought you meant it."

"I'm not afraid; it took me by surprise, that's all. You forget that I shall be with him."

"If you can't figure out a way to get back, forget something. I'll likely be there, too, and you bet I'll know how to get away. But if you don't want it, all right."

"But suppose you set off the dust? Exploding a gas pocket is risky."

"Bunk! There ain't no danger of a dust explosion in this mine. We sprinkle onct a week and there's the seepage from the walls. The dust's all right."

Gower considered: after all, he would have no part in it: he would only know it was to happen: Gower told himself the crime would be none of his.

Gower already hated Cahaba. He wanted to get the thing over and return to Pittsburgh. The way opened by Lawler was easiest and quickest, and at length he nodded.

"All right, but I want to know what room it will be in. I don't want any slip-up. The gas would catch two just as easy as one."

Lawler reassured him. "It'll be easy. You just let me know a little while before you come down an' leave the rest to me. Before we start, I'll tell you where it is and you can get back to the shaft. When you come back it'll all be over."

"Then you won't have to tie things up any more. I don't want more damage than necessary. When I take hold, I want to get the coal out of this mine and get back home. I don't want to have to spend all summer down here."

Each considerably relieved, the two separated. Lawler, who was playing for a stake infinitely greater than Gower imagined, was pleased. With Blackford out of the way all danger to himself would pass. He felt instinctively he could handle Gower. He had had one brief test of the man's character and found that he could dominate him; with Blackford gone, it would be easier. Gower would be afraid of him then; having seen what he could do. Lawler's lips twisted in a grim smile. The missing danger-board was only one way. There are countless others in a mine, and Lawler knew them all. He sought the fire boss, Sullivan.

"Got any gas?" he asked.

"Some in the new room in the east headin'," answered Sullivan. "The air was pretty heavy in there this mornin'."

"Any place else?"

"It's all in the east headin' at this time of year. I been lookin' for several rooms over there to show up soon's they get a

little deeper in the coal. It was foggy in Thirteen Left this mornin'. It'll be worse to-morrow."

"Got any danger-boards up?"

"One on Fourteen Left and another in Twenty-Three Left."

"Both in the east headin'?"

"Yes."

"All right, when you're ready I'll put up some more brattices and blow it out," said Lawler and went to the surface.

He left the tippie and went over Double Oak Mountain; he had not seen Shackleford in a week and he sought the support of a stronger nature—he wanted approval of what he planned. He found Shackleford seated on his porch, fanning himself with a palmetto leaf. Shackleford waved his handless arm at a chair and the foreman lost no time in stating his errand.

"Heard you and Blackford had a run-in the other day," he said. "Don't you think it's time we did somethin' 'bout that?"

Shackleford looked at him; there was a question in his eyes, and Lawler nodded.

"I think somethin's goin' to happen in a day or two," he said. "'N then you and Galloway can get together again."

Shackleford shook his head dubiously. "Maybe so, but if I was you I'd go kind of careful."

"I'm careful, all right. Wait and see what happens. Don't you want to stand with me in this? I'm goin' to need help."

Shackleford shook his head. With Lawler he dropped his air of benevolent good-humor. "I don't aim to have nothin' to do with that man. 'F you take my advice, you'll go careful yourself. He ain't a good man to fool with."

Lawler laughed unpleasantly. "He ain't got you bluffed, has he?"

"He ain't got nothin' on me, if that's what you mean. I just never did like to monkey with no buzz-saw. I'm considerable older 'n you be and I've seen more men an' more different kinds of men 'n you have. When you see one of these fellers that smiles when they gits mad and talks nice and soft, you let him alone. I never did hanker to have nothin' to do with no man what gits kind of white round the mouth and their nose pinches in and talks easy. When they git started, somebody usually gits hurt."

"I ain't afraid," said Lawler.

"No, you ain't got sense enough. I ain't 'fraid neither; I just don't aim to get crossed up with that man. And listen here, Joe, I'll tell you somethin' 'bout him maybe you ain't found out—he don't bluff. I'm pretty well fixed, and I guess I'll just sit down over here and wait 'till things quiet down. I kin 'ford to, and it's lots more comfortable."

"But, listen! You ain't goin' to leave Galloway and me now, are you? You know how all the boys think of you. If things don't start happenin' pretty soon, I'm goin' to work with them. I know what I can do there."

"Yes, and when you do, keep your eyes open. Now I know men; know 'em better 'n you do. I'm goin' to waste some more breath on you. You let Blackford alone. First thing you know, he'll ketch you at it an' he'll throw you out of the mine or shoot you or whatever he takes a notion. He ain't goin' to stop at nothin'. I've seen his kind before, and I allus made it a p'int to git outa their way when they really start some'rs. Hit's easier and hit's safer."

Lawler was taken aback. "Come on and help," he urged. "When you git ready, you can come in with us and we'll go on like we was before. Blackford ain't goin' to last much longer, and this new feller, Gower, ain't the kind of man Blackford is."

"Not me," said Shackleford decisively. "That ain't my style. I don't aim to cross the mountain and I ain't goin' to mess with Blackford. That's his mine and he can run it for all of me. If you'd lived 's long 's I have you'd do the same."

Finding argument fruitless, Lawler left.

Margaret came out on the porch and looked after the foreman.

"What's he over here for?" she asked her father.

"Business," Shackleford answered briefly, and Margaret glanced at him.

"Meaning none of mine?"

"No, none of mine. Listen, Peg, you stay 'way from Cahaba, hear? Don't want you goin' over there. I don't aim to have no trouble with Blackford and he mout blame me for what's goin' to happen."

"What is to happen?" Margaret asked in quick apprehension.

Shackleford shook his head stubbornly. "I don't know an' I don't aim to know. I don't want you mixin' in either."

Margaret's answer was non-committal. "I don't like Lawler. I think I'll see what I can find out."

"Better stay out of it," warned her father. "Don't concern us noways."

Margaret smiled at him. "I wonder if it does," she said.



CHAPTER XX

BELOW THE SURFACE

Blackford was well pleased; certainly things had moved much better than he had anticipated and he scanned the tippie figures before him with quiet satisfaction. He had done well with the night side and it only remained now to speed up the day crew. It should not be difficult. Blackford had more confidence now in his ability to handle men.

His paper work was done, and when Gower came in he told him he was ready for the inspection to plan the new rooms.

"I think you and Lawler had better come with me," Blackford said. "From what Mudd has told me and what little I have seen myself, there will be a number of changes I shall want made. I'm not at all satisfied with the day side. The night men are distancing them and I want to find why."

"Lawler has been improving things the best he could," Gower said. "Remember that we do most of the dead work for your night crew. You can't work a mine twenty hours a day with no preparation and expect it to go as smoothly as with one shift. I'll telephone Lawler to meet us at the bottom of the shaft in half an hour, say."

"Yes, that will be about right. I'll have to get into different clothes and get a light. It'll be fully that time."

Gower reached Lawler in his office on the main slope. "He's coming in half an hour," he said and heard the foreman grunt in satisfaction.

Blackford was whistling as he went to the Residency to change clothes. He was tired mentally: he had been in the mine office so constantly, the prospect of a visit underground pleased him, for Blackford, after all, was a mining engineer and loved his profession.

He spoke to Alice as he came out on the porch in the blue overalls and jumper and hobnailed shoes of the miner. He planned to get his lamp at the pit-head.

It was the first time Alice had seen him in working clothes and there was something rugged in his figure as he stood on the top step and looked back at her.

"I'm going down," he said. "All over the headings. I may be late. If I'm not here by dark, don't wait supper on me."

"This is your first time underground, isn't it?" asked Alice, thinking how much he had done and so quickly. But Blackford misunderstood and his face darkened.

"Meaning I waited long enough about it, I suppose," he said. "Thank you for reminding me. All I can say is that I am trying to make up lost time."

He turned on his heel before Alice could reply, leaving her biting her lip in vexation. He was so difficult and sensitive. She had not meant to remind him of anything, but he always misunderstood. She felt rebuffed.

Gower's mouth was dry as he walked beside Blackford to the shaft. Gower was not keen on what Lawler proposed, but he remembered Fain's words and determined not to interfere.

The two stepped into the cage and were dropped away by Tidmore at the engine-hoist. Blackford looked up for a moment as the bit of daylight flickered out and he went down into the darkness to bring up with a bump at the bottom of the shaft. In his nostrils was the familiar cool, damp odor of the mine, saturated with the coal and the faint acrid tang of explosives. It was chilly in the shaft, much cooler than on the surface. It would have been warmer in winter. The temperature of a mine never changes.

Echoing sounds boomed away down the silent headings. Blackford was blinded for a time by the brilliant lights on the men's caps. The shadow cast before him by his own lamp bothered him, but presently his vision cleared and he began to distinguish objects.

Lawler was waiting for them. The three watched as a trip was loaded onto the cage and on the signal hoisted to the surface.

Then Lawler said: "Well, Mr. Blackford, what part of the workin's do you want to see first?"

"We had better go to the end of the west heading," answered the superintendent. "Then we can work back. I want to see about driving the heading farther and opening more rooms. I understand the central office is to send me more men, and to use them we must have more working faces."

"What's the matter with the seam under this?" asked Gower. "Wouldn't it be simpler to sink the shaft and open that up?"

"I've considered that, but I believe it would be quicker to drive the headings than the shaft. If we opened the seam under this, it would have to be room for room and pillar for pillar to avoid cave-ins. That isn't a very difficult job and when I get a little more time, I may do it."

Gower nodded, but remarked: "This level isn't that way with the one above."

"No, it isn't. The level above was worked out before this was opened. That was why the surveys didn't coincide. Of course, we're still taking a chance, but not a great one."

They picked their way along the main heading. It was stumbling, uneven footing along the tracks.

"Hadn't we better take the man-way?" suggested Lawler. "It'll be easier walkin'."

"No, I came down the heading for a reason," said Blackford. "I want to see how the track is standing up under the heavier cars."

Apparently it was standing up very well. Blackford swung the light he carried from time to time for a quick survey. The track was in fair condition and gave no indication of spreading under the strain of the three-ton cars. So far, so good; he began to question Lawler.

"We should have had the fire boss with us. Remind me when we get back that I want to see him. I can see that you haven't much trouble with dust." He swung his lamp against the walls where moisture was dripping.

"No, dust don't bother us much," answered the foreman. "Guess we're pretty well under the river and a good deal of the water seeps through. We have to get the pumps goin' one day a week, usually Sunday, to keep it clear. I have the mine sprinkled once a week, though. I ain't takin' no chances."

"How about gas?"

"Gas troubles us right smart. Worst thing we have to contend with, though, is a rotten ceilin'. Rock falls all the time if you don't watch it. It takes 'n awful lot of timberin'. That's one reason we've had so much work on the day side. I've had to take a bunch of men an' put 'em to work timberin' so's we wouldn't be all the time havin' trouble."

"So the gas is pretty bad?"

"Yes, sir. I put on a couple of extra men with the fire boss this mornin'. With two shifts workin' they don't have much time to handle the gas the way it ought. I've had some extra bratticin' done, too. The air wasn't circulatin' in the end of the headin' and the men was kickin'."

Occasionally they met a trip of cars. First they heard the echoing rumble of the rolling car as the mule tugged it along the rails. Then the driver's light became a pin-point in the blackness. Then the trip passed, the negro driver perched on the coal looking at them curiously and speaking to Lawler. They were moving along fairly level ground. Instead of the seam pitching downward, it offered no grades of consequence.

"That's why we ain't usin' 'lectricity," Lawler explained. "Mules could be used 'cause there ain't much pitch to the seam. They never did bring the juice down here, though we're usin' it on the surface."

"I may bring it down," Blackford volunteered. "I've already arranged with Cameron to put a wire in every room in the mine. He'll begin work this week."

As they walked, Blackford forged a little ahead and Gower, who had been at his side, dropped back. "How about it?" he muttered to Lawler.

"Fourteen Left on the east side," answered the foreman cautiously. "You needn't go in. Do what I do."

At last they came to the heading at the end of the drift; that is, the end of the passageway from which entries led off on either side. In these entries the coal was mined. Blackford planned to go into every room in the mine. He studied the formation and the track and the coal as he would have studied a book. He read the signs of slack interior movement as they made their way from room to room, stopping frequently to talk with the men who were swinging picks and cutting the coal preliminary to blasting it down to be loaded. They were using forty per cent dynamite and Blackford decided to change that. He planned to use permissible explosive rather than the dynamite, which was always dangerous.

The superintendent found the men rather sullen. They watched Blackford silently as he looked over the rooms, tested the brattices, watched the traps opening into the drift, and tried the air in each room.

The three gradually worked back to the shaft. From the west heading they crossed to the east and began a similar tour. The shaft tapped the seam of coal at the point where it was nearest to the surface and headings had been driven east and west along it. The mine in effect was an inverted letter "T." When the haul on either heading became too long to be profitable, another shaft would be sunk farther along the seam and headings again driven in both directions. This enabled more men to work and simplified haulage and trackage. Drivers could move coal faster because they had two tracks, and it not only shortened the haul, but aided in ventilation.

Blackford, Lawler, and Gower went directly to the head of the drift and, as in the west side, began working back.

"Damn! I've forgotten the drivers!" Lawler exclaimed suddenly. "Don't you remember, Mr. Gower, we were to meet them at my office and see about that new track? And it's after time now."

"Go ahead and meet them," Blackford said. "Just wait for me at your office until I come. Then we'll go over things. There are a number of points I don't think you have seen as yet. I can find my way about now."

"Thank you, sir; I believe I will if you don't mind," Lawler said. "I told 'em to wait for me."

"You'd better go, too, Gower," Blackford added. "I've kept you from your work long enough. Are all the rooms being worked?"

"Not all of them; that is, in the daytime. We'll wait for you at Lawler's office."

Blackford swung his lamp and turned into an entry. Gower and Lawler hurried away down the drift. Lawler, a little in advance, laughed as they turned a curve and the light on Blackford's cap was extinguished.

"Good-bye, Mr. Blackford," he said.

"Damn it, man, don't talk like that!" Gower objected. He shivered. "I don't half-like this."

Lawler grunted. "Well, it's too late for you to talk like that now." His deference to the assistant superintendent was gone. "You're in it just as much as me. You're over me and you'll have to do the explainin'. I won't."

Margaret hurried over the trail from Double Oak Mountain with a warning for Blackford. Her suspicions aroused by Lawler's visit to her father, Margaret had tried in vain to learn his errand. Her father was kindly, but would tell her nothing. Then she appealed to Stringfellow.

The chief clerk was sullen. "I ain't crazy about doin' anything but my own work," he said. "I tried to help him the other day when your father was over here and he cut me off short. He don't like me and he ain't goin' to listen to what I say. He'll tell me again it ain't none of my business and it ain't."

"Then tell me and I'll do it," Margaret urged. "You don't understand Mr. Blackford, he doesn't mean to be curt."

Stringfellow assented reluctantly, and it was a message from him that brought her over the mountain to find Blackford. Stringfellow had learned only a whisper of something vague, some impending event, how Margaret did not ask. But she felt that she could impress the superintendent with her own anxiety and make him more watchful.

John Mudd was at the tippie when she ran up.

"Where is Mr. Blackford?" she asked. She knew Mudd for Blackford's friend and did not share her father's hatred of the youngster.

Mudd eyed her with approval; he knew who she was, though it was the first time he had seen her. "Mr. Blackford's inspectin' the levels. It'll be some time before he comes up."

Margaret showed her disappointment. "I wanted to see him. It is important."

"Could you give me a message? I could go down and find him."

Margaret considered. "Is Mr. Lawler with him?"

"Sure? Why?"

She shook her head. "That is what I feared. I—I must see him."

Her uneasiness was contagious. "Was it something about the mine?" asked Mudd.

"Yes and no. I—I hardly know what to say, it is so indefinite. But I heard that something was to happen."

"To him?"

"Yes, but that's all I know." She paused, studying Mudd's open face. Perhaps he would take a warning more seriously than Blackford and she need not explain. "It may be unnecessary, but, if I were you, I wouldn't let Mr. Blackford go in the mine alone," she said slowly. "Understand what I mean? Not with Mr. Lawler. That's all I can say."

Mudd was impressed. "I'll go down and find him right now. They don't exactly love him down there. I never thought of it before."

Margaret still hesitated. "One thing more. Tell him I said watch Lawler."

"I'll do more than that; I'll watch Lawler myself. Thank you for telling me. I'll go right down."

Margaret turned away. Perhaps this was better than if she had seen Blackford. Margaret had read loyalty in Mudd's eyes and he had not received her warning lightly.

Mudd was already in the cage. "Good idea," he muttered. "They tried to kill him twice, and I don't like that Lawler."

When Gower and Lawler returned to the foreman's office, the engineer did not leave. He was restless. Gower had a vivid imagination. He pictured Blackford going from room to room, the open light on his cap. Unsuspecting he would enter the Fourteenth Left entry. A moment of silence and then a rush of flame ... and again ... silence ... Blackford's charred body on the ground ...

Gower shook himself and cursed angrily. What was the matter with him?... Fain had said ... The thought of Fain heartened him ... He ignored the change in Lawler's manner. The foreman no longer paid Gower the deference due the assistant superintendent. There was a hint of bullying patronage in his voice. Gower resented it, but that would keep. Let the foreman think ... They would clash, but there would be Fain ... That helped. What was happening behind him in the depths of the east heading? Gower shivered again.

Lawler surveyed him sardonically, but said nothing. The foreman was pleased with himself: his way was now clear. The weight sheets would not be too closely inspected. Money would still come ... Who would interfere? Not Gower; him he dismissed contemptuously. He could bulldoze him as he chose: Gower had seen that he was dangerous.

Lawler did not give Blackford a thought. His mind was on the future and he felt no remorse. He knew the entry to be filled with gas, had known it for days and deliberately saved it against to-day. After Gower telephoned of Blackford's coming, it had been easy to rip the warning from its place on a timber and throw it to one side. There was no other gas near and the mine had been sprinkled yesterday. No chance of trouble with dust. It was a trap that could not miss.

Lawler went on with his work unmoved. He hurried Gower out of his office to his own duties and the two kept the coal

moving rapidly to the surface. The uncertainty wore on Gower's nerves. After an hour, he could stand it no longer. He sidled over to the foreman.

"Let's go see what has happened," he proposed.

"No, we don't want to find it. Let some of the men do that or the fire boss. We don't want to be there at all."

"Do you think it is over now?"

"Ain't nothin' else. It didn't have a——"

Mudd walked into the alcove. "Where's Blackford?" he asked curtly, looking around.

"Down in the east headin'," answered Lawler. "What are you doin' down here? This ain't the night shift."

Mudd ignored the question. "How long will Blackford be gone?"

"Good while," said Lawler with a side glance at Gower, whose face was sickly in the dim light.

"I want him quick. Send one of your men to tell him."

"Better go yourself. I ain't got none to spare and I ain't runnin' your errands noway."

"All right, I'll go," said Mudd, declining the challenge and started out only to meet Blackford in the heading. They returned to the alcove together.

Gower's heart jumped: he was a little glad to see the superintendent. He was easier that nothing had happened. He looked at Lawler, but the foreman's face hid his rage as he moved over to the superintendent.

"Mudd here's been lookin' for you, sir," he said. "Do you want to go up now or do you want to see the stables?"

"I'll look at the stables before I go," answered Blackford. "Right now I want to see your fire boss. Send for him."

They summoned Sullivan, a short chubby man with two chin fully developed and a third striving for recognition. Blackford questioned him sharply.

"When have you been over the mine?"

"This mornin'."

"All of it?"

"Every room. I did it just after the night men left and before the day shift come down."

"Go in the rooms not being worked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go in Fourteen Left in the east drift?"

"Yes, sir, and put a danger-board on it. It was full of gas and has been for a couple of days."

"Right sure about the danger-board? Where did you put it?"

"I nailed it to the timber right outside the brattice. Nobody that started in there could of failed to see it."

Blackford took from under his coat a board with the warning in red:

DANGER! GAS! Do not
Go in with open light.

"Is this the danger-board you put up?"

"Yes, sir; if it ain't it's one just like it."

"That's all, you may go."

"One minute," said Mudd, "Did you have other danger-boards up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were they up?" Mudd looked at Blackford, who nodded and Mudd dismissed the fire boss.

Blackford looked after Sullivan. "Has he got it in for anybody who works in Fourteen?" he asked Lawler.

"Not that I knows of."

"Funny, then. I got along fine until I came to Fourteen Left. I kicked this board where it had fallen in the drift. You see, it had been torn down and not long before. The nail marks are fresh and it didn't fall. It was torn down. I brought a safety lamp with me. Good thing I did. I lit it before I went in and put out my open light. If I hadn't done that, I'd have been caught sure. Is that fire boss reliable?"

"He's all right 's far 's I know," said Lawler. "There ain't no tellin' who tore that danger-board down. You see, that's a favorite way of gettin' back at a man you don't like. Might of been meant for me, one of the drivers might of tore it down. I'm mighty glad you found it in time. Wouldn't do for you to git hurt now."

Blackford glanced at him obliquely. "Yes, I'm pretty lucky sometimes. Now let's see those stables."

Where an entry had been worked out, the stables had been made with stalls from planking. The superintendent looked them over, his irritation growing.

"How many mules do you keep in this place?" he asked.

"'Bout twenty-five," answered Lawler.

"This isn't big enough and it isn't clean. Do you keep your hay and feed in that room?"

"Yes."

Blackford exploded. "Don't you know better than that? Suppose a fire started in that stuff and it right here at the shaft? You wouldn't have a dog's chance of getting the men out."

"I don't 'tend to the stables. That's the boss driver's job," Lawler said sulkily.

"The hell it ain't your job! It's your job to see that the ordinary rules of safety are observed in the mine. Who is boss driver?"

"Jim Rhodes."

"Get him."

Blackford waited, his anger growing over the carelessness before his eyes. Mudd was at his elbow, but volunteered nothing. Presently, looming through the murk, came the giant negro Blackford had seen at the commissary. The superintendent spoke sharply.

"Get all this hay and feedstuff to the surface to-night. Only bring down enough to feed the mules each day. You should know better than to keep this in the mine."

"There, now! What I done tole you!" exclaimed the negro, rolling his eyes toward Lawler. "Ain't I said we didn' have no bisness with dis stuff all down here."

"I want these stables cleaned and enlarged," Blackford ordered. "You can't keep twenty-five mules in a little space like this. Your air is bad. How long since they were on top?"

"Not since las' fall, boss. Us don' like to take 'em up endurin' th' winter. Cold gives um distempuh or newmonia an' they gits sick."

"The first Sunday we have a chance, we'll bring them up," decided Blackford. "You be ready. Meanwhile, get the stables fixed."

Blackford announced his readiness to go to the surface. Lawler attempted to explain the condition of the stables.

"I've told that nigger he ought to clean up," he lied, but Blackford cut him off.

"It was up to you to see that he did it. You know as well as I that you can't depend on a nigger to do anything unless he's watched. You have to keep after him yourself. I don't think much of the way you are running this mine in the daytime. After I've mapped out a programme, I want to talk to you about it. Things are entirely too slack down here."

Blackford stepped into the cage and looked at Mudd. "Coming up, John?" he asked.

"I'll be along in a minute. I want to see you."

Blackford signaled and was whisked out of sight. Behind him Mudd looked steadily at Lawler.

"Danger-board down, eh?" he said. "You may fool him, sweetheart, but you can't fool me. I'll tell you the same thing he told Shackleford. Better pass the word to keep all your danger-boards in place."

Lawler attempted to bluster. "You run this mine at night. I'll run it in the daytime. Git on up to the surface."

Mudd walked toward him, his eyes dangerous. "Want to come along?" he invited, but Lawler affected not to hear. Mudd stood looking after him until he caught Gower's eye. "I wonder how much of this you knew?" he said pleasantly. "Well, you heard what I said. It goes for you, too."

He stepped into the cage and followed Blackford to the surface. He found the superintendent at the office with the danger-board on his desk. Mudd went straight to the point.

"Miss Shackleford left a message for you; that was why I came to find you. She said tell you to watch Lawler and I'm tellin' you the same thing."

Blackford gestured toward the board on his desk. "You think he knew about this?"

"Sure I do. How did Miss Shackleford find out unless he's been talkin' and makin' threats? Boss, why don't you throw him out of the mine? He's goin' to make trouble. You know him an' Shackleford's awful thick."

"I've considered that," Blackford explained. "And I've decided against it. Lawler can handle the men and I don't know any one else who can do as well. Now he doesn't know we suspect he's up to anything. If we look sharp, he can't get away with much. You'll be underground and I'll be up here. Then there'll be Miss Shackleford. We'll have advance notice of anything that's going to happen. We'd better keep him, at least for a time. We can let him think he's going to get by with whatever he's planning and meanwhile he'll keep the men quiet."

"You're takin' big chances."

"Maybe, but I've got to risk something and I can't have trouble with the men now. Lawler can do pretty well what he chooses with them. You know how mine foremen are. I've got to get coal out, and the new men must have time to learn the working. I'd rather leave Lawler in the mine with both of us watching him than throw him out and have an immediate fight. I'm not ready for trouble with the men and I can't have it. It would tie us up tight. We must get coal. That comes first. Keep your eyes open and I'll do the same."

Mudd looked at him admiringly. "We'll give 'em hell," he said and went out.

CHAPTER XXI

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

Now began a period for Blackford when everything seemed to go exactly right. He turned over direction of the night side entirely to Mudd and pushed the day. Lawler and Gower worked with him, and even they could not hang back before his energy. Blackford spent hours in the mine, meeting the subordinate executives, directing the contractors who worked the entries, and lending a hand wherever he found need.

Every night when the day shift came up, he received the production reports for the twenty-four hours. After another week, Blackford found the night crew was producing twelve hundred tons a shift, although only a hundred picks were working. The day side had been pushed up to sixteen hundred tons. That gave him twenty-eight hundred tons a day and in a twenty-six-day month he would get seventy-two thousand tons. This was so near his minimum of seventy-five thousand tons fixed by the central office that Blackford felt reasonably safe.

The superintendent had been notified from Pittsburgh that another train of men would reach Coosa the following day and with them he could bring his total to the desired point. He even began to figure on pushing production beyond the figure where he had been told it must stand.

The second shipment of miners was not so grave a problem as the first. He simply sent Mudd to Coosa and took over more houses. So far, he had heard nothing from the central office, but he was not deceived. When Reubens moved, it would be at the point least expected, so, when the superintendent was not in the mine, he was driving the work on the new bunk-houses and temporary quarters for his people. Even now, if forced to move them from Coosa he could find some kind of housing for them in Cahaba. Within another week or two, he would have temporary quarters completed and could begin on permanent houses.

Blackford was preoccupied with the mine, but he never forgot that he was working for Alice. She was constantly in his thoughts, though he maintained his reserve at the Residency. Sometimes he fancied that she was changing, but he would not allow himself to hope. When he had done the task he had set himself ... He would go to her ... In the freedom from bitterness that came with his new confidence in himself, he decided it would be foolish to accept one rebuff as final. He believed that if his wife had once cared, his own love now would bring a response. And he would have something concrete to show her.

"I have done this for you," he would say. "Won't you forget and start over again with me? You know I love you; won't you love me just a little to start? I'll make you do more than that."

She would say ... Blackford looked dreamily out the window. It was a moment of relaxation with him, a rare luxury now. The exaltation of his mood called for wide spaces. Abruptly his thoughts went back to the night Alice had stood between him and the rifle outside. Since then he had not despaired of again winning her. He lived over the tense moments. Again he could feel the curve of her body as she pressed against him to keep him from the door. She had thrown herself between him and danger; surely, if she hated him as she said, she would not have done that. Blackford's heart grew warmer as he mused. He looked up at Double Oak Mountain and the vastness called to him. He had not been there in weeks: the wind would feel good on his face: his work for the day was over and there was no reason he should not go. He went out.

As he tramped up the precipitous path, it seemed as if he were going to keep a tryst with something he had been, but was no longer. As he came out on the plateau, he sniffed gratefully at the resinous air that swept up to him in great gusts.

He thought he was alone, but his nerves were so steady that he did not start when Margaret Shackleford spoke from where she sat by the wall of rock, only a few feet away.

"You seem to be enjoying it more than you did the last time you were here," she observed.

Blackford smiled at her. "I am, and I'm glad you are here to see. I've missed the mountain, but I've been too busy for idling."

"I, too, will miss the mountain. I've waited for you here several times; I wanted to thank you."

"To thank me? But it should be the other way. I should thank you. I received your message the other day. And the night they blew up my office, you disappeared so quickly——"

"I told you I would help, but I didn't do it for you. I was trying to keep some one out of trouble."

"Your father?"

She nodded. "Ever since I came back from Birmingham and realized what he was doing and how he made his money, I have been afraid that he would hurt some one and get into really serious trouble. Now I shan't need to worry about it any longer."

Blackford looked his pleasure. "You mean you are going away?"

"Yes, and I want to thank you for that. You have made it possible. Daddy is planning to sell everything and go somewhere else to start over. I don't quite understand him. I didn't expect it to come so easily."

"Why question good fortune? This opens a new world to you, doesn't it?"

"In more ways than one. You remember I told you some one was waiting for me? Well, he need not wait much longer. It won't be in one month or two, but pretty soon Daddy won't need me as he has and ... and ..."

She flushed and her voice trailed off. Blackford finished the sentence. "And then you'll be married and live happily ever after. When that time comes, won't you let me know? I'd like to acknowledge my obligation to you. You can't understand how much knowing you has meant to me. I don't mean just the ... mine, but seeing your courage, and then you helped when I was lonely. I'll be sorry to see you go."

"In a way, I'll be sorry myself. This has been home and I love the mountains, but there are so many other things, I shan't miss them long. You've been kind about Daddy. Some day when I tell him, he will thank you, too."

Blackford's spirits were light. With instinctive delicacy, he did not question her. He held out his hand. "I suppose this is good-bye?"

Margaret rose and put her hand in his. "We shall see you again before we go. It won't be for several months, but this is good-bye to the mountain for us."

Blackford watched her down the trail and turned away himself. His pulse quickened as he hurried toward the Residency. He hoped Alice would be waiting for him, and she was. She had dressed for dinner, and Blackford's eyes lighted as he saw her standing under the chandelier and smiling at him.

"You are early," she said, and Blackford thought he detected a hint of gladness in her voice.

"Yes, everything was going so smoothly I thought I might take it a little easy to-night and come in early. I'm as hungry as a bear. What have you for supper?"

"Martha didn't come to-day and I fixed supper myself. I don't know whether you'll like it. I've a steak and rice with biscuits and gravy."

Gravely Blackford took her by the arm. "Will you have dinner with me?" he invited whimsically. "It has been a long time since we had a celebration; let's have one to-night. I want to make the occasion a remarkable one, and, after supper, I'll tell you something."

Alice smiled at him in understanding. "I shall be delighted to have dinner with Mr. Blackford and you shall tell me all about what you have done to-day."

It was a meal they both remembered. Blackford's spirits were high and he bubbled over with fun. Alice shook off her usual gravity and they made a game of the meal, both tacitly accepting the present.

"I'm going to make it," Blackford told her over the dessert. "I can see my way to-day for the first time. I'm going to make this old mine produce seventy-five thousand tons a month."

"I'm glad for you," said Alice. "I know something of what it means to you and I'm glad. I've wanted you to do it and I've

wondered if there wasn't some way I could help."

Blackford told her of his plans and a little of the difficulties he had encountered. When they had eaten, he said gravely:

"Now we'll do the dishes; you wash and I'll wipe."

Like children they romped through the duties and then went into the big living-room. Blackford was tempted to speak of his love, but some instinct held him back. Instead he turned to the mine and found her an eager listener.

"Remember the last time we sat here and what happened?" he asked, and Alice shivered.

"As if I should ever forget!"

"I mentioned it because I don't think I'll have any more trouble from that source. I learned this afternoon that Shackleford is planning to sell his place and leave Possum Valley. I thought you would like to know."

"I have worried about that. I've been afraid something would happen to you, and I don't want you to have any more trouble. I feel as if I was in some measure responsible."

"You must be here when I turn over my first seventy-five thousand tons for a month's work," Blackford said. "That will be a milestone and I want it for you."

"Don't worry; I shall. But why for me?"

"Don't you remember that your father said if I did this he would consider my application for a transfer to some other place? I think we can begin to figure on where you would like to go."

"Why, I don't know, I never thought about that. I don't believe I'd ever get a nicer house than this and ... everything is so ... You understand."

"I just mentioned it so you can be thinking. Of course, it won't be in several months, but I don't think there will be any necessity for us to spend the winter here."

"Mrs. Lawler tells me that things have improved wonderfully in the camp since you stopped the whisky and I have seen for myself. Dr. Rawls says, so, too. He says he admires you immensely for what you have done. He told me you had made a very simple operation of what a less vigorous man might have found very difficult."

"Thank you. I am glad he thinks so; I like him."

It was very quiet in the living-room. The silence was companionable, and neither spoke. Alice was sewing under the lamp and Blackford sat in the shadows where he could gaze at her undisturbed.

What a woman she was! Suppose he should sit on the arm of her chair and ... tell her ... His thoughts paused. Once before he had done that and she had been pretending. Was this pretense? Blackford did not believe it.

He smothered his impulse to speak: he could wait. The mine came first. When that was done ... No thought that there might be a slip crossed his mind. He had mastered the worst he would have to face: it was now only a question of time.

Looking at the shining head bent over the bit of embroidery, Blackford wondered of what she was thinking.

There was a knock, and Alice rose. "Who on earth at this time of night!" she exclaimed and threw open the door to find her father on the threshold. With a little cry, she ran into his arms. "Why, Daddy! How did you get here and when did you come? I'm so glad to see you! Have you had anything to eat? Are you tired?"

Reubens laughed and, lifting her easily in his powerful grasp, kissed her on either cheek. "One thing at a time, honey. I came because I couldn't find anything by mail and I had to see how you were getting along. I came over with a special engine to my private car and I'm not hungry. We ate before we left Birmingham."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Alice reproached. "I should have met you."

"I wanted to surprise you, and I wanted to see how you were living."

Blackford had risen and stood quietly by his chair. He did not know how Reubens would greet him. Somehow the ironmaster seemed more formidable now that he bulked in the living-room. Blackford had felt no awe of him in Pittsburgh; now that he was here, he was different, bigger somehow.

Reubens came in with a quiet word. "How are you Blackford? They tell me you have reformed Cahaba. I came down to see how you were doing it."

"I've been pushing everything for Dolomite, sir," Blackford answered. "I hope you will approve of what I have done."

Reubens gestured negligently and turned to his daughter. "We'll talk about that to-morrow. Oh, I forgot; come in, Fain. Don't stand on ceremony, man."

At his invitation, Parsons Fain came through the door and greeted Alice cordially. He had always liked her, and Alice had found something soothing in the big man's impassive strength. Fain nodded to Blackford and the superintendent nodded back; Blackford knew what the man was and what he did. The talk was general for a few minutes; then Reubens:

"Fain, you'd better get back to the car. I'll spend the night here if they've a spare room."

"Of course, Daddy," said Alice happily. "I'll go right now and get it ready."

Fain left with a courteous word of farewell and Blackford was alone with Reubens. The older man's geniality fell from him.

"She seems to be doing well. I'm glad of that."

"I've taken as good care of her as I knew how," responded Blackford.

The two were silent until Alice returned and led her father away, busy with chatter of Pittsburgh. Blackford sat alone. Reubens and Fain; what did it mean? He was not so well satisfied as he had been an hour before.

CHAPTER XXII

GATHERING CLOUDS

Blackford was still wondering the next morning what Reubens's coming portended and the effect on Alice and himself. Blackford did not believe Reubens had come to help him, but he did not see what he could do in advance to protect himself.

He wondered about Fain also. Where trouble was, there was Fain. The big man never took pleasure trips. Blackford knew his presence in Cahaba augured trouble.

One thing both Reubens and Fain overlooked, he told himself grimly. They were a long way from Pittsburgh. Men in Cahaba looked to him for their bread and their safety and their work—not to Reubens or Fain. Blackford was glad that he had Mudd and the others who were loyal, not to the Cahaba Company, but to himself.

Blackford resolved to use a heavy hand if necessary. That was one advantage of being more than a hired man—he could do almost as he chose. He was confident of that and it gave him assurance. Fain he dismissed; Reubens was the man to watch. Blackford almost decided to have one of Mudd's men keep an eye on Reubens, but a sense of shame held him back. He could not set a spy on the movements of Alice's father in his own camp.

Reluctantly Blackford turned to the mine and, under pressure of getting coal, gradually forgot his anxiety about Reubens.

The ironmaster told Blackford at dinner that night that he was taking a real vacation, his first in years. He intended, he said, to enjoy it without reference to business. Blackford saw little of him. Alice showed the old man about the camp, tramped over the mountains, and even explored over Double Oak into Possum Valley.

Blackford was never invited on these excursions. He was a little envious of the intimacy between Alice and her father. At times, he actually found himself jealous. Alice unbent amazingly with her father. She was in high spirits, full of playful moods and light-hearted as a child.

Because of her reserve with him, Blackford had come to think of his wife as a woman and not as a girl. Now he saw her laughter, heard her voice in gay little snatches of song, watched the chatter between her father and herself, and felt himself an outsider. It hurt, and his bitterness against himself revived. As Alice developed and sparkled in merry play with Reubens, the old man shook off his gruffness and became simply Alice's father.

No one seeing Reubens now would have thought him one of the richest men in America. He was kneeling in Alice's garden as Blackford came up the hill, thoughtful with anxieties that had begun to fret him about the mine. Reubens was dressed in faded corduroy trousers, with a blue shirt open at the neck, and on his head a battered hat Blackford recognized as his own discarded headgear.

Reubens had been grubbing in the dirt with his hands and was decidedly disreputable. He had drawn one palm across his face to wipe away perspiration and it had left a broad smear.

As Blackford paused to look at the two, Alice waved a hand and called gayly:

"We've been planting ferns we found on Little River. Do you think they will live?"

"Did you bring any leaf mold? The soil here is too rocky for river-bottom ferns unless you put in a layer of subsoil to hold the moisture," Blackford answered. "You should have dug those on the mountain."

"Oh, but these were so much prettier, and it was a lot of fun getting them. Dad fell in. Doesn't he look a sight?" Alice laughed as she spoke.

Reubens looked at Blackford with a slow grin. "Yep, I do look a good bit like a tramp," he assented with a glance at his fat legs that filled the corduroys snugly. "But what's the use of having a vacation if you don't do what you like?"

"Not a bit. I hope you are enjoying yourself."

"I am, more than I thought was possible. It's a great country, greater than I ever supposed. My time hasn't been entirely

wasted. I've located a vein of ore on the other side of the mountain. I ran across some outcroppings of brown hematite and I believe there are more. Anyway, I'll have our engineering staff look it over."

Blackford was brought back to realities by this. He had been musing on the good-fellowship that must have prevailed as Reuben and his daughter rambled over the cliffs and the pleasure of both at their find.

"If you've located the ore, I have the limestone," he said. "We've coal right here. Those are the three elements for making steel and all in the same valley. This is a good place to keep in mind if Dolomite plays out. There's limestone in Possum Valley and near the surface, too."

"Do you know who owns the land?" asked Reubens.

"Most of it is held by a man who once worked for us—Ben Shackleford—and I understand he is anxious to sell. I don't think you could get mineral rights; you'd have to buy outright."

"That will bear looking into, also. The Cahaba Company wants every acre of land possible in reserve. This field has hardly been scratched, and the first to develop it will reap the benefits. I'll keep this in mind. We can——"

"Here! This is after business hours," interrupted Alice. "If you talk that way you must go to the commissary."

"There's always time to talk business," Reubens bantered. "Aren't you planning to have anything to eat to-night?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving. Aren't you, Blackford?"

"Pretty hungry, that's a fact."

"Oh, well, I'll feed the brutes," consented Alice and scrambled to her feet with a fleeting glance at her husband. "You two stay here and talk. I know you've lots to say to each other."

Alone, they found instead that they had little to say. Blackford had been taken aback at Reubens's casual manner. He had expected hostility or contempt or both; good-natured and indifferent tolerance puzzled him.

"Well, I'll have to be off and make myself presentable," grunted Reubens, getting stiffly to his feet. "I've been looking around a bit and so has Fain. You've made a good start, but starting isn't all. You must keep it up."

Afterward Blackford remembered Reubens's words and wondered if they had been significant. He suddenly found himself tangled in a maze of delays. Production ceased to go up and then fell off steadily until he was running far behind the schedule required of him.

The day shift, instead of producing an average of ten tons a day, fell below eight a day per man. Blackford questioned Lawler about it. Gower, too, appeared disgusted.

"Just when the old man is here," the assistant superintendent growled. "Thank the Lord, he hasn't been around the tipple yet, but there's no telling when he will come down. Fain has been there."

Lawler was voluble. "We've been unlucky," he said. "If 'tain't one thing, it's another. I've had to take a lot of men out of the workin's and put 'em to cuttin' brattices and fixin' the pillars and keepin' up the track. That track has been givin' us hell. I told you it wouldn't hold up with them three-ton trucks."

"All right, let's locate the trouble," said Blackford. "I'm not trying to find fault. We must spot the weak places to remedy them. What is your biggest difficulty with the men?"

"Layin' off. Them fellers has got so shifless you c'n rake it off with a stick. Now here's the figgers. We got a hundred and fifty diggin' coal on the day shift, which is all I know anything about right now. Then we've got a hundred men on company work. If the company men lays off, that means I've got to take miners and put 'em on company work instead of diggin' coal. Every one of 'em I take off means that much less coal for the day."

"How have you divided your dead workers?"

"There's twenty drivers and about twenty workin' with timberin' and on the roof and there's eight bratticin'. The fire boss has five workin' with him and the boss driver has six more besides the drivers. The foremen for the levels work for me. That's about seventy. Tidmore has fourteen on the top-house and there's six firemen and a couple of engineers and six handlin' the railroad cars."

"Who are the worst about laying off?"

"They's all bad. Sometimes it's the drivers and half of 'em won't show up. Sometimes it's the top-house men and then again it's the coal diggers theirselves. You can't never tell until the time for the checker to send 'em down and then it's too late to git anybody."

"What can you do about it?"

"Ain't nothin' that I know of less'n you fire 'em, and I haven't done that 'cause I knowed how anxious you was to git coal and men is hard to find for this mine. It's too lonesome or something. Our crew's changing all the time. There's another reason I ain't fired 'em—they might all quit. These here mountain men hang powerful close together. But men is only part of our trouble; we've struck rotten roofin' and I've had a bunch of men timberin' and cuttin' pillars. I've had to use miners for that and when you git your pick men on company work, by golly, you can't keep coal comin' up like it would if you wasn't havin' no trouble. The track has took nearly double the men it ought to, and with one thing 'n' another I been lucky to move 's much coal 's I have."

Blackford did not equivocate. "We've been getting less than a thousand tons from the day side for the last three days. You've let the night shift with fewer men work all around you. I don't want that to continue. It's up to you and Gower to bring that production back to where it should be. I don't care how you do it, but it must be done if I turn over the work up here to Stringfellow and go down myself."

Blackford was thoughtful as Gower and Lawler left. What the foreman had said was plausible, but it did not satisfy. He glanced at the tippie sheets on his desk. So far there had been no decrease in the night-shift production; that was the flaw in Lawler's explanation. If the conditions he pictured were true, they should handicap Mudd's night men also.

Blackford did not understand the sudden slackening. He was suspicious, but he knew that Reubens had not been about the mine. Then he thought of Fain. The policeman had not been at the Residency, and he knew that Fain had spent much time about the tippie. He had not paid particular heed to Fain, and it had been a mistake. He could not spy on Reubens, but he had no scruples about having Fain watched. Mudd could do it. He strolled down the hill to the cottage where Johnny was asleep and woke him regretfully.

"Listen, John, I've something I want you to do," he said without preliminaries. "Somebody is trying to throw a wrench in the works again. This is more than Lawler, but I think he has a hand in it. We must be certain."

Mudd yawned and shook himself. "I smell trouble comin'. I figgered it was about time. I got everything quiet and runnin' smooth in the mine and it was gettin' monotonous. Trouble's my middle name. Shoot, what do you want me to do?"

"Know Parsons Fain?"

"Chief special agent? Sure, better'n I want to."

"He's the man. Have one of your boys keep tab on him, will you?"

"Sure; ought to be like shootin' fish. Fain thinks we're all hicks down here."

Blackford waited a day, two days, still nothing from Mudd, and still Reubens manifested no outward interest in the mine or its operation. He had developed a love of prospecting and, armed with a geologist's pick and bag, he and Alice roamed through the woods in search of minerals. It was virgin Country and Reubens kept away from settled sections after Blackford warned him.

"I know these people," Blackford told him emphatically. "They shoot first and ask questions afterward. Keep away from the lower part of Possum Valley unless you stay in the roads. Do your prospecting in the upper valley, I don't think you'll find any whisky stills up there; they're all nearer the river where they can get water. But if you see smoke and there is no clearing, stay away: more than likely it's a still and they resent curiosity."

Blackford watched them leave. He would have liked to go along: Blackford was lonely.

Another day passed, and still there was no word from Mudd, but the second afternoon following, just as the day shift was coming off and the fire boss was hurrying his crew down for the inspection for gas, Mudd lounged in.

"Got a date to-night?" he asked Blackford.

The superintendent shook his head. "Why, no."

"Yes, you have," contradicted Mudd.

Blackford looked at him. "Know something?"

"Yep, I got it. Lawler's got a date, too, and so has Fain. It ought to be a right merry little party."

"Tell me about it."

"I was down early this afternoon standin' in the stables talkin' to Jim 'bout some new mules—those you brought in for the night shift—when Fain came in the main heading. He and Lawler was together and they must of been talkin' some before I heard. One of my boys had been tailin' them, but hadn't gotten close enough to hear what they said. It's the first time I know of that Fain's been in the mine. He's been hangin' 'round the tipples and kind of circulatin' among the houses. He's got pretty chummy with some of the men."

"But what about to-night?"

"Just before I walked out, Fain says to Lawler: 'To-night, then, at the club.'"

"But I closed that."

"Guess they figure that's the best place to meet without causin' talk. Anyway, I took Thorne off, figurin' we knew what we wanted and it wouldn't do to get him suspicious."

"Right. You and I will be there to-night and see what Mr. Lawler and Mr. Fain have to say to each other."

"I thought you'd want to, so I sent down and took the locks off all the windows on the rear. You can raise one of them and hear every word. There ain't but one room on the ground floor and I don't think they'll go upstairs."

"Fine; that'll suit us. I'll meet you here after supper. I want you in on this."

The sense of coming conflict cleared Blackford's depression. He was almost gay at supper, chaffing Reubens about losing flesh and teasing his wife over her biscuits. When the meal was over, he went out with the remark that there was work he must do.

The club was dark when he and Mudd arrived. They took their places under a window and waited.

"What you gonna do?" whispered Mudd. "Figure on jumpin' 'em. Bring a gun? Big Willie is here."

"No, I just want to listen," answered Blackford. "No rough stuff now, no matter what happens."

"You sure are peaceable," Mudd commented. "Me, now, I'd——"

Blackford nudged him. "Hush. Here they come."

The front door opened quietly under a key and three men came into the big room. Their low voices echoed in the stillness and Blackford and Mudd had no difficulty in hearing.

Lawler spoke first. "I'm here as you asked, sir."

"Let's get it over quickly. I don't fancy this sneaking around in the dark. I believe in open methods."

That was Fain, but when the third man spoke, Blackford started. It was Reubens. "I suppose you wonder at this," he said suavely. "But then, money is the best ease for curiosity. Fain has already told you what we want. I am here simply to confirm it as you asked. We want production here held down, and we don't care how you do it. There will be substantial

money in this for you as Fain has already explained."

Lawler was suspicious. "You ain't gettin' me into this so's you'll have somethin' on me, are you? You ain't trying to get me into anything? But then you wouldn't tell if you was."

Fain broke in impatiently. "Of course not. We sent Gower here to do this and he has not made good. He wrote us he couldn't, so we came down."

"And after Blackford leaves is Gower goin' to be superintendent?"

"No, you are," said Reubens shortly. "That is, if you do what we want. Then you can mend things in your own way and big production will mean another bonus for you. You get paid for doing it and then undoing it."

"I haven't anything but your word," said Lawler slowly. "This is pretty ticklish. I want a little something more."

"Oh, we'll pay in advance." Reubens was contemptuous of haggling. "Give him the money, Fain."

"Here it is," said Fain, "but don't think you can get away with anything. We can take it away from you as easily as we gave it."

Blackford had heard all he wanted to know. With a pressure on Mudd's arm he rose. They went directly to Blackford's office, neither speaking. When Blackford switched on a light, Mudd saw his eyes were dancing.

"The old son-of-a-gun," said the superintendent. "He sat right at my own table to-night and was as nice as pie. I wonder what he means by 'fixed.'" Blackford paused and looked at Mudd. "Gower and Lawler both. I'm not surprised. It looks as if it is up to us to play a lone hand, John; are you game?"

"Them kind suit me best. What are you goin' to do first?"

"Give them time to see what they will do. I know they are knifing me, but they don't know that I know. That gives me an advantage." Blackford paused rather uncertainly. "John, don't say anything about ... about ... Reubens being there to-night.... He's my wife's father ... and ... well, you know how it is."

"Sure I do, boss," Mudd said. "Married relations sure is hell."

CHAPTER XXIII

HURTING EACH OTHER

Reubens and his daughter were in the living-room of the Residency; they had just come in from the mountain. Neither as yet had spoken seriously to the other; Reubens had been waiting for Alice and she for him.

Reubens did not know how to begin. To rouse her antagonism would be fatal. He had been in Cahaba more than a week now and he had seen many things. He had observed the relations between his daughter and her husband and he had quietly gained other information through Fain. He felt that at last he was prepared to make his plea.

He looked over at his daughter and took her hand. "Don't you think the time has come to talk straight to your Daddy?"

Alice smiled at him understandingly and patted his hand. "What does Daddy want to know?"

"First, when are you coming home? I miss you and I want you. You are not happy. When are you coming?"

"But I'm not unhappy, and I should be there."

"I hoped that you would have learned a little more wisdom by this time—after you had gotten over the first ... shock of the thing."

"But I haven't changed, Daddy, and I don't want to go back."

"Not even if I want you?"

"You wouldn't want me if I didn't want to come. That's a rather hard question, Daddy. Sooner or later, every one must live their own life. I'm living mine, and you can't live it for me."

"Surely you can't be living in a place like this!"

"I've my house and you've no idea how I love it, Daddy. Then there are the people here ... I'm interested in them and they like me ... There are still other things."

Reubens hesitated to introduce Blackford's name: it was treading on delicate ground, but there was no other way. He must know.

"Do you ... still ... think of him as you did?"

"He is not what you thought, Daddy. Maybe you weren't quite fair to him that day in the office. He's honestly doing his best here and he hasn't whined. I haven't been ... very kind." Her voice sank. "I—I wish I had."

Reubens forgot to be as diplomatic as he had planned. "Fair!" he said angrily. "That's nonsense. You surely can't love him!"

Alice smiled rather sadly. She had known this was inevitable, but it was painful. She did not expect her father to understand, and she knew she would hurt him. She equivocated, striving to put off the blow. "Is it likely that I should love him after all that has happened?"

"Of course not!" her father said irritably. "And that is what I can't understand. Why do you remain with him? I should think the very sight of him would be distasteful."

Alice touched his hand. "Don't be cross. I'm trying to explain. It isn't because of him. When I first came I was bitter. I hated him. Somehow, the mountains took it away and I'm not bitter any more. But my instinct tells me not to go back to Pittsburgh. I was not happy there, Daddy. I was lonely in spite of everything you did. Here I feel that I am living, really doing something."

"I can't understand you," said Reubens helplessly. "And once I thought I could almost read your thoughts. I could sympathize at first—but—but you've had time to see him as he is. He's an idler, dear, a parasite. You've seen that by what he has done here. He——"

"Oh, but I think——"

Reubens shook his head firmly. "I'm beginning to distrust your thoughts where he is concerned. I don't want to hurt you, but we must be honest with each other and about him. He said that he wanted a chance to work, but he didn't. When he got it, he ignored it."

"I don't think so. Look what he is——"

Again Reubens interrupted. "You don't know what he has done, you only think you do. Dear, Daddy doesn't want to be unkind and he's going to hurt you, but you'll believe him because he's always been honest with you. Won't you?"

"Of course, Daddy."

"Then you'll believe me when I tell you that your husband isn't worthy of you. He has proved it since he has been in Cahaba. I know because I've watched over you. I didn't forget; and when I found out I came here to tell you because I couldn't bear for you to hear it from some one else. You were sure to hear; these things always come out. I came to tell you and carry you back with me."

Alice moved restlessly. "Oh, Daddy, I don't want to be hurt. Are you sure?"

"Very sure, dear. Would I have come if I were not?"

"Then tell me. I'll listen, but, Daddy ..." She looked away and Reubens saw one hand clench. He paused to choose his words: he could not tell her the bald truth as Fain had told him.

"There's—there's a girl ... They met on the mountain ... You thought he was at the office—working. He wasn't—he was seeing her. You should not even pretend you are the wife of a man like that."

Alice smiled at him incredulously. "Was that what you came to tell me? I don't believe it. It couldn't be true. Why, he _____"

Reubens shook his head sorrowfully. "Do you think I would have spoken until I knew? Surely you realize that. Blackford has been under the eyes of my men every minute since you came. I can prove it, dear—but—but that isn't necessary, is it?"

Alice was looking out the window. If her father's words hurt her, she gave no sign. Reubens looked at her uneasily, nonplussed by her silence. He had expected recrimination. He had dreaded telling her, not because he thought it would really hurt her, but because it would be another blow to her pride that already had suffered keenly through Blackford. He took her hand and Alice turned to look at him. He met her eyes fairly; there was tenderness and sympathy in his gaze, but in it Alice read the truth. She needed no further proof. Her face was white as she turned again to the window, scarcely hearing her father's words.

"I wanted to see you, but if it had not been for this thing I should have waited until you came back to me willingly. I could not let you go on in ignorance. All I want is your happiness. If I thought he could give you this, as hard as it would be, I should keep silent. But you couldn't be happy with him, dear. The man has no moral fiber, no standards that you and I recognize. He could not have and do that. So when I found out, I came after you because I knew you needed me. Come home with your Daddy and forget this. Put it behind you."

Still Alice did not speak. Her thoughts were racing. This was a thing she had never considered. After all, she had been overcredulous again. He had told her that he loved her and she had believed. Her bitterness had not lasted. She would have forgiven him the other for his new love, because she had never ceased to care. Even on that terrible first night at the Residency, her heart had ached even as she hurt him.

His love came lightly and went as quickly. Hers was not like that: once given it could not be recalled. But she had never thought he would care for another. She had lost him, then. No, that was not true; she had never had him. Her father was right; there was nothing to be hoped from him. But she would not condemn him unheard. She would listen; perhaps there was some explanation. She would not judge harshly, because she had driven him away. But ... Her father was speaking again.

"You are still young," he pleaded. "Life is before you; let me give it to you. Time will cure this. I——"

Alice interrupted with quiet finality. "Oh, no, Daddy, I'll never love any one else. Not if I can help it, it's too ... painful."

"Then you'll come home with me?"

"Home?" Alice asked wearily. "I wonder if it would be home again. Don't beg me any more this afternoon, Daddy. I'd rather think for a time. He told me——"

She choked and turned again to the window. Reubens would have preferred to see her weep; her quiet frightened him. But it was kinder to wake her up. She might even love the man!

Alice was mourning lost hopes. She had welcomed Reubens because she had begun to be proud of her husband and wanted her father to see. She loved these two men and had dreamed of bringing them together ... That was gone ... She could not reconcile them, her father would be implacable now.

She must not act hastily; she would do nothing until the first pain was over, she could think better then. All that she knew now was that she would not leave Cahaba without an understanding with her husband; nothing should prevent that. Stubbornly she clung to the faint hope that there might be some—some explanation. Curiously, she did not blame her husband. After all, she had given him nothing; perhaps if she had ...

She rose. "Daddy, don't say any more now. I—I mustn't act hastily. You tell me——"

She hurried from the room, leaving her father shaken by what he had seen. There was heartbreak in her face and it disquieted him. Had he been wise to speak so soon? He justified himself by recalling Fain's words; Fain had not troubled to be nice.

After all, he was seeking only her happiness and it did not lie with Blackford. Damn him! What was the spell he seemed to hold over Alice? The man was an offense; he must be removed at any cost. Reubens gave his hatred free play in his thoughts; there must be an end to this; he would be ruthless for her, it would be kinder in the end. He would see Fain ...

Blackford, too, was having his troubles. His wife no longer welcomed him with shy gladness. She had changed with the coming of her father. She turned from him to Reubens. All the delightful intimacy was gone. To Blackford this was worse than those first weeks at the Residency, for then he had not hoped.

Blackford found it hard to meet Reubens casually after listening to his meeting with Lawler. He knew the ironmaster was behind the growing disorganization at the camp, and there was another thing. When Reubens went back to Pittsburgh, he would try to take Alice with him. Of that Blackford was sure, and he did not know how to meet it. What had he to offer her to keep her? Nothing, not even difficult work well done. And for this Reubens was responsible. Blackford grew morose under the strain of keeping up a casual front with Reuben. His words were irritable and his manner distraught as the disorganization of the mine harassed him.

Blackford debated with John Mudd whether they should discharge Lawler and take their chance of trouble with the men. Both decided against it. A tie-up of the mine would be playing into Reubens's hands. Blackford resolved to fight on, hoping that the ironmaster would grow tired and leave.

Blackford could not push production within ten thousand tons of the minimum required, and when he found the man responsible for this daily at his table, in his home, he grew snappish and irritable. Reubens blandly ignored Blackford's manner, but Alice did not. She mentioned it to him one night when Reubens disappeared with a word of conferences with Fain.

The time was poorly chosen. Blackford looked after Reubens and wondered what new move he and Fain were planning against him.

"Warren, I wish you wouldn't be so abrupt toward Daddy," Alice said.

Blackford restrained himself for the moment.

"I'm sorry," he said ungraciously. "I did not mean to be discourteous. He is our guest."

"He is more; he is my father."

"I wish he would act like it then."

"What do you mean?"

Blackford crowded back the words on his tongue. "Nothing, I guess. I'm sorry if I'm cross. I've had a hard day."

Alice asked the question that had been on her lips since her father had spoken to her. "Warren, would it help you if I were to go back to Pittsburgh with Daddy?"

"I've been expecting that," Blackford said. "That's one of the things he came for."

"Yes, I suppose it is. You see, he wants me and needs me. I never thought much of it before, but I remember now that not long ago you asked me to return to Pittsburgh."

"I thought we had settled that."

"But you haven't answered my question."

"Listen, my dear, the only thing I want right now is to get coal out of this mine. All I ever asked was a fair break and I've never gotten it. I don't want you to go back to Pittsburgh or anywhere else, but I wish to God your father would."

"Why should my father leave? This is his camp."

"Naturally you would take his part."

"Of course. You at least owe him courtesy. He came here to see me and you've no right to object."

"I wouldn't if that was what he came for, but it isn't. Don't tell me, I know what I am saying. He came to stir up the camp against me. If not, why should he bring Fain?"

"Don't try to hide behind my father. If you fail, you——"

"I haven't failed—yet, and I shan't. I can beat your father and Fain and all of them. But it isn't fair. Your father——"

"My father is fair."

"I'm glad you think so, because I don't." Blackford was savage. "He thought he set me an impossible task and, when I was doing it, he came to see that I did not. He is trying to discredit me with you."

"He could not do that, but you can and you are doing it now. You are afraid of my father."

Blackford restrained himself with an effort. "Perhaps I am—because he doesn't fight in the open. Why does your father pretend? Because he wants you to think I have failed. It isn't right. I never did anything——"

"That isn't true. What did you do to me?" Alice demanded, forgetful of everything in her passionate defense of her father.

Blackford's white face grew whiter. Only his eyes belied his calmness. They were frosty. "Ah! So that's it. I had almost forgotten," he said coolly. "I remember now I was to be punished. Another case of leading me on, eh? Then I have been stupid a second time. I did not think it of myself."

"No stupider than I!" cried Alice. "What about the girl on the mountain?"

The question slipped out; she had not intended to speak of that. This was no time for explanation when both were angry. But she could not recall the words.

Blackford waved his hand contemptuously. "I suppose he told you to ask me that and, of course, you believed him. That's an insinuation that I shan't even answer. If you choose to believe that ... You never give any one the benefit of the doubt, do you?"

So he would not explain; if her father had been mistaken, he would not have answered so. She was very close to tears, but she would not break down. She forced herself to speak calmly. "I asked for an explanation, but I do not want it. After all, you are nothing to me. You do what you choose, but don't attempt to hide behind accusations of my father. I won't

have that."

"You think your father too good to twist the truth to suit himself; you don't know him any better than you know me. Your father thinks he has me beaten. He has money and power and authority—let him use them as he chooses. He'll not be hindered by any scruples. Tell him I said——"

"Don't say anything more about my father." Alice's voice was shaking. "He is——"

"A liar," Blackford finished. "That—and other things."

Alice gasped. Then her face flushed in a rush of furious anger. "I hate you!" she said evenly. "How I hate you! I shall tell him exactly what you have said. This is the end. I shan't remain with you. I shall go home with him."

Blackford's tone was almost pleasant. "That is for you to decide. I stay here to complete what I have set out to do. You are as free as the day you came. I have never asked you to stay and I have been expecting this."

Alice abruptly left him. Why should they hurt each other? She groped her way to her bedroom. She had said it was the end. It was true. The struggle was useless. She loved them both, but she must give up one or the other. There could be but one choice. She loved Blackford in spite of the words that her heart gave the lie as she spoke them. But she could not trust him. What was it her father had said? He has no standards, that was it. She would go back to Pittsburgh and leave Blackford unhampered by her father or herself.

Lying wide-eyed on the bed, she suddenly burst into sobs. It was the end.

CHAPTER XXIV

REUBENS SEES A LIGHT

It was a silent group at breakfast the next morning. Blackford's face was drawn from a sleepless night, but his manner was impersonal and his tongue guarded. He ate in silence and immediately the meal was over left the house.

Blackford was bitter. Everything was turning against him just as he had seen happiness and success in his grasp. He felt hopeless about Alice; he had Reubens to thank for that. Even if he could do his work now, he could not go to her; she would not listen.

Blackford's conscience was clear about Margaret Shackelford. There had been nothing between them of which he need be ashamed, but he was resolved to offer no explanation. He would not ask forgiveness for an imaginary offense. If Alice had not seen the sincerity of his love, nothing he could say would shake her disbelief. He had honestly given of his best, and if she would not have it, he would not give her the satisfaction of a refusal.

But for Reubens he might have succeeded with Alice, but he could not contest with him there. The issue was not equal. He grew despondent until spurred by gathering anger. He would smile and pretend to be misled, but if Reubens should slip ... he would know what to do. Blackford's mood was dangerous. Perhaps his view was distorted, but he desperately wanted to meet the requirements he knew had been flung at him in the confident belief that he would fail. He forgot that he had not been overscrupulous and that he could hardly expect more consideration than he had shown.

Reubens sensed the tension between his daughter and her husband and guessed at some stormy interview of which he knew nothing. He grew anxious as he saw the pain in her eyes. Anything that touched her, touched him. He lived for her happiness and understood her with a large tolerance of the tragedies of youth that sometimes seem trivial to those older.

He must comfort her and remove the disturbing element from her life. They must leave Cahaba immediately. He was watchful as his daughter played silently with the food before her and glanced from time to time at her husband.

When Blackford left the table, Alice remained seated, staring at her empty plate. She was living over last night. Was there no other way but to leave Cahaba? Had she admitted defeat too easily? Had she condemned her husband without a hearing? It was so hopeless to go away. If she went out of his life like this, it would indeed be the end. He would never come to her and she could not go to him. She feared to tell her father of her decision to go home with him. He would wish to go soon ... She was not ready ...

Her father asked gently: "Time to start, isn't it, dear?"

They had planned a trip to Little River for more ferns. Alice raised her head and Reubens saw her eyes.

"Would you mind if we didn't go to-day, Daddy? I don't feel very well. Wouldn't to-morrow do?"

"Certainly, or we need not go at all. What's wrong, dear?"

"Nothing," answered Alice, biting her lip.

Reubens came around to her side of the table. He pulled up a chair and patted her shoulder softly. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

Alice shook her head, her face averted.

"Can't you tell your Daddy what is wrong?" persisted Reubens, running a caressing hand over her hair. "Can't Daddy help?"

"I'm afraid it's too late for any one to help," she said wearily. "I suppose it's my fault, anyway."

"You will forget if you come home with me."

"Oh, Daddy! Don't say that!" Alice cried and put her head on his shoulder. "I am so unhappy!"

Reubens held her close, patting her hair and murmuring endearments. "Tell Daddy about it," he urged. "I'll understand."

Talking to some one who understands always helps."

Her shoulders shook and Reubens's arms tightened. Here was no ordinary quarrel. "Tell Daddy, honey," he whispered.

"I—I—can't." Alice's voice was muffled.

"Is anything wrong that Daddy can remedy?"

Alice raised her head. "It's all wrong," she said drearily. "You must not worry. I think—I—think—I will go back with you as you asked—if you still want me."

"Of course I want you, always," said her father tenderly. "But what of ... him?"

Alice shook her head and her eyes filled. "You see—you see—he—he—has told me again he doesn't—want me."

Reubens's voice was very soft. "And it hurt?" he asked, taking Alice's face between his hands. His eyes were kindly, but his gaze was keen.

"Yes," she admitted.

"Why?" he probed gently.

Alice did not answer as her face slowly crimsoned. "It would not hurt if you did not care for him," her father said. Alice made no response. "Does he mean that much to you, dear?" Again the telltale flush and Alice hid her face in her arms. Holding her close, Reubens thought rapidly.

It was bitter, this knowledge that, whatever he had done, Blackford held Alice's happiness in his hands. Reubens's face hardened. Should he take Alice in her moment of depression and sweep her out of Cahaba before she had time to repent her promise? There was nothing to prevent, his car was ready. But would she be happy? Would there come a time when she would long for Cahaba and Blackford on any terms? Reubens was not certain, and he hesitated.

Reubens hated Blackford, but Alice's happiness came first. If she loved Blackford, then Reubens's hand was stayed. The ironmaster moved and sighed. He was shaken by the battle he waged with himself. It meant the undoing of all his plans, but he must if it meant the happiness of his daughter. He passed his hand wearily across his face. The emotions of youth were so hot, so untempered by experience or philosophy, and their tragedies so poignant. He had been young once; he never allowed himself to forget it.

Abruptly the struggle ended. What mattered anything beside her happiness! He almost choked on the words, but he spoke easily. It was never his fashion to give niggardly. He gave magnificently or not at all.

"Did you quarrel about me?" he asked.

"Don't ask me," begged Alice. "You can do nothing. No one can."

Reubens patted her shoulder, apparently cheerful. "You haven't enough confidence in your Daddy, sweetheart. There is something I can do. Run get your hat and we'll go down to the tipple."

"Not there, please," Alice protested.

"You must not sit here and think; it isn't good for you. Leave it to Daddy and everything will be all right. Come, I've a reason for going to the tipple."

Alice left the room reluctantly and Reubens's face was drawn into hard lines as he meditated. He was reluctant to draw back, but there was no other way—Alice loved her husband. She was proud; she would not admit it in words, even to her father, but Reubens had seen. That disarmed him; for her he must make the best of it, no matter his own feelings.

Perhaps, after all, he might be able to do something. He had underestimated Blackford; no man could bring Cahaba to heel and be what he thought. Now that he sought excuses for toleration, he found them. A man wholly worthless could not inspire such love as Alice felt for her husband.

Alice rejoined her father and the two walked slowly down the mountain. "What is it you wish me to see?" she asked

indifferently.

"Blackford told me he was bringing the mules out this morning."

"Are they in the mine always?"

"Months at a time and they go blind. I've never seen them when they are brought up."

"That does sound interesting. How many mules are in the mine now?"

"Twenty that have been down all winter. The others went only a week or so ago when the night shift was put on."

The two continued past the commissary to the tipple, which they ascended to the top-house, practically level with the ground, so that it was possible to walk out on it. On the other side, under the trestle-work, were the railroad tracks. Alice glanced down and wondered where Blackford had stood the day he had so nearly been killed.

Blackford they found in his shirt-sleeves talking with Lawler and Gower. Mudd was at his elbow.

"As soon as the mules are all out, you and Gower go with me," he was saying. "I will show you where we are to open the new rooms and make more cross-cuts. The breakth rough on Twenty-Six Left should also be widened."

When he saw his wife and her father, he moved out to greet them. He spoke to Reubens, but included his wife in his casual salutation.

"You are just in time," he said. "We are bringing up the mules this morning. We'll probably keep them out a day or two while we open more rooms and reduce the haulage. The mules usually are queer when they first get out. If you wish to see, you should stand over there on the steps to the engine-house. Then there's no chance of getting hurt."

Alice was startled by his words. "Are they dangerous?" she asked.

Blackford glanced at her briefly. "They have been in darkness so long they are blind when they come out. They don't know where they are or what they are doing. Sometimes they kick and rear or they may lie down or try to stand on their heads. You never know what they'll do."

Blackford placed the two on the steps and turned back to his men. He stood out in his clean khaki and incisive forcefulness. Blackford looked at Lawler.

"Ready?" he asked, and the foreman nodded.

Blackford waved his hand at Tidmore and the engineer disappeared from his window. "They're ready below," the superintendent called. "Hoist away."

There were two warning clangs from the signal bell; two answering tugs, and Tidmore opened the throttle and the great drum on which the hoisting cable was wound began slowly to revolve.

"He is bringing them up easy," Blackford explained to Alice and Reubens. "Ordinarily the cage shoots to the top, but you're likely to have trouble handling mules that way."

The steel cage that to Alice's unfamiliar eyes looked just like a big elevator rose gently to the unloading platform of the top-house. Instead of containing a mine car, the cage was filled by a black mule, which trembled violently. Two negroes, one on either side, held tightly to its bridle.

"That's Mouse," Lawler called warningly. "Handle him easy."

"Us knows it, Mist' Joe," panted one. "Don't us drive 'im?"

Alice watched the negroes' efforts to induce the mule to leave the cage.

"Mules have personalities just like people," Blackford commented to her. "That's why their drivers bring them up. The negroes know the mules, and most of them become real friends. The affinity between a negro and a mule is closer in a coal mine than anywhere."

The negroes talked coaxingly to the big animal and by much prodding finally got him out of the cage. He was still trembling, but he was beginning to prick up his ears. He planted his feet carefully, taking oddly uneven steps as he reluctantly followed the drivers.

"He thinks he is still walking between the rails of the mine tracks," Blackford explained to Alice.

Mouse suddenly seemed to realize that something unusual was happening and that he was not in his accustomed element. It requires a lot to surprise a mule, and especially a mine mule, but Mouse was always pleasantly surprised on his periodic visits to the upper world.

The mule raised his head and brayed delightedly as he walked off the planking to the ground. Down went his head; he grunted, lay down, and wallowed in the dirt, fairly wriggling with pleasure. It is a terrible deprivation to a mule, not to be able to wallow and no mule ever attempts it in a mine but once: mules are too shrewd for that.

Alice watched Mouse sympathetically as he tumbled back and forth, kicking up clouds of dust and pausing now and then to sneeze. "If he was a cat, he would purr," she observed.

"Yes, Mouse was docile," Blackford agreed. "All of them are not that gentle; some kick up a fearful row."

This morning, however, none of the mules were stubborn. Greasy came up and Bacon Rind and Blondie—so called from color—and Buck and Trouble. One after another they were introduced to Alice by Gower, who had joined the group. Lawler, too, from time to time gave dry comments on the mules and their drivers. Mudd was at the cage directing and unloading.

Not all of them came up as easily as had the first. Some came fighting with men hanging thick about them; others gave no sign of nervousness.

Blackford, Gower, and Lawler stood watching them keenly. Blackford was scanning each animal for defects; each mule disabled meant fewer cars of coal moved. He was squeezing the tons now. He meant to send a relief mule for any that was not in condition.

A fawn-colored mule came up in the cage, kicking and squealing. As he was led out, Blackford caught a glimpse of his shoulders; they were raw, where great sores had been rubbed by the collar and into these the coal dust had worked.

"Wait a minute; I want to look at him," he called to the negroes, and walked across in front of the animal, which flung its head from side to side, but did not move. Gower moved toward the mule.

Suddenly Alice screamed. She meant to warn her husband. She saw Gower passing the mule's hind quarters and caught the flash of the knife in his fingers. His movement cloaked from the others by his body, Gower's hand suddenly moved up and he plunged the blade into the mule's flank. Gower's hand traveled less than six inches, but Alice saw and saw the blade come away red.

Then she screamed even as the animal sprang, but it was too late.

It was over in a breath. As Blackford bent to examine the mule's shoulders, the animal gave a sudden convulsive spring that knocked the superintendent off his feet. The mule was frantic and tore free from the men holding him. Blackford, knocked over by the first spring, had just turned to get up when the mule planted a hoof squarely in his back.

The mule galloped off and Blackford lay still on the platform. The group on the top-house stood petrified.

Alice would have sprung forward, but found her arm clutched in her father's great hand. He was staring at Blackford's body.

"Perhaps it was better this way," she heard him mutter. Then he released her as the crowd gathered about Blackford.

CHAPTER XXV

HELPLESS

Alice never had any clear recollection of what happened in the next few minutes—it was all a blur of pain. Her emotions were mixed—amazement at her father's words, realization that it had not been an accident, an anguished thought that she and her husband had parted in anger and now he might never know that she loved him.

She pushed her way through the little group about the quiet figure. They opened respectfully, and she dropped to her knees beside Blackford's motionless body.

Attracted by her scream, Tidmore rushed up from the engine-house. He dashed back, and in a moment the great siren was sending out a staccato cry for help. It was the doctor's call, an imperative summons to the tipple.

Mudd took charge with quick authority that superseded Lawler, who did not understand what had happened, but looked on without regret. Mudd raised Blackford in his arms and felt with practiced fingers to see what first aid could be rendered. Subconsciously, Alice noted that his face was white as he bent over Blackford.

His fingers found nothing and he glanced around the little circle. His eyes fell on Gower, who was watching from the outskirts of the group. Mudd shifted his gaze to Lipscomb, who had come from the scales. "Go up to the commissary and tell my man Thorne I want him," Mudd ordered. "Tell him to bring help."

Lipscomb moved off, and Mudd made room for Alice beside Blackford. The superintendent lay very still where he had fallen. His hat was off and the heavy black hair dropped away from his forehead. There was a little trickle of blood from his mouth that Alice tried ineffectually to stanch with her handkerchief.

Alice was never one to give way to hysterics and she did not now. Subconsciously, she knew that Gower was in the background and that he was watching furtively. Her father by now had come to her side.

Above her the siren kept up its call, and Alice, almost stunned by the reverberations, could think only of one thing—remorse that Blackford and she had parted in anger.

His body lay so still in her arms! Yearning over him, Alice saw haggard lines in his face, dark circles about the eyes, and a touch of silver at the temples.

She forgot the men, forgot her father beside her attempting to shield her dress from the blood that dripped from Blackford's mouth. Her whole soul was concentrated in a passionate cry:

"Oh, don't die! Please don't die!"

She did not know that she whispered the words or that her father caught them. She was oblivious of everything save the man over whom she bent. It had all come so suddenly! One moment Blackford had been there, strong, dominant, virile; now he lay a crumpled figure in khaki, his head lolling inertly to one side and a crimson stream oozing from his mouth.

If the men marveled at her control, Alice in one part of her mind marveled also. She wanted to scream, to burst into denunciation, but she would not. She held herself sternly in check because she felt that only so could she help her husband.

The diapason of the whistle ceased and simultaneously Dr. Rawls hurried up the tipple, an emergency case under his arm.

"Who is it? What is the trouble?" he asked quickly and Mudd answered.

"Mr. Blackford was knocked down by a mule that came up fightin'. It only happened a minute ago. You made good time."

Rawls bent over Blackford and his trained fingers flashed over his figure. "Slight hemorrhage," he murmured. "Looks like concussion. Blow on the head. An abrasion that did not break the scalp. It doesn't look bad." He glanced at Alice.

"But it stepped right on him!" she said, her voice breaking on a high note. "Oh, Doctor! Save him!"—and added under her

breath—"for me."

"Ah, then in that case we must make a thorough examination immediately," said Rawls. "Stretcher here. Take him to the infirmary."

Alice interposed quickly. "Oh, no, Doctor. He is going home. I can care for him much better there."

Blackford was placed on the stretcher and the bearers stepped slowly down the hill. Mudd steadied it from one side and Alice on the other. An instant before they started Thorne ran up and Mudd paused. He pointed to Gower.

"Thorne, hold that man until I get back," he ordered, and Alice looked at Gower, who flushed with rage.

"Here! What the hell do you mean?" he demanded.

"Take him, Thorne," repeated Mudd, and the policeman placed a hand on Gower's shoulder.

"Let's go up to the commissary," he suggested, and without waiting for Gower's reply pushed him through the crowd.

Mudd turned back to the stretcher as Dr. Rawls spoke to Alice.

"I have given him a hypodermic. Take him home. I'll go by the hospital and get what I need. Don't worry; I anticipate nothing serious."

Blackford's hand dangled from the stretcher and Alice replaced it. Mudd's presence was comforting; she scarcely saw where she was going. Her mind was occupied with the one thought: "Suppose he should never know!" Mudd's hand steadied her. She wondered what he would do with Gower. She would speak to her father about it. But not now! Blackford was all that mattered!

Her father followed them silently, a little appalled at what he had seen. Reubens had heard much of violence, many things had been done at his direction, but this was his first contact with results, and it sickened him. He watched his daughter uneasily. If she had broken down and wept, he would have comprehended better, but this strange quiet ... She would blame him.

Alice directed that Blackford be taken to his own room. She prepared a cold compress for his head as the doctor had directed. As she bent over him, she saw that the hemorrhage from his mouth had ceased.

Dr. Rawls came in accompanied by his nurse and sent her out. "You can do nothing in here," he said brusquely. "You might do more harm than good. Go sit on the porch. I will call you if we need you."

Alice obeyed. Her father disappeared with a word that he would return presently. Alice wondered where he could be going at such a time. She felt curiously remote from her father. All her thoughts were of her husband. She had parted from him in anger!

She was bitter against herself. She had not meant to judge hardly, but she had condemned him without a hearing. She had given him no opportunity to explain. She had believed too readily in her father's words. If only she had not! Suppose ...

Margaret Shackelford was at the gate before Alice saw her. She was breathless, her eyes frightened, her hair disheveled. "What—what—has happened?" she called from the steps. "We heard the whistle and I knew some one was hurt. Who?"

"Mr. Blackford. At the tippie. He——"

"How?" interrupted Margaret. "Badly hurt?"

Alice stiffened. Why should this girl come to find if Blackford had been hurt? "He isn't badly injured," she said coldly. "We do not——"

"Oh, thank God for that!" Margaret murmured. "How did it happen?"

"A mule ran over him at the tippie," Alice answered, her face still colder.

Margaret slumped on to the steps, her body shaking and her head buried in her elbow.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she cried brokenly. "Dad wasn't at home, and I knew just what had happened. I came as quickly as I could."

"I shall tell Mr. Blackford you were here," Alice said icily. "He will be glad to know, I am sure, that you were anxious."

At her tone, Margaret's head came up in indignant surprise. She opened her lips, then closed them firmly. She rose. "Thank you, I was anxious," she said quietly and walked down the hill with a dignity that matched Alice's own.

Alice looked after Margaret wonderingly. So this was ... the woman her husband preferred ... She did not wonder greatly ... the girl was beautiful. Alice thought of her own features with sudden scornful comparison. She could only offer material things ... what she had ... but this other ...

Alice was not angry; she was hurt. Strangely enough, having seen Margaret, she did not again doubt the truth of her father's words. Nor did she as before leap ahead to conclusions. Once she had thought he had not been entirely frank about her husband and the girl. She did not believe that now.

She had hurt him and Warren had found comfort elsewhere ... Perhaps Margaret had been understanding ... She had realized of late that there she had failed. She could not blame her husband; she had driven him out even if he had wished to stay. Alice now did not believe that he had desired this.

And her taunts had brought him to this ... inside. It had come through her. She forgot everything but that and that she loved him. Her pride was gone.

Silently she sat through her Gethsemane, and under the seeming clarity of her distorted logic reached her resolution. Through her this had happened; it was but just that she should remedy it. She would demand that from her father and she would stay with her husband until he no longer needed her. She could pay him the service of love; she could not surrender that. He would never know; nothing could erase his memory of that first night here. It was a heavy burden, but she must not complain. But she would not give him up until she had nursed him back to health and helped him do what he wished. Then ...

Dr. Rawls was at the door. "You may go in now," he said.

In an instant Alice forgot herself. "How is he? Will he know me? Is he badly hurt?"

"I do not think he is permanently injured," the doctor said gravely. "He is still unconscious."

Alice looked down silently at the dark head and face that stood out against the white sheet. The clean jaw and the thin sensitive lips were limned clearly under the bandage about the head. If only he would move! A finger or an eyelid even! He was so still!

Rawls mechanically lifted an inert wrist, his fingers on the pulse. "I don't understand," he muttered, frowning. "The blow on the head is of no consequence. He should have recovered from that before now. His pulse is unsteady. I will stay with him."

Alice, too, kept vigil. Her alarm had partially subsided, allayed by the doctor's words. Again she was at the tippie. She saw Blackford's stooping figure, the flash of the knife in Gower's hand as he struck at the mule. A new thought struck her. Gower came direct from her father's office! "Perhaps it was better this way," her father had said. Suppose what Blackford said of her father was true! Alice rose suddenly; the room stifled her. She must meet this new issue.

"I'm going out," she whispered to Rawls, his fingers still on Blackford's wrist. "Call if you need me. I shall be on the porch."

Rawls nodded and she slipped out. Her father was moving slowly up the steps as she came to the door.

"How is he?" Reubens asked.

"Still unconscious," she answered. "Daddy, I want to talk with you. Come sit in the swing."

Alice hesitated after her father was seated beside her. She wanted the whole truth and yet she feared it. She did not believe her father would lie to her. What he told her, she would believe, and because of this she was loath to begin.

"Were you watching when Warren was hurt?" she asked at last. "Do you know what caused the mule's spring?"

"I was not looking at the mule," he answered.

"I was," Alice said briefly. "I know."

Reubens was puzzled. "Why, honey, it was excited. You saw how they all came up frightened."

Alice shook her head. "Daddy, I was looking. Mr. Gower had a knife in his hand ... he struck the mule's side. That was what——"

"Aren't you mistaken, honey? That's a grave charge."

"I'm not mistaken; I was watching. Daddy, tell me the truth, just as you have always done. I don't care how much it hurts, I want to know. Won't you please, Daddy?"

"Surely, sweetheart. I've never deceived you."

"Just before Warren was hurt, he said ... he said that you were trying to do something to him; that you had not given him a fair chance. That—that you had sent people here to work against him—after—after setting him an impossible task. He said Mr. Gower was one of them. And if Mr. Gower did this, it was because you wanted it done—if what Warren said is true. Is it true, Daddy?"

Reubens was silent; it was a hard question and he knew how much depended on his answer. "Partly true and partly not, dear," he said at last. "I think you are mistaken about Gower. I never intended anything like this. But sometimes ..."

"Then it is not true? Daddy, I can't doubt you, but are you sure?"

Again Reubens was silent. There was Fain ... and Gower was Fain's man—and Lawler, too. But he was honest.

"I can't answer yes or no; it isn't that kind of a question. Look at it a minute as I saw it. You are all I have. You married this—this——"

"Remember he is in there, Daddy, hurt ..."

"I say it without rancor, but I felt the end justified the means—it was all for you. The fact that Blackford has been hurt does not alter the essential issue. I was trying to get you back. I knew his kind, and I wanted to show him to you as he is. What better way than to give him a man's job? I felt I was under no obligation to him. He had robbed me ... Don't you understand, dear? I expected him to fail, and I sent Gower here——"

He paused as Alice turned away with a gasp of pain. "You couldn't blame me for that," he pleaded. "I was only watching over you. I'll send Gower back——"

"It's too late now for that. I love you, Daddy, and I know you love me. I'm trying not to blame you. It won't help any to quarrel about this. But I am beginning to see more clearly. When Mr. Gower told you that Warren was doing the task you gave him, you came to see that he failed, didn't you?"

Under the compelling honesty of her eyes, Reubens could not equivocate. "Something like that," he admitted.

"And you sat at his table and pretended friendship!" she said incredulously.

"That is a hard way of putting it," her father protested. "Remember I did all this because I love you."

"It all comes to this—that he never had a chance to do what you told him." She mused a moment. "There is something else—this would not have happened if it had not been for me."

She was thinking of her appeal to Blackford to subdue the camp, but her father misunderstood.

"Remember what he did!" he cried fiercely. "You told me you warned him!"

"Who can I trust?" said Alice despairingly. "Not you, for you let this happen when you knew what it meant to me. Not him, for what you said of him seems to be true also."

The tears rolled down her cheeks unashamed, and Reubens was silent. He was thinking of their errand at the tippie—it had been to tell Blackford that he would interfere no longer. He attempted a cheerfulness he did not feel.

"Cheer up, dear! Perhaps he isn't badly injured. He only got a nasty blow on the head."

"I was not thinking of him just then," Alice said. "I was thinking of myself. Between you——" She broke off the bitter speech with a gesture of helplessness. "What are you going to do?"

"What is there to do?" her father asked.

"Don't you think you owe him his chance?" she asked gently. "You've no idea what it means to him."

"I'll wash my hands of the whole affair if that is what you want."

"Don't you think it would be ungenerous to stop there?"

Her father nodded. "All right. I'll have Fain attend to it. Don't worry, and if you want him to keep his self-esteem, don't tell him it was stage-managed."

"I don't think you can tell him anything about Cahaba that he doesn't already know," Alice said proudly. "I think you still have something to learn of him——"

She was interrupted by Dr. Rawls, who came out, his face grave.

"Is he conscious?" Alice asked. Rawls nodded. "Did he ask for me?"

"He asked for no one. I'm afraid——It will be a shock to you. He is more seriously injured than we thought."

Alice's hand went to her throat and she leaned for an instant against her father—then straightened courageously.

"Badly hurt! Oh, Dr. Rawls! How badly?"

"When the mule stepped on his back, it injured his spine. He is paralyzed from the waist down. I'm afraid he will never walk again."



CHAPTER XXVI

MUDD FIGHTS BACK

Mudd was thoughtful as he left the tippie and followed Thorne and Gower to the commissary. Gower had been on the opposite side of the mule from him when the thing happened and his movements had been hidden. He had ordered his arrest in a sudden burst of suspicion—now he meant to make sure.

Mudd stopped Jim Rhodes at the commissary steps. "Jim, what made the mule jump?" he asked.

The negro's face was mournful as he shook his head. "Mist' John, you know you cain't never tell what no mule'll do. He was just cantankerous and fightin'."

"But he wasn't scared; he didn't try to run away. He jumped—like something happened suddenly. I didn't see anything, did you?"

"Nawsuh, I wasn' lookin'. Mist' John, 's a funny thing 'bout dat mule. 'At was Gravy. He ain't never give us no trouble when we brung him up befo'."

"Go bring him to the commissary; I want to look him over."

Mudd sobered as he walked slowly into the building. This was an emergency neither he nor Blackford had anticipated. What would the superintendent want done? Ordinarily, Lawler would have taken over direction of the mine in Blackford's absence, but Mudd vetoed that, remembering Fain's instructions to the foreman.

Had Lawler been responsible for this? He could not see how the foreman could have done anything. He had been on the steps beside Mrs. Blackford when the mule sprang. Gower had been close behind Blackford. Mudd remembered vaguely that Gower had not seemed surprised.

But the mine was the question. Lawler was impossible. Gower he meant to eliminate. That left only himself. Mudd squared his shoulders and his lightness fell from him. It was a heavy responsibility. Fain would attempt to interfere, perhaps. Or Reubens. Well, he would give up only on Blackford's orders.

He walked through the commissary as he cast up the possibilities. Blackford was helpless, but the work must go on, whether Fain wished or not. There was Reubens, too. Mudd groaned inwardly, but when he opened the door there was no uncertainty in his face.

Gower sat glowering in a chair. Thorne was looking out the window and Stringfellow worked over his books.

Mudd paused at the threshold. "Stringfellow, we'll excuse you," he said. Only his own men would listen while he talked to Gower.

Stringfellow rose without a word, but Gower protested sharply. "Damn this foolishness! I've had enough of it." Mudd grew suddenly cheerful: it was a dangerous sign. Stringfellow paused uncertainly in the door. "Go on," said Mudd pleasantly. "I told you we didn't need you."

Gower attempted to crowd past, but Mudd caught him by the shoulder. "Come back in here. I told you I wanted to talk to you. Shut the door, Thorne."

Gower sat down abruptly as Mudd shoved him back. He looked from Mudd to Thorne. "You're two to one," he said. "What do you want?"

"Nothing much, just to ask you a question," said Mudd, dragging out a chair.

"Don't waste time. Ask it, then."

"Suppose I don't want to hurry, what'll you do?"

Gower was ready with his answer. In moments like this he thought of one man. "I'll tell Fain."

Mudd laughed cheerfully. "We'll have to risk that. I don't know whether I want to rush things or not. Maybe you do."

Gower scowled at them both. "I'm waiting."

"What did you do to the mule?"

Gower leaned back with an air of relief; he knew what he must face. "So that's it. If I had done anything I wouldn't tell you."

"What did you do to the mule?" Mudd repeated.

"Nothing; what could I have done?"

Mudd looked at him consideringly. "You're a liar," he said calmly. "What did you do to the mule?"

Gower sprang to his feet, his fist drawn back. Mudd did not move—he only looked and the arm dropped.

"What in hell do you mean by this, anyway?" Gower cried angrily. "You can't keep me in here. Let me out."

"Sit down!" Mudd's voice rang. Thorne moved over to the door at a glance from his chief. "What did you do to the mule?"

"Nothing." Gower's voice was choked. "I'll tell Fain about this. You wait——"

"What did you do to the mule?"

Gower attempted bravado. "Since you know so much, find out!" he said.

"I shall," answered Mudd evenly. "Do you want it the easy or the rough way? I'm going to search you."

"Like hell you will! Come and try it!"

Mudd rose and took off his coat. "Lock the door, Thorne, and come here." Mudd laid a revolver on the table and stretched two muscular arms. He spoke to Gower. "You asked for this. You're going to be searched. If I can't, there are enough here to do it. Better take the easy way."

Mudd raised himself on his toes, flexed his muscles, and walked toward Gower. He was smiling happily and his blue eyes were snapping. Gower backed away and his voice changed. His bravado was gone.

"All right, keep your hands off me. I don't want to hurt you."

Mudd was disappointed. "Oh, well, then lay everything you have in your pockets on the table."

Thorne and Mudd watched as the pockets were emptied: a small roll of bills; a notebook; a slide rule; a piece of twine; a knife. Mudd picked it up. "Some sticker," he commented, as he opened a keen blade. "I thought so. Look here, Thorne." The opened blade was covered with dried blood.

"That's where I cut my hand this morning," Gower explained eagerly. "I bled all over it."

"Show me the cut," said Mudd. Gower hesitated, and Mudd continued speaking. "So you stuck the knife in the mule, eh? That explains the jump."

"No, I didn't," Gower denied. "I was as much surprised as you were. I——"

There was a knock on the door and Thorne opened it. Jim Rhodes beckoned to Mudd. "Heah's yore mule, Mist' John. I just kotched him."

"Bring Gower out here, Thorne," Mudd ordered, and they walked through the commissary to the mule outside. Mudd examined its flank. His face cleared as he indicated a cut. "See that—that's all the proof we need. Bring the gentleman inside, Thorne."

Fain walked up as they turned and Gower greeted him eagerly. "Mr. Fain, come here quick," he called hurriedly. "These men won't——"

He was interrupted as Thorne hustled him inside. Mudd followed without a glance at Fain, who entered on their heels.

"What's this?" asked Fain, looking from Gower to Mudd. Mudd made no effort to explain, but Gower broke into eager speech.

"This man"—indicating Mudd—"has searched me and now won't let me go. You talk to him."

"How about it, Mudd?"

Johnny chose to grow facetious. "It's a very fair statement of the facts, I'd say. So fair that it's true. I've got him for that thing on the tippie. He's responsible."

"Release him at once."

Mudd smiled at him. "My hearin's awful poor."

"Free Mr. Gower at once before I find it necessary to take further measures."

"When you're appointed superintendent, tell me the same thing and I'll listen."

"I don't have to be superintendent to order this man's release."

"Orderin's one thing—gettin's another."

Mudd's cool manner exasperated Fain. Perhaps the man did not know him. "I am Fain, head of the safety department. If there is anything to be done in this case, I'll do it."

Mudd shook his head. "You're a little late. It's already been done."

"You mean you won't release him?"

"You're a mind-reader, I see."

Both of them ignored Gower. "I'll break you for this," said Fain.

Mudd snapped his fingers and turned to Thorne. "Take Gower up to the cottage and put a couple of the boys with him until you hear from me. He's only to be released on my order. Understand?"

"All right, Chief," said Thorne. "Come on, Gower."

But Gower hung back. "I won't go," he said. "I'm looking to you, Mr. Fain."

"You're damned right you are," said Fain, suddenly savage.

Thorne ignored Fain and walked over to Gower. "You heard what Mr. Mudd said," he growled. "Get out of that chair or I'll bring you."

Cowed, Gower rose with an appealing glance at Fain, who moved toward them. He paused at Mudd's soft voice at his elbow. "I wouldn't if I were you." Fain glanced over his shoulder and Mudd grinned at him. "Let them alone and talk to me. It's safer—Thorne ain't very patient."

Fain swallowed his wrath and watched the men go out. Then he turned on Mudd. "You carry things with a high hand. You are not in charge of this camp because——"

Mudd interrupted smoothly. "Wrong again. I represent Mr. Blackford and will run this camp until relieved by him."

"By what authority?"

Mudd was growing more pleasant as the other became angrier. "There are seven good reasons," he said politely. "Each one has a thirty-thirty rifle."

Fain was raging, but helpless. He had no force at his immediate command and this man seemed totally unawed by what he represented. Ordinarily his name was enough. He looked at Mudd and Mudd smiled back. This was the tableau that

Reubens found when he hurried into the office.

"Where is Gower, Fain?" he demanded. "I must see him immediately."

Fain leaned back with an ironic smile. "Ask this man. Gower seems to be in his hands."

Reubens turned to Mudd. "Well, where is he?"

"Gower is under arrest."

"Arrested? By whom? Nonsense! I want him at once."

"I arrested him and he's not seein' any one at present. No visitors allowed."

Reubens was as bewildered as Fain. "Does he know who I am?" he asked. "This is my own camp."

Fain straightened up and struck the desk with his fist. "This is rot. This man thinks he is running the camp because Blackford has been hurt. Tell him he's fired."

Reubens snapped at Mudd. "I don't like your manner. You're guilty of insubordination—something I won't tolerate. Get out—you're discharged."

Mudd did not stir. "My hearin's still bad. You didn't hire me and I won't let you fire me."

Reubens looked at Fain, who shrugged. "What's it all about?" demanded the ironmaster. "Why was Gower arrested?"

"He is responsible for Mr. Blackford's injury," said Mudd dispassionately. "I shall hold him until the extent of the injury is determined."

"That's a broad statement. I expect you to prove it."

"How's this, then? Gower was the only man near the mule. There is a knife gash in the animal's flank. Gower's knife has blood on it. Circumstantial, perhaps, but conclusive. It's enough for me, anyway."

Reubens looked at Fain. "Is this true?"

"What if it is?" asked the policeman bluntly; "You don't need to worry with this. Leave this man to me. Say the word and I'll have enough men here to-morrow to throw him off the reservation." He reached for the telephone. "I'll call my Birmingham office. They'll know what to do." He lifted the receiver at Reubens's nod when Mudd halted him.

"Do you want to join Gower?" he asked. "Put down that telephone. Listen. I'm a regularly commissioned deputy sheriff of Alabama. I'm the law in this camp, and if you interfere with me, I'll put you with Gower. Now, go easy." Fain, one hand on the telephone, looked at Mudd, who nodded. "Yes, I'll use force if I have to. You're beat; I've got the men here and you haven't."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Reubens. He was wiser than Fain and a better judge of men; Mudd was not to be overawed.

"I shall hold Gower until I find what Blackford wants done with him."

"You are responsible only to Mr. Blackford?"

Mudd nodded shortly. "Yes."

"Oh, hell! This is ridiculous!" said Fain. "The president and the safety department head held up by this youngster! You won't stand for that, will you?"

Mudd continued to smile. "He has no choice. I'll ask you the same question. What are you going to do?"

"Get you," said Fain, "and before I leave."

Reubens shook his head as he thought of Alice; she must not learn of this. She had been right, then, and he was responsible for her husband's injury. Her reproach had been justified. He felt a sudden distaste for Fain: the man was

unfeeling. He shook his head again.

"No, that won't do, Fain. I guess you had best go on back to Birmingham and leave me to handle this. My plans have changed, and I can't have any trouble for my daughter's sake. It is her husband who has been hurt. She would never forgive me if I protected the man responsible. Go on and leave this to me."

Fain got up angrily. "I'll go if it's an order. It isn't my way, though. I'm not bluffed."

Reubens's thoughts were of Alice's eyes as she had looked at him. He passed his hand across his face. "That's all right, Fain. I know you meant well, but your way won't do here. That's why I'm sending you to Birmingham."

Fain stamped out and Reubens was left with Mudd. "I don't think you want to hold Gower," the ironmaster said. "I'm not ordering anything; I'm suggesting. Suppose we go and consult Mr. Blackford."

"Fair enough," said Mudd, and they went out together.

They found Blackford awake and fretful.

"Hello, John," he said weakly. "I'll try to get down to-morrow. You take care of things until I get back."

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Blackford. I am following through on production. I know exactly what you wish."

Reubens stated their errand. "Blackford, I have sent Fain away; he is leaving Cahaba to-night. I want to send Gower with him; you can get another engineer. Mudd, here, has Gower under arrest and will not allow him to go unless you order it."

Blackford turned his head slowly. "But why——"

"We'll explain that later. Right now isn't it sufficient that I want him to go?"

"It's about the accident, Mr. Blackford," said Mudd. "Gower was——"

"That isn't necessary now," interrupted Reubens. "I'll undertake to bring Gower back here at any time you want him. Wait until Mr. Blackford is stronger before you fret him with more talk."

"Do what Mr. Reubens wants, John," said Blackford feebly. "It's his camp, you know."

"Very well, sir, I'll go right down and put him on the night train," said Mudd. "I'm sorry if I bothered you, but I was doing what I thought was right." He went out with Reubens on his heels. "You say you want him to go? Well, he's goin' this very night."

"That is suitable to me," assented Reubens. "Fain knows what I want him to do."

Mudd found Gower with Thorne still on guard. He looked down on the engineer, who cringed a little from his contemptuous gaze.

"You're lucky," said Mudd. "Mr. Blackford said let you go. You've got an hour to make the night train."

"But I want to see Mr. Reubens and Fain," Gower objected. "You will——"

"Don't argue; go and be glad you can." Mudd was suddenly ferocious. "If I had my way you'd go in a box. Now get out quick."

With that Mudd turned on his heel. Lawler was still to be seen. His thoughts were on Blackford.

CHAPTER XXVII

MORE THAN HALF A MAN

To Blackford realization came early that his condition was graver than the doctor would admit. At first he had asked no questions. His mind was curiously hazy and his head ached cruelly. The cold compress the doctor ordered hampered his thoughts and the nurse warned him constantly not to talk.

Blackford wormed out of them the circumstances of his injury. He knew that a frightened mule had knocked him down and struck his head. But Blackford was beginning to feel that there was something behind the reticence of his doctor, in his injunctions against moving.

His legs were without feeling and he could not move, but he thought little of that. His whole attention was concentrated on the mine. His first question on regaining consciousness was, "Who is running it?" But Dr. Rawls shook his head.

"Never mind about that now," he said. "This is much more important to you than the mine. That will take care of itself."

But Blackford fretted. After his brief talk with Mudd, he was a little easier, but this did not last. There were so many things to be watched. John was a marvel, but he was unfamiliar with the office. And Lawler! What was he doing? And Reubens. He chafed at his thoughts. The doctor would not permit visitors and Blackford's questions were met with assurances that failed to soothe.

He lay on his back this hot June afternoon and thought grimly. There was some mystery here. His place was at the mine. Why should he be held in bed for a superficial injury? He could stand uncertainty no longer.

Alice was in and out of the sick-room. She was friendly, sympathetic, and anxious to ease his pain, for Blackford suffered constantly. She ignored all that had passed between them: it was as if it had never been. But Blackford did not forget. During the days when he could only lie and think he had re-lived the recent eventful months and he was not proud of himself.

His heart was filled with a great humility. Who was he that he should have wrought so ruthlessly in the life of another? He did not wonder that she found him intolerable and wished to get back to her own people. Well, it had been sweet while it lasted. He would at least have some wonderful memories when she had gone—bitter memories, too, but the others were worth them.

Blackford took pleasure in inflicting pain on himself, for he was in an abnormal mental condition from his injuries. Hours he spent in thought of Alice and himself. He acknowledged the justice of her decision to return to Pittsburgh with her father. It would be better for both to have it irrevocably ended.

As for himself, he would do what was to be done at the mine and then—well, it didn't matter greatly. He knew that he would never forget, and he shrank from the years ahead, but he resolutely refused to let himself think of that.

He was in a feverish hurry to get back to the mine. It had been pleasant to know that he was overcoming difficulties, doing things other men said were impossible. The newly born respect in Stringfellow's manner had been grateful. It measured his progress toward his goal.

Musing so, Blackford fretted at his enforced inaction. His body, he knew, was in a rigid bandage that stretched from under his arms to below his waist. He could not understand it and the nurse would not talk. He must learn the truth from Dr. Rawls himself.

He sank into a troubled nap and woke to find Alice beside him. It hurt to see her and long for her, yet know that she would never again be his. He punished himself by the thought that once she had loved him. Well, no one could take that from him; he would have that to remember always.

"How do you feel?" asked Alice gently.

"I'm all right," Blackford answered. "Is Dr. Rawls here?"

"He is talking with Daddy in the library for a moment."

"Your father is still here, then. When do you and he leave?"

Alice hesitated and looked down at the fan in her lap. "Why—why—I have—we—I have changed my mind," she said slowly. "I don't think I am going back with him."

Blackford did not show his surprise. "You are not remaining because of me?" he asked. "I'll be well in a little time. You should not allow that to interfere with your plans." Then he punished himself. "You know I suggested some time ago that you visit Birmingham or Pittsburgh."

"Things were different then," Alice said gravely.

"Very true. I thought you and I understood each other better. What do you plan to do?"

"I shall be here for a time," she said evasively. "If I were you, I would not talk."

"Nonsense! I'm weary of that!" Blackford exclaimed irritably. "Why shouldn't I talk? How long before I can be out?"

"Perhaps you had better ask Dr. Rawls. I'll call him." She met the doctor at the door. "He is fretting," she whispered. "I think we should tell him now."

Blackford looked up impatiently as the doctor came to the bed. "Look here, Doctor! What is all this nonsense about?" he demanded. "You tell me my head is hurt and that I must be quiet for a time. I don't believe that is all that is wrong and I want to know the truth."

"No need to fret, Mr. Blackford," Rawls said soothingly. "There's no hurry, you know."

"Yes, there is," contradicted Blackford. "I have felt some mystery about me since I came to myself. I want to know—now."

"Excitement is bad for you," Rawls insisted equably. "Can't you lie still and relax?"

"Stop talking in riddles. I'm no child; I want the truth. What is wrong with me and why can't I move my feet? You said my head was hurt."

"Your back was injured also," said the doctor softly. He glanced at Alice, who came for a minute and sat on the bed. Her hand crept up to Blackford's forehead and smoothed his hair lightly for an instant. It was the first caress he could remember since ...

Fear gripped him: the doctor's grave face, the nurse's silent sympathy, and the unaccustomed touch from his wife. What was the undefinable something that haunted him? He sensed some blow about to fall and his impatience dropped from him. He was silent for a minute.

"Tell me," he said at last, his voice steady.

Tears were rolling unrestrained down the nurse's cheeks; Rawls's eyes were sorrowful and Alice's face was turned.

"When the mule knocked you down it stepped on you and—and—hurt your back," the doctor said slowly. "It injured the nerves and has brought paralysis."

"Do you mean my back is broken?" Blackford scarcely recognized his own voice.

"Not that I can determine and the X-ray does not show it," Rawls said. "It seems rather to be a displacement of nerve centers."

"But—but—you mean I can't walk?" asked Blackford incredulously, his face gray.

"You have no control over your legs. There seems to be a gap in the nerve centers so that the orders your brain gives do not reach them."

"Say it simply," Blackford cried. "Do you mean I can't ever walk again?"

"I would not say that——" Rawls began, when Blackford interrupted.

"Don't deceive me, I can stand it. I had rather know than be uncertain——" with a ghastly smile.

"I see no hope that you will ever be able to walk," the doctor admitted.

Blackford sank back on the pillows from which he had raised himself on one arm. His first thought was that he would never be able to do what he had hoped—never know the joy of full accomplishment.

He heard the doctor tiptoe out and knew subconsciously that he beckoned the nurse to follow him. Blackford was grateful for his kindness; he wanted to be alone. He must grasp what it meant. Never walk again! Spend his life in bed! He might live years!

A movement at the head of his bed told him that, after all, he was not alone and new bitterness swept him. He turned haggard eyes on Alice.

"So that was the mystery! I wondered ... but I never thought of ... this."

Alice flung herself down beside him. "Oh, Warren! I'm so sorry! So sorry!" She gathered his hands up with fierce tenderness and pressed them against her breast. Her head went down and Blackford felt her tears.

"Now I know why you are not going back to Pittsburgh," he said. "It was ... this."

Alice crowded closer to him and placed a hand over his mouth. "No! No!" she sobbed. "It wasn't that. I love you! I love you!"

Once Blackford would have given his soul for the words—now they only hurt. He did not believe them.

"No, you don't love me. You are only wonderfully sympathetic and you think it would not be honorable to leave me like this." He laughed shortly. "My God, no! That isn't necessary. I will not have such a sacrifice."

Again Alice put her hand on his lips. "But it is not a sacrifice. I am——"

Blackford took her hand away firmly. "I shall protect you from yourself. You say you love me. Once I would have believed you—but not now. I know you better now. You are too honorable ... Well, you have never seen it, but I can be honorable, too. And I won't let you do it. It's too great."

Alice dried her tears and rose from her knees. She was a little stunned. She had cried out to him from the fullness of her heart and he would not believe. Was he being willfully blind? Perhaps he did not want her. Margaret! Was she the reason? Alice told herself fiercely that she should not have him. This broken man belonged to her; no one else should comfort him and sustain him. But could she if he would not have it?

Blackford was musing. Alice could not read his thoughts. He was deriding himself. Helpless he would not hold her. Once he had betrayed her, but he would not again. He forgot her momentarily in thoughts of himself. It was incredible!

He wiped his face with a handkerchief and looked at her. "Go on to Pittsburgh with your father," he said. "You will be happier there. You do not realize what you are proposing."

"I shall not leave you."

"You had planned to go with your father, hadn't you?"

"Yes."

"And now you are not?" She shook her head. "Isn't it because I am ... like this?"

"You have no right to ask such a question. Would you leave me if conditions were reversed?"

"I don't want pity." Harshly.

Alice did not answer. The still figure under the light covering stripped her of resentment. He was not responsible; he hardly knew what he was saying. She was anxious only to soothe him, but he turned from her touch. "I won't have pity," he repeated.

"Warren, please don't misunderstand. I'd rather talk of this some other time when you are more yourself. You know I couldn't leave you like this."

Blackford had been fighting for control; now he regained his self-possession. His voice was kindly, but under it she detected an unchangeable resolution. "I know how good you are," he said somberly. "It isn't that I don't appreciate it; I do. But you'll understand if I think only of myself for a moment. You don't realize what this means to me. Just when I thought ..." He meditated, lines springing into his face. "Every time I saw you I would tell myself: 'She is only staying from pity. Playing the game, that's what she's doing.' Well, I can play the game, too." His voice sank to a whisper. "I don't want you on those terms. I had rather lock the memory of you in my heart. I'd rather remember you as something fine that once ... But to see you every day ... To long for you ... And still to know, that ..."

"I am here," said Alice steadily.

Blackford glanced at her briefly. "Pity!" he said, not unkindly. "No, I can't. It isn't that I'm not grateful; I am. You'll never know how much I honor you for it, but I would hate myself if I took advantage of you. I won't, and I won't let you sacrifice yourself to your generosity. You will be grateful to me—later on. You are sorry now, but time will heal it. You _____"

"I shall not leave you like this," Alice said.

"You consider yourself tied to me, then, so long as I am like this?"

"Oh, no, Warren! Not tied. But——"

Again Blackford laughed shortly. "We may as well have it out now as later. Call the doctor."

Reubens was with Rawls when the doctor came, but Blackford vouchsafed him only a brief glance. He spoke directly to the surgeon.

"I wish direct answers, please. You say I shall never be able to walk; does that mean that I cannot be moved?"

"Oh, no. I was merely keeping you quiet in the hope that the nerve gap would close."

"Then I can sit up?"

"You *can*, but you are taking your life in your hands when you change positions. Any violent strain might be fatal."

"I am in a cast, am I not?"

"Yes."

"Won't that keep me from strain?"

"Within reason, but you must realize that in such a state as yours, the utmost precautions are necessary."

"Then you would advise me to remain in bed?"

"By all means, or in a rolling chair."

Blackford thought for a moment. He saw a giant negro towering above the crowd as he read a bulletin board.

"Well, I shan't!" he said, and his jaw snapped shut.

"But, Warren! What——" Alice cried in quick protest.

"Never mind," Blackford said shortly. Then addressing Reubens. "I don't suppose I have been relieved as superintendent of Cahaba, have I?" Reubens shook his head. "Are you still willing to give me the chance of doing what you demanded?"

"But you aren't able," Reubens said. "We had other plans. We were to take you East to a specialist."

Blackford communed with himself for a moment. "No," he said. "I'll hazard that what Rawls says is true. I'm still more than half a man. I've still my head—that has not been hurt."

"Speak to him, Doctor," Alice begged. "You won't permit that, will you?"

"I can only advise Mr. Blackford of what is best," said the physician.

Blackford laughed. It was ugly. "What in hell do I care?" he asked. He turned to his wife. "Will you send to the tippie and have John Mudd told that I want him—at once?"

Alice went out with the doctor, who shook his head at her distress. "Humor him," he said sympathetically. "That is best for the present. I'm sorry, but men react differently."

Alice sent the message to Mudd and returned to her room to grieve over Blackford. It seemed her fate, she thought drearily, to offer herself and be refused. She raised her head hours later to find her father beside her.

"Oh, Daddy! See what we have done!" she cried in bitter reproach. "If it had not been for me, this would not have happened. And you helped!" She choked. "I am so miserable."

She slipped to her knees in tears while her father strove in vain to comfort her. Alice felt alone—with her father an alien for the first time in her life.

From her husband's room came the steady monotone of voices, one giving orders and the other protesting.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FREE HAND

Stringfellow, pondering over long columns of figures in Blackford's office and wrinkling his brow in disgust over what they showed, heard a heavy tread in the corridor. There was something unusual about it and he listened curiously. It sounded as if some one were carrying a heavy burden. The steps were slow, cautious, and uneven.

The door opened, and Blue Gum Jim Rhodes stepped carefully over the threshold. It was what he bore in his arms that brought Stringfellow to his feet.

It was Blackford. Fully dressed, the superintendent was borne into his office in the arms of the giant negro and deposited carefully in his chair. Blackford's face was gray, for his head throbbed, but he fought back the nausea and spoke easily to his bearer.

"That was fine, Jim. I knew you could do it. It didn't hurt a bit." Then to Stringfellow: "They told me I'd never be better and I couldn't leave the works any longer. Stringfellow, they've just got to have that coal at Dolomite. How is production?"

Stringfellow shook his head dubiously. "We're way behind our schedule," he answered slowly. "We have run into a bunch of accidents. First, there was a big fall of rock in the main heading and Lawler had to put nearly every man in the mine at work clearing it out. It had us completely blocked."

"Main heading!" Blackford echoed. "Rock falls in the main heading? I never heard of such a thing. Didn't he have the roof timbered or did the timbers give way?"

"I don't know; I'm no inside man. Lawler told Mudd that there was a fault in the roof, and that when it came down, it crushed all the timbering. Anyway, it tied us up the best part of three days."

"You're working now, though, aren't you?"

"No; they're down again. They had a bad smash-up in the crusher. Got a rock out of there weighed a couple of hundred pounds. Lawler said he couldn't take any more coal, so they called the men out after they loaded what cars they had."

Blackford's nerves tightened. It was well that he had come. So deep was he in thought that he did not hear Stringfellow's question until it was repeated.

"I hope you ain't badly hurt, sir. What is the trouble?"

"They tell me I'll never walk any more," the superintendent said absently. "But as long as I've got Jim, there, I guess I can get around. How about it, Jim?"

"Sho' kin. You don' weigh more'n a good sack of meal, Mist' Blackford. I kin carry you all day 'n never know it."

"They told us that only your head was hurt and that you would be back in a few days. I hope it isn't permanent," Stringfellow said sympathetically.

Blackford, scanning his production sheets, answered quietly. "That's what they tried to tell me, but I got the truth. I don't want to talk about myself, though. Where are Mudd and Lawler? Tell them all I want them. We can't have such delays as this."

Stringfellow hurried out, leaving the superintendent engrossed in his tippie sheets and the big negro standing behind his chair with impassive face, his tremendous bulk dwarfing even Blackford's stalwart figure.

Alice had watched with mingled feelings as Blackford left the house that morning, carried easily in Jim's arms. She was glad that he was not condemned to brood in bed, but she was apprehensive lest moving should do him a mischief. When she heard of his plan from Blackford's lips, she protested vigorously.

"Don't take this risk, Warren," she begged. "You know what the doctor said—that moving you might have serious

consequences."

"Consequences have no particular terror for me. I don't see that they could be much worse. I'll go crazy if I remain in bed."

"But you might injure yourself more and might—might——"

"You mean I might kill myself?" asked Blackford coolly, and Alice shrank at his smile. "Worse things might happen. At least that would free you."

"Oh, how can you say such things!" she gasped. "You need not hurt me because you are hurt yourself. I am only trying to help."

"Yes, I know you are," Blackford said in quick regret and stretched out a hand for an instant.

"Then you won't go?"

"Oh, yes, I'm going. They need me at the office. I must."

"You know it isn't necessary. It is only your pride."

"Call it pride if you like," Blackford said indifferently; but his wife continued unheeding:

"Daddy and I——It isn't necessary for you to go. Daddy and I had planned to take you East, to New York to a specialist. Don't be foolish, Warren. Don't let your pride come between what we want to do and your safety now. Think! Your life may be at stake. If anything were to happen to you, I should feel that I was to blame."

"You needn't, for you're not. I'm doing this willingly. If—if—anything happens ... Well, honestly, it doesn't matter."

Alice was baffled by his mood. This was something new in Blackford: he was deaf to her appeals as she had never imagined he could be. But she swallowed her hurt and remained in the room when Jim came. She arranged her husband's clothing, saw that he was easy, twisted his tie, and did the hundred little offices a woman offers when she feels she is giving up her nearest and dearest and doesn't know whether he is coming back.

Her eyes filled as she watched Blackford borne easily down the steep street in the giant's great arms. Her taunting words came back to her. If he had not then made the most of his opportunities, he was doing so now. She turned to find her father looking after Blackford, approval in his eyes.

"The boy's got iron in his blood," he commented soberly. "I didn't come into the room. I thought perhaps you could manage him better if I were not there. He and I ..."

"I couldn't do a thing with him," said Alice in distress. "I felt as if I were talking to a stranger. He hardly heard what I said."

"He's taking his life in his hands and he knows it," Reubens said slowly, and Alice gave a quick sob.

"And he's doing it because he doesn't understand. He doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Oh, Daddy!"

"Don't cry, dear. Daddy will ... We'll help Blackford do what he wants and then he'll go with us. I have sent Gower back to Pittsburgh." Alice looked at him inquiringly. "You were—yes—he admitted it; thought he ought to be proud ... He and Fain ... I never meant ... Don't blame me, dear; I'm trying to undo it."

"I'm not blaming you, Daddy," Alice said sadly. "What's the use? Not even he does that. What will you do?"

"I've sent for Lawler. He will not make the same mistake as Fain and Gower. I'll see that Blackford has no more trouble with his men."

Alice soon went in to move restlessly about the house. Blackford had promised to send a messenger if he felt worse. She kept an eye on the street leading to the Residency and her heart quickened when she saw a figure on the path. When she met him at the steps, it was only Lawler, and she left her father to talk with him alone.

Reubens did not waste time. "You and I had a talk the other night. Conditions since then have changed. Those orders are

cancelled and I want all plans dropped. Do you understand?"

"I hear what you say, but it don't mean nothin'," Lawler answered sullenly.

Reubens stared at the tone and the words. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"You can't set fire to a house and then tell the fire to stop burnin' and have it do any good."

"Nothing has been fired here."

"You know what I mean. These men are a sight worse than fire. You wanted me to set fire to 'em, and I done it. Now you want me to call 'em off. You can't blow hot and blow cold at the same time; leastwise, not down here."

Lawler was not taking particular pains in choosing his words. He had been warned by Gower. Lawler had known what to expect when he came up the hill. He was only making certain.

Reubens's eyes kindled under the other's manner, and Lawler found his gaze disconcerting. "You can stop it if I say so," Reubens declared. "And understand this—it will be important to you. I want this stopped."

"That's easy enough to say, but you don't have to do the stoppin' yourself. Besides, where do I come in?"

"Don't worry, you will be taken care of in the manner in which we agreed. I thought that was what troubled you."

"No, sir, you are wrong," Lawler said earnestly. "It ain't. I know your word is good, but you don't seem to realize, sir, that you're a long way from Pittsburgh. They don't pay much attention to anything down here, and when they start runnin' wild, they're hard to stop."

Reubens lost his urbanity. "I want them stopped. Can you do it?"

"No, nor you neither. Try it and see."

Reubens lifted a monitory finger and shook it at the foreman. "If you are wise, there will be no more trouble here. Understand? I should regret having to bring Fain in here again. I've sent him away and I don't want him back. You would be sorry."

"I'll do what I can. I tell you now it ain't goin' to be much. Ain't nothin' but a fight goin' to clear the air now, it's gone too far. You asked me to do it an' I done it. Now you want me to back-track, an' that ain't so easy. Don't you know it's a dam' sight easier to start trouble 'n stop it?"

Reubens was impressed; he recognized the worth of the man's arguments because he had seen Cahaba; it was rough at best. Now, under Lawler's inciting, it needed only a spark for an explosion. From commanding, he became almost pleading.

"This means a good bit to us. For reasons that would not interest you, I cannot afford to appear in it, but I want this trouble among the men quelled and I want them to get back to work. If you can put it over, it'll be worth a good deal to you. You're their boss—the man they deal with. It should not be hard for you to handle them."

"But I kind of egged 'em on, and they ain't goin' to like my tryin' to stop 'em. But I'll do what I can."

With that Reubens was forced to be content, but he would not have been so well satisfied if he had heard Lawler's muttered words as he left.

"Like hell, I will! Just watch me. I can still see a way out."

A brooding calm settled over Cahaba in the succeeding days. Reubens telegraphed his office that he would be absent indefinitely and settled down in Cahaba to watch Blackford's fight and help his daughter if he could.

It was a fight: they read this from Blackford's face, which daily grew thinner and more haggard. They grew accustomed to seeing him in Jim's arms. The negro never left him for a moment and between the two there grew up a mutual affection.

The giant black was wonderfully gentle. He soon found the most comfortable position for Blackford; watched him; anticipated his wants. Rarely did Blackford ask for anything; he looked up to find it at his elbow.

Alice watched over him as well as she could, but she made no further effort to penetrate his reserve. She knew that he was so sensitive now that any touch, even the most gentle, would hurt. And she, too, retired into herself.

Reubens, watching them both, wanted to help, but was too wise. Any interference from him now would be fatal. His daughter loved Blackford, but of the man he was not so sure. Blackford, his face white, his eyes somber, his bearing taciturn, but faultlessly courteous, baffled him. Again Reubens paid the man the tribute of involuntary admiration. Blackford at all events shouldered his burdens and neither whined nor rebelled: that appealed to Reubens.

And Blackford: in his heart a certain hopelessness was growing. He found himself heavily handicapped by his injury. He felt as if he were chained, and he sensed rather than saw the slackening of his control over the men. He had lost his prestige: they no longer stood in awe of him: his orders were no longer respected as they had been. Men sometimes did as they chose.

Mudd came to Blackford about it, mopping a harassed brow. Mudd was sleeping hardly four hours a day, spending all his time at the mine, striving as best he could to fill Blackford's place.

"Boss, I'm gonna kill somebody before this thing is over," he said. "I can see it comin'. They're goin' too far."

"No, John, nothing like that," Blackford cautioned. "It would not help any. Just what do you find wrong?"

"I can't put my finger on it, but I can feel it. They don't seem to care whether they work or not. It's Lawler, sure. He's doin' just what the—the old man told him. We ain't gettin' out half the coal we should on the day side, boss. And I'm afraid they'll get to my night crew. We gotta do something."

"Hold your head a little longer, John. We are in no position to meet a strike. Lawler must stay a little longer, then watch me get rid of him. I must have a reason."

Mudd was no longer good-natured. "Let me do it," he growled. "I don't need no reason."

But Blackford calmed him and sent him back into the mine with renewed determination. But try as they might he and Mudd could not raise production to seventy-five thousand tons and hold it there. Already there were nearly twenty thousand tons to be made up and he had only a little more time.

The limit was reached on the day that the washer was damaged with emery dust in the bearings. Blackford, from Jim Rhodes's arms, investigated. Mudd was awakened and looked it over. It was sabotage: there was no doubt of it.

"This is hell," said Mudd, looking down at the scored bearings. "Lawler again."

"Yes, and this is the limit." Blackford was desperate. "We can't have this. We'll face the issue now."

Mudd's face lighted and he felt in his pocket. "Want me to go get him? Me and Big Willie will bring him."

"Not to-night," Blackford said. "I want to try another way first. We both know what's back of this. I'll see to-night and to-morrow ..."

Blackford had about reached the end of his endurance: he must know where he stood. His nerves jangled as he looked at the washer that meant more days of idleness for the mine. He had thought Reubens might ... after he was hurt, but it made no difference. He was weary.

At the dinner table that night, his white face even paler than usual, he made his bid for freedom.

"Suppose we come to an understanding, sir," he said to Reubens. "I am under difficulties because you are in my home and at my table, but I feel sure you will waive that."

"I don't know what you mean," said Reubens.

Blackford gestured wearily. "Why pretend? I know what you came here to do: I even know how you are doing it. I thought that perhaps what had happened to me would satisfy you. After all, I am not asking much, only a fighting chance to do something that will benefit you. I get nothing from it."

"I shan't pretend to misunderstand. I have done nothing since your accident."

Blackford smiled incredulously. "You must think me stupid, sir. I recognize your hand in everything that has happened. Besides, I overheard your talk with Lawler at the club. But I believed you when you told me I should have a free hand." Blackford looked at Reubens thoughtfully. He was speaking without heat; neither heeded Alice. "You are vindictive, aren't you?" Blackford asked, speculative eyes on Reubens. "You do not believe in leaving a man anything at all." He waited a moment, but the ironmaster was silent. "I'll admit I have given you cause, but I've paid heavily for it. You don't suppose, do you, that I think what happened to me was an accident?" He chuckled mirthlessly. Alice's eyes widened: so he did know. "It was made to happen; you know that: I know it. The reason I have done nothing is to avoid involving you. And I felt as if there was some justification for your feelings. But I don't think you are fair now. I only asked a chance to do something for you, then I planned to relieve you of the embarrassment of my presence. You promised I should have this chance, and you are not keeping your word."

All this still without heat. Reubens and his daughter sat unstirring. At last the ironmaster spoke.

"Suppose I told you I am keeping my word?"

"I should find it hard to believe," Blackford returned promptly.

"I am," said Reubens simply. "For reasons of my own, I decided to let bygones be bygones. I dropped all plans."

"But they are going ahead," said Blackford calmly. "The other day the crusher, to-day the washer. Who knows what next? And these weren't legitimate accidents. They were made to happen."

Reubens shook his head helplessly. "But I told them they must stop."

"These things are easier started than stopped."

"That's what Lawler——"

Blackford picked up the unfinished sentence. "That's what Lawler said, was it?" he finished evenly. Again there was silence. Alice buried her face in her arms. "I'll make one last appeal to you, Mr. Reubens," said Blackford slowly. "If you won't give me a chance, I'm ready to quit. I'll admit that you have beaten me and go. You have started something that has gotten away from you. I don't know whether you want it stopped or not. I can stop it. These men look to me for their bread. They know me. I can stop it and handle them, but only if you don't interfere—no matter what I do. It isn't much to ask and you will benefit more than I."

"I promise," said Reubens instantly.

"Thank you," answered Blackford as he motioned to Jim Rhodes. "Then I'll stop it."

The negro picked him up easily and carried him out. Reubens and his daughter looked after him. Neither doubted his words.

CHAPTER XXIX

FALLING BLOWS

Blackford struck swiftly to remedy the disorganization at the mine. He no longer hesitated with halfway measures—the time had come to meet the issue in the open.

It would be a fight; the superintendent knew that. He might win or he might lose, but he would not sit idle and see the camp disintegrate under his hands. Blackford did not shrink from the struggle; he welcomed it. In it he would find, perhaps, an ease for his loneliness.

Despite the efforts of John Mudd, production had gone steadily down after Blackford's accident; nor had it improved on his return. The men knew he must work through another and the driving inspiration of his rather grim personality was missing. This was a loss he would have to discount, Blackford told himself; he must teach the men that, although he could not walk, he was still powerful.

Blackford had long known that, before he could have satisfactory peace at the mine, he must get rid of Lawler. He had been waiting until he could gain the greatest prestige from discharging him. Lawler had been at the working so long that he was an institution, and Blackford reasoned that there could be no greater warning to the men than his summary dismissal.

Blackford had already made what preparations he could for a sudden elimination of himself as superintendent. He gave himself two reasons for this. In spite of what Dr. Rawls had told him, he believed that he was likely to die suddenly from the injury to his back. He carried this thought with him always. Then, again, Blackford knew the dangers of the conflict with his men. When he had stood upon his feet, it had not seemed so unequal, but now, tied to a chair, he recognized his difficulties.

Life did not seem particularly sweet to him, but instinctively he clung to it. He had no great will to live save the desire to justify his ambition to Alice and show her that not only could he dream, but also perform. That seemed the one thing holding him. He grew morbid. It did not matter greatly if he did go out, he told himself. If he went down fighting, perhaps it would be the better way. It would save her ...

Sometimes in the isolation into which he had drawn, he wondered how he stood it; wondered why he did not solve the puzzle for himself and for her. He marveled to discover in himself some unexpected source of strength he did not recognize; some voice that bade him fight on long after he had lost hope.

He was lonely. Blackford's nature had changed since his accident. He no longer felt he could depend on himself. What others did and thought had abnormal weight with him. He longed for understanding and resented anything akin to pity. He would not have it from Alice or Mudd or any one.

He tried to force himself to his old relations with Alice and found he could not. He no longer felt he could dominate. If he saw her very much, he would break down and cry to her to be comforted.

Blackford had never realized his pride in his body until now. He glanced down at his helpless limbs. If only ...

More and more he withdrew into himself. He spoke to Alice and her father when necessary, but the home knew him no more. Only to Jim Rhodes, of whose silent adoration Blackford had at length taken notice, did he unburden himself. Jim didn't understand; he answered "yes, suh," at what he thought the proper points and asked no questions. That helped Blackford.

With a half-angry shake, Blackford came out of his abstraction. From his deliberation came the hardening of his resolve—he would go forward now without a backward glance.

He motioned Stringfellow to a seat across from his desk and carefully settled himself in an easy position.

"Stringfellow, I've been so busy I haven't had time to get acquainted with you," he said. "Perhaps that was a mistake, but you did your work without prompting and there were so many who didn't that I let you alone. But the time has come when we must have an understanding. Every one who isn't for me now is against me and I shall act accordingly."

Stringfellow placed his hands on the table before him and leaned forward. There was a little ring in his voice and his stooped form straightened.

"I've been hoping you would ask me that, sir," he said, "and I've wanted to answer. I am for you, one hundred per cent."

Blackford raised his brows at the other's vehemence. "That is what you say and that is how you have done your work, but there are things I don't understand."

"I know it, sir, and I've wanted to explain. I tried weeks ago and you wouldn't listen. I'm for you, sir, and I know what you are up against. I wanted to help, even before your ... accident, but I couldn't as long as you were suspicious, and I didn't think you would understand if I went to you."

"Perhaps I shouldn't, but I shall now, and I want to know. I need all the help I can get; you know that without being told. Suppose you give me the whole story."

"Willingly, sir, anything you want to know."

"Are you friendly with Lawler?"

"He thinks I am."

"Are you?"

"No."

"And Shackleford?"

"As friendly as he will let me be."

"Then that explains your visits with him and Lawler and Galloway."

"Yes, it does, but not in the way you might think. I—I guess I'd better tell you the whole story. It isn't Shackleford, it's—it's Miss Shackleford."

Blackford looked at him, recognition in his eyes. He remembered Margaret's words. "Oh, so you are the one who is waiting."

"Yes, sir. I met her in Birmingham when she was in school. I loved her and—and she liked me, but she wouldn't marry me and wouldn't tell me why, so I came here to find out. I found Big Shackleford. I saw she was worried about him and I wanted to protect her, so I stayed here and tried to keep things from happening. He—he was in with Lawler and Galloway. I didn't trust Lawler, but Big Shackleford did, and I stayed here and kept him out of trouble the best way I could. It wasn't—wasn't nice, but when you feel as I do ... It was for her. Mr. Crosslands gave me a job and—and then Mr. Fain come along. He wanted me to keep an eye on things and report to him, and I got to know some of them in the central office. I could warn Shackleford when it was needed. I—I warned him about you."

"Now you are ready to work with me?"

"I've been that for some time. It's—it's Margaret; she told me how she felt and why she wanted her father ... She asked me to help and I've wanted to, but until we could kind of understand each other there wasn't much I could do. But I've done what I could."

Blackford stretched out his hand. "I believe you, Stringfellow, and I'm glad to accept your help. You won't have to wait much longer for Margaret. You know that."

"Yes, sir, she told me and said, too, that I could thank you for it. I do."

Blackford still held Stringfellow's hand. "You'll be happy. Margaret's a fine girl. I'm glad it is you. I'd never thought much about it, although she told me. And now we can work together for the mine."

"Yes, sir, we can, and I can tell you a lot of things to help. You remember about them weights. I can tell you about the scale-house and Lawler. I've kept still about it till now. Maybe I wasn't doin' right, but then Mr. Fain knew it, and he

never said nothin'. Now I'll tell you."

"That will keep for a little while. What do you think is wrong in this mine?"

Blackford was testing him with the question, and was satisfied with the promptness of his answer. "Lawler."

"I think so, too. Send for him."

Impassively he waited the half-hour until Lawler came up from the top-house and took the seat he indicated. Blackford pushed his chair around to face the foreman.

"Lawler, I have decided to make a change," he began without preliminary. "You have not given satisfaction for some time. You know what I have to do here, but you don't seem able to get into it so I've decided to get some one who can."

Lawler, who had wondered why this blow had not fallen sooner, and who had been quietly preparing for it, took on an injured air. "I've done the best I could," he protested. "'Tain't my fault the crusher broke and the——"

"I don't want excuses; I want coal," Blackford interrupted.

"I been unlucky. Things ain't seemed to go right——"

"Exactly, so I'm going to try some one else," Blackford interrupted again. "Perhaps they will be lucky. Anyway, I'll try."

"Then there ain't no use arguin' 'bout it," said Lawler with unexpected mildness. "Who do you want me to turn over to?"

"Mudd," answered Blackford, agreeably surprised. He had expected protest. "I'll give you your wages for another month and you can keep your house until you decide what to do."

Lawler rose, his eyes smoldering. "I ain't workin' for you no more an' I guess I can say things I couldn't say before. Keep your dam' house and your money, too. I don't want nothin' you nor the company gives me. I can get what I want and I'm goin' to do it, too."

Blackford looked up indifferently. "You mean me?" he asked quietly.

"Never mind who I mean; you'll find out quick enough," cried Lawler. "You think you can get away with puttin' me out of a mine I been workin' in since it opened. I'll show you. I'll be here a long time——"

"Go to it," said Blackford, still without raising his voice. "I know you'll try to make trouble. Shoot. It's your move."

"When I get ready, you'll know about it," raged the foreman. "You'll wish——"

"That will do," interrupted Blackford. "Get out. If that is all you have to say I'm tired of listening."

Lawler uttered a howl of rage and pounded Blackford's desk. "I'll get out when I get good and ready! An' you nor no other dam' Yankee from up north can come down here and put me out of the commissary where I been workin'——"

John Mudd and one of his men entered the room in response to the buzzer Blackford had pressed unnoticed by Lawler. Blackford indicated the foreman with a thumb.

"Throw him out," he commanded.

"God save the Irish!" said Mudd. "I been waitin' a long time for this day. Come here to me."

He twined a hand in Lawler's collar and pulled. The foreman twisted in his grasp and planted a knee in Mudd's stomach. Simultaneously, Lawler's fist caught Mudd a glancing blow. So it was to be a fight. Mudd laughed. The other constable was circling around.

"Keep off," Mudd called. "I'll handle this."

That was how Cahaba got the news of Lawler's dismissal. Miners in the commissary saw the two men reel out of the office, locked in a struggle that smashed a counter; saw Lawler's hand go up with a knife and the butt of the revolver wielded by Mudd.

Lawler wilted to the floor with Mudd standing over him, his eyes hard, the gun drawn back to strike again. But there was no need. All turned their heads as Blackford appeared in the door, sitting easily in Jim's arms.

"Throw him out," he repeated, his voice flat.

They dragged Lawler's body across the commissary floor and dumped it into the street, where presently the foreman sat up and staggered away.

Without a glance at the fallen man, Blackford turned back to his desk with a call for Mudd.

"All right, John; it's come and it's up to you now. You're foreman."

"I'll get the coal if I have to dig it with my hands," Mudd asserted cheerfully.

"You may have to do it at that," said Blackford soberly. "We can expect trouble. You know and so do I that Lawler isn't going to take it lying down. The question is which way will it come?"

"Only thing to do is to make everything tight and tidy and wait and see," said Mudd, and Blackford grunted assent.

"I've got to get coal and I haven't much time to waste," Blackford said. "That's up to you now. I'll see to everything up here, but I can do nothing if I don't get the coal."

"Long as it can be give to you I'll give it," Mudd reassured. "I'll go down now and break the news. First thing I'm going to do is change the weighman on them scales. I told you what I found there and I don't like it."

Blackford began to take Mudd's advice to prepare for what was coming. There was little he could do until he knew from what direction the blow would fall. That there would be one, he did not doubt, and when he came down the next morning in Jim's arms it was waiting for him.

Blackford glanced at the three miners in his office. "Well, what is it?" he asked, almost before Jim had settled him in his chair.

"My name is Bob Lockwood. This is Tom Griswold, and that is Herb Bonner," the biggest of the men began. "We're a committee from the men. Is Mr. Mudd goin' to be foreman in Mr. Lawler's place?"

"Yes."

"Then we are authorized by the boys to say that we don't work under him."

"Why?"

"He don't know nothin' 'bout the mine. He don't know how we do things. He ain't been down long and he don't know how we are fixed. They are afraid of him."

"Don't you know that the State of Alabama requires every mine foreman to have a certificate and to pass an examination? I could not make him foreman if he did not know enough to hold the job."

Lockwood shook his head stubbornly. "We would rather work under Mr. Lawler. He knows our ways and we know his'n. Ain't that right, boys?"

There was a rumble of assent. Lawler had done his work well.

"It isn't suitable for me to have Mr. Lawler right now," Blackford said politely. "I'm sorry you men don't like Mr. Mudd, but you'll have to get along with him the best you can."

Again Lockwood shook his head. "No, sir, we won't. There ain't none of the boys goin' to work under Mr. Mudd a-tall. We ain't goin' to work under no policeman."

Blackford leaned forward scanning them, and they shuffled uneasily. "You know the answer to that, don't you?" he asked. "If you don't work under Mr. Mudd you won't work at all—not here. Now that will do. I'm perfectly willing to meet the men or a committee from them when they have a legitimate complaint about working conditions or wages or matters of concern to them. The selection of executives at this mine does not concern you. I don't recognize your right to have a

voice in it. You may go."

Blackford looked after them; it was a strike sure. He telephoned Mudd, and then began to cast up his own resources. In his nights of sleepless consideration, Blackford had provided against every contingency. Well, he was ready. Let it come. He had the night shift and the electricians had made progress in wiring. If he had to, he could use machines with only a short delay.

Blackford and Mudd sat late in conference that afternoon planning what to do when the strike came. That it would come they had already learned.

"And she's goin' to be ugly, too, boss," Mudd told Blackford. "Better get your folks out of here."

"When is it set for?" Blackford asked.

"One of the boys who's goin' out and who will continue on my payroll said the word had been passed for ten o'clock to-morrow."

"Well, they can't get to the top until we are ready. You can hold the engineers, I suppose."

"Sure, every man-jack of them and the night shift, too."

"All right. Jerk them up as fast as they want to come and then hold them on the top-house. I want to talk with them."

With that the conference broke up. Mudd went to marshal his men. Blackford had sent to Birmingham for more guards. They would be in next morning. He already had arms for them.

"Better station a double guard over the dynamite-house and don't issue any except to the night crew," he ordered. "We want all the explosives in camp in our own hands for a while, anyway."

With that they parted.

"Don't you want to go home?" Blackford asked Reubens bluntly that night at the supper table.

Reubens gasped, and Alice opened her lips in hot protest, but Blackford forestalled them.

"Now I didn't mean that, and you know it. There's going to be trouble in this camp, and it won't be the place for the head of the company. You had better go home and take Alice with you."

"But what of you?" the ironmaster asked.

"It's part of my job and I'll take care of myself. I'm not trading on my condition. This is a hazard I'll have to accept, as you know. If I can't control my own men, then I can't ever hope to get anywhere. But it's different with you. You don't need to take the risk."

"What makes you think it is coming and what is it?"

"I fired Lawler yesterday and then threw him out of my office—or had it done," he corrected. "He grew insolent. To-day I got an ultimatum that the men would not work under any one but Lawler, and I understand that they are coming out to-morrow at ten o'clock."

"I'll go down and talk to them; they will listen to me," said Reubens.

"You'll be foolish if you try."

"I have managed much bigger things than a strike in a small coal camp. You'll see I'll be able to handle it."

"If you are determined I can't stop you, I suppose." Blackford was a trifle weary. These people could not see that they were sitting over a powder keg. He would not argue. "All right if you say so," he replied to Reubens's insistence. "But remember I shan't have Lawler and I shan't let them tell me who I can hire."

CHAPTER XXX

INTERLUDES

It was Mrs. Lawler at the door, wretched, fearful. Alice pulled her quickly inside. "Why, Mrs. Lawler! Whatever is the matter?" she asked in concern.

The woman's gaunt face was drawn and her eyes haggard. "Hit's Joe, Mis' Alice," she said. "He's plumb crazy. I don't know what he'll do. I'm afraid for him."

"Has anything happened?"

"Joe's been drinkin' an' out 'mong the men. They're plannin' somethin' an' I'm 'fraid they'll get him to do somethin'. He ain't responsible."

"I'm glad to help if I can," said Alice gently. "But what do you wish me to do?"

"I don't know," confessed the other. "I just come to you 'cause I didn't know anywhere else to go."

"Suppose we speak to my husband about it."

Mrs. Lawler shivered and drew back. "You do it," she entreated. "I'm 'fraid of him. Besides, what could I ask him?"

"Afraid of him? Surely not," Alice said. "Come with me."

They found Blackford in the living-room, his head on his hands, his eyes sober.

"Warren, here is Mrs. Lawler—the one who has been so nice to me, you know."

"Good-evening, Mrs. Lawler," the superintendent said courteously. "You will pardon my not rising." He looked inquiringly at Alice.

"Mrs. Lawler is anxious about her husband," she explained.

Blackford's face hardened. "Yes?"

Mrs. Lawler broke into speech. "Oh, Mist' Blackford! Please don't blame him! He ain't responsible."

"Blame him for what?"

"I don't know," said the terrified woman. "I just feel like somethin' is goin' to happen. He—he's so different. I tried to get him to leave, but he wouldn't. He says he won't give up the house. Mr. Blackford, I'm 'fraid of what'll happen to him."

"You mean me?" She nodded.

Blackford smiled mirthlessly. "I'm not very formidable," with an oblique glance at his wife. "I told him he could keep his house until he found something else to do."

"You won't let the comp'ny hurt him?" begged Mrs. Lawler.

"I am the company here, Mrs. Lawler," Blackford said kindly. "Dismiss your fears. I am not your husband's enemy; the remembrance of your kindness to Mrs. Blackford would prevent that. Just get him to go somewhere else as soon as you can. I shall not be impatient."

Alice took Mrs. Lawler to the door. "You see," she said triumphantly. "And you were afraid!"

"Thank you, Mis' Alice. And thank him for me, won't you? I'll do the best I kin with Joe."

Mrs. Lawler passed two figures coming up the steps. Alice recognized one as Margaret Shackleford. The man she assumed to be her father. Big Shackleford spoke.

"Good-evenin', ma'am. Could we see Mr. Blackford for just a second?"

"Certainly; won't you come in? He is in the living-room."

They followed her, and again Blackford was surprised. His greeting of Shackleford was almost jovial.

"Well, well! Come in. It took you a long time to return my call, but I'm glad to see you. Excuse me for not getting up; you know how it is when you are comfortable."

"Sure, keep your seat," rumbled Shackleford, and subsided under the dig of his daughter's elbow. He had taken Blackford's words literally.

"I will," said the superintendent gravely, looking from one to the other. Alice had disappeared.

It was the first time Margaret had seen him since his accident. Her eyes filled.

"Guess you wonder how come I'm over here," said Shackleford, his massive head beginning its slow oscillation.

"Yes, but no matter. I'm glad to see you," said Blackford.

Shackleford twisted uncomfortably. "I hearn tell of what happened to you," he said, "and I hearn tell as how you was gettin' 'long. Son, I takes off my hat to you. You is all there."

"Thank you; I do the best I can."

"What I wanted to say was kinda like this. I didn't want you to think I was mixed up in this bisness. I don't aim to fight that-away. You and me ain't agreed on all kind of things. I allus 'lowed I had a right to do what I pleased with what I made with my two hands. Maybe I'm right, maybe I'm wrong. But that was how I felt. Son, I don't admit that I was wrong yet, but I don't stick nobody in the back. That ain't my way of fightin'. I seen it wa'n't yourn neither. I didn't want you should think, son, that I had anything to do with it. I ain't sayin' I love you nor nothin' like that, but I just ain't built that-away."

Blackford recognized the man's standards. He warmed to the old fellow. "I never blamed you for this," he told him.

"But you did for some of them other things," Shackleford said. "Son, I wa'n't no more to blame for them 'n I was for this. My girl will tell you that."

"Truly he wasn't, Mr. Blackford," Margaret said. "I thought so at the time, but I found the truth."

"Who was, then?" questioned Blackford. "Do you know?"

"Yes, I know," answered Shackleford, "but I ain't goin' to tell. I don't put in with no man and then turn him up. That ain't my way neither. Maybe you think it's funny to hear an old hill-billy talk about things he wouldn't do, but that's where I stand."

Shackleford was silent for a moment, and then resumed: "I plumb admires the way you been doin' since you was hurt. Son, then's when you find what kind of stuff a man is." He held up the stump of his right hand. "I been there an' I know how you feel. Only yourn was worse nor mine. It takes stummick to face a thing like you done. Son, I couldn't bear for a man I kin respect to think I'd do a thing like that."

"I never blamed you for this, and as for the other things, if you didn't—and I accept your word that you did not—Lawler did," said Blackford thoughtfully. "Knowing what I do now, it seems more plausible."

"I ain't sayin' it was him or it wasn't him," said the old man. "It wa'n't me, and the rest of it ain't none of my bisness. I told you once before that folks what went around mindin' other folks' bisness generally gits hurt."

"I want to thank you for coming up to-night," Blackford said. "It makes me a whole lot easier. I suppose you know what we are up against down the hill?"

"Yes, I hearn about it. An' I want you to know I ain't had nothin' to do with that neither. 'N fact, me and my girl is shakin' the dust of this here camp off'n our feet in a few days."

"So she told me. I am glad for her sake."

"Yep, I'm doin' it for her. I never thought 'xactly what I was doin' to her till here lately. I been pretty hard on her."

Alice came into the room. She had done so reluctantly, but she could not be so discourteous as not to welcome her husband's guests. She walked in quietly and stood behind Blackford's chair.

"Alice, this is Mr. Shackleford," Blackford introduced. "And Miss Shackleford."

"How do you do, ma'am?" said Shackleford unawed. "Real proud to meet you. I've hearn a lot about you."

"Yes, and I have about you," Alice smiled at him.

"Then we ought to feel like we was already gettin' long to'rd bein' friends."

"Mrs. Blackford and I have met," said Margaret, and Alice inclined her head.

"Won't you set down?" invited Shackleford, waving his handless arm toward his chair.

Alice sat down and the old man resumed his interrupted talk.

"Yes, I never found out how she felt 'bout it till the other day. She allus thought I'd git in trouble an' she never hearn of trouble 't she didn't worry 'bout me if she didn't know where I was at. The day you was hurt was when I found out. Seems like she run all the way over here when she hearn the whistle. She was 'feared you an' me had got together. She was pretty scared, an' she wa'n't scared 'bout you either, though I bin' takin' care of myself quite a spell now."

Alice started. So that had been the explanation of Margaret's fear. And she had condemned her husband unheard as he had said. She looked at Margaret, understanding in her eyes. Shackleford was still speaking.

"We're leavin' next week. Margaret, she's goin' to marry your man Stringfellow," he said, garrulous in the friendly atmosphere. "New one on me. Seems she met him when she was in Birmingham in school. She wouldn't marry him long 's I was in Possum Valley. When I found that out, I quit. I ain't goin' to do nothin' no more but sit in the sun." His eyes twinkled as he added. "I got all the money I need, anyways."

"Father," interrupted Margaret. "You know you don't mean that. Don't you think we had better be going?"

"Guess so," her father replied. "Guess this is good-bye, Mist' Blackford, leastwise for a time till we get settled." Then he went as far as his code of honor would permit. "Watch 'em at the tipple, Mist' Blackford. Well, so long."

"Thank you, I shall. Good-bye, Margaret. If I can help in any way, let me know."

Blackford's eyes followed them as they walked out. Alice turned to him in impulsive regret. "Oh, Warren," she cried. "I thought——"

"I know exactly what you thought," said her husband.

CHAPTER XXXI

STRIKE-BREAKING

The next morning, when Reubens saw the black-smearing figures as they poured out of the cage and stood restlessly about the tippie waiting for their spokesman, his assurance was shaken.

Because she had begged, Reubens had brought Alice with him against his judgment.

"You and he will both be there," she had pleaded. "You never can tell what will happen and I want to go."

Reubens yielded with the idea that perhaps she might restrain the crowd. He had seen the camp's affection. And so, standing on the weighman's platform on the tippie scales, she watched the sullen men.

Reubens climbed to the roof of the scale-house and waited as the men gathered. As Blackford had directed, the hoist engineer lifted them as fast as he could raise and lower the cage. Reubens caught many sidelong glances in his direction. The crowd's mood was ugly. He was not misled by the quietness. Of Blackford he saw nothing.

Reubens at last began to speak. "I guess most of you men know who I am," he shouted, after a preliminary hail to attract their attention. He was astonished at the violence of the response.

"You bet we know!" the men cried venomously, and Reubens caught muttered threats in the undertone of the general shout.

Reubens's spirits rose to meet the hostility of his audience. He waited quietly until the men shouted themselves out. Into a space of silence he struck.

"The Cahaba Company has always treated its men well," he cried, and paused at the general execration. He waited, and silence again fell. "It will continue to do so as long as they merit it. We cannot permit the men to have a part in the management of the mine. The Cahaba Company does not recognize this principle——"

A shrill voice rose from the back of the crowd—piercing in its derision. "What in hell do you know about mining, anyway? You never done any."

Again the men yelled. Reubens recognized that he was to be baited. Nevertheless he persisted. "We do not need to operate this mine——"

"Well, you ain't doin' it for charity," the same voice called.

Again that responsive burst of shouts. The miners were pressing about the scale-house and Reubens saw their anger was being steadily fanned. Was he inciting them? Suddenly he realized that these men cared nothing for him or for the power he represented. His sense of authority fell from him.

Pressed against the scaffolding of the loading track behind her father, Alice caught the uncertainty of his manner. Behind her she saw Mudd significantly coupling a hose to the nozzle of a steam pipe.

It was Mudd's idea, that steam. He had broached it that morning in the office when Blackford told him what he planned. Mudd had protested.

"Let me handle it, boss. You don't know what you're gettin' into. Lawler don't like you a-tall and them men'll feel just like he does. You let me do it."

"No, I'll go down. It's the best way, if I'm ever to control them. I must show them I'm not afraid, and I'm not. They can do nothing to hurt me."

"The hell they can't! And there's Jim, too. You wouldn't have a chance."

Blackford was stubborn. "Let them try it. I'll talk to them. I can handle them."

Mudd glanced at his set face and ceased to object. "All right, but I'll be there and, if anything starts, I'll know what to

do."

So now Mudd coupled the steam pipe, behind which was ninety pounds of pressure, to a thirty-foot hose. As Alice watched him, Mudd was smiling. Mudd smiled when he was most dangerous.

Alice shuddered to think what the scalding steam would do if it swept the close-packed men. For the first time a thrill of fear shook her. Then, beyond her father, she saw her husband.

Borne in Jim Rhodes's arms, Blackford came steadily forward. The crowd opened before them. Without hastening his steps a cadence, Jim picked his way slowly. Under whispered instructions from Blackford, he looked neither to the right nor left, ignoring the ring of hostile white faces that pressed close and yet never quite dared engulf them. Only the negro's nostrils, dilating and contracting as he breathed, hinted of any strain.

Right through the miners Jim bore the helpless superintendent, and the men grew quiet. They waited while Jim mounted the steps to the scale-house roof. Blackford was borne forward where he surveyed them silently. As Jim turned slowly from side to side, so that Blackford could get a view of all the miners, Alice caught a glimpse of his face. It was saturnine, his eyes cold, implacable.

"Well, what is this? A strike?"

Blackford's voice carried to the edges of the gathering. It was chill, even, almost contemptuous.

"Yes!" "You bet!" "No!" with sarcastic laughter, the cries came back.

"What do you want?" Blackford asked.

"We want Lawler. He's the man for us," the crowd roared.

"You can't have him," the superintendent told them without raising his voice. The quietness of his defiance made it the more menacing. That irrepressible voice from the rear was raised again.

"If we can't have him, we'll take you," and the shout was echoed and reëchoed.

Blackford waited for the shouting to die out. Jim Rhodes shifted him to a more comfortable position. The superintendent was tingling to his finger-tips. He was pitting himself against the crowd, with the stake everything he hoped to do—and perhaps his own life.

"We may as well understand each other right here," Blackford said when quiet fell. "If you strike, you know the answer. There's two sides. You will work or you will get out of the company houses in twenty-four hours. If you don't, I'll put you out. You can't get water—the wells will be closed to you. You can't buy anything at the commissary. You'll work or you'll get out of Cahaba. That's one side of it. There's another. You think you want Lawler; you don't. I know it." The men moved uneasily under his words. They were intimidated. His methods were new.

"You can't get away with it," Blackford heard.

"Try me!" he challenged. "You say you want Lawler. You don't know what he has been doing. I'll tell you."

"Yeah, you'll tell us anything!"

"Then I'll prove it." Blackford raised his arm and pointed at Lockwood, singling him out of the crowd and calling him by name. "Lockwood, how much were you paid last month?"

The miner gaped back at him. "I got a hundred and sixty dollars for twenty days' work," he answered, and every one heard him.

Blackford smiled coldly. "I thought so. You should have received about a hundred and seventy-five. Lawler did it." He paused again, and the crowd was silent. Again Blackford stretched out his hand and in it was a window pulley weight. "I took this out of the scales right under me," he said distinctly. "You men know how easy it is. You had no check-weighman; you had to take the figures the company weighman gave you. He and Lawler were partners. Lawler kept two sets of weights; one was for the company for the payroll, the other was for him. He pocketed the difference." Blackford watched them for a moment. "I'm not asking you to take my word for it. Send a committee and I'll show you the two

weight sheets."

The temper of the crowd veered. Blackford's smile was chill. It had been his big moment, and he had won because he had kept back the blow. It had cost the men and the company thousands of dollars, but it had been worth it. Into the amazed silence, he spoke again.

"Do you men want to lose your homes and your jobs for that kind of foreman? Your committee said Mr. Mudd didn't know anything about the mine." Then he made a grim jest at which there were bursts of hoarse laughter. "He knows plenty about scales. He found the job Lawler was putting up." Blackford judged the psychological moment had come. "Do you men want to lose out here for that kind of man?" He was satisfied with the response and met it. "Then go back on the job," he ordered curtly, his voice ringing. "Get back to work. No more of this damned foolishness!"

But the crowd was still unsatisfied. "Where is Lawler?" was the cry. "We want Lawler. Let's go get him. Robber!"

Blackford spoke again, and they heeded him. "I am boss here!" he snapped. "Don't try any funny business! Let Lawler alone; I'll attend to him. He's gone, anyway. Left when I told him what I was going to do."

The men yielded the point, even if there were some who did it reluctantly. They crowded back into the cage, still rumbling, but cowed by Blackford, who sat in Jim Rhodes's arms watching them with impassive eyes.

Weary at the relief from the strain, Blackford told Jim to take him down. At the foot of the steps he met Alice, her eyes shining.

"You did it when Daddy couldn't!" she cried. "You did it from another man's arms. I am proud of you."

"You here?" said Blackford listlessly. "Thank you. I made the most of that opportunity, at least."

And, ignoring the hurt look in her eyes, he motioned to Jim to bear him away.

CHAPTER XXXII

CONQUERING BY ENDURING

Blackford stretched his arms wearily and leaned back in his chair, unmindful of the pain sudden movement brought. Blue Gum Jim, his intent eyes on Blackford's face, detected the shadow that swept across the haggard brow and half-rose. Blackford waved him back.

"It is nothing," he said. "I don't want anything."

Jim resumed his seat where he could catch an angling view of Blackford's face. He was never directly behind or in front of him.

Despite pain from which he was never wholly free, Blackford found the world good that morning. For the first time in months his estimate of himself rose. One of his goals had been reached, he told himself soberly. He had done what men said was impossible; done it under enormous physical handicaps. Blackford did not minimize the difficulties behind him because they were his own; nor did he exaggerate or magnify. Dispassionately he told himself his work had been good.

Blackford had grown so accustomed to his infirmity, he now scarcely thought of it save in moments of impatience when he found himself held to his chair or the slow, careful steps of Jim Rhodes. It had ceased to be any great factor in his thoughts of himself. It was inevitable: he accepted it; and if he wasted time in throwing himself against the irrevocable, only Jim Rhodes knew.

In his dealings with the men, he never referred to it. After that eventful morning when he had spoken to them from Jim's arms, he found his physical condition a help. It brought the men in closer touch with him, gave them a personal sympathy that drove them hard. Blackford had stamped them with the urge of his personality and this had been reinforced by the appeal of his crippled body. They labored and strove, not for the Cahaba Coal and Iron Company, but for Warren Blackford because of their feeling for the man himself.

Blackford never told, never made any charges, but it became generally known how he had been hurt. Mudd did that before Blackford could stop him. A miner honors courage, and the men of Cahaba saw and paid tribute to courage they could understand. They had seen other men maimed; they had seen them rail against fate; they had seen them wither and die—but this man fronted his troubles indomitably and fought without a murmur for what he wanted. He never whimpered; he was never irascible; he was square; and because of these things the miners forgave his hardness, his incessant demands, his ruthless driving.

Blackford they could respect. When the miners saw that the superintendent had set his heart on production, when they understood that it meant something personal to him, they worked with an energy that defied hours. All they asked was cars and these Mudd gave them, all the cars they could load, with empties always ready.

That had been Mudd's contribution to the work, and he had done well. He, too, had been caught by the pathos of the grim figure, chained to a chair, who was carrying on because he wouldn't give up.

There had been others. Stringfellow; all the shift bosses—they labored tirelessly. Things began to move smoothly. Coal came pouring up the shaft, trip after trip, and long trains on the Mineral puffed away from the overflowing tipple.

Blackford had Jim take his chair on the veranda of the commissary in the evenings when the day shift came off and the night side was going down. Then men began shyly to speak to him. They found he responded. Then a group stopped for a moment to chat, to put some problem of the underground workings before him.

Blackford knew mining—knew it as only a practical man who has afterward been technically trained can know it. The men found he grasped their perplexities and could help them. Steadily to the pathos of his lonely figure always in the chair was added the admiration of workmen for the master of his trade. Before he knew it, Blackford was talking with practically the entire shift around him as he advised—first with this one and then with that. Their relation grew to be a personal one; they realized his desire for a certain production figure, and they gave it to him.

To Blackford seated on the veranda of the commissary the tipple sheets for the day were brought each afternoon. His quiet pleasure as this total mounted steadily was sufficient reward for the men.

Blackford had had no more trouble with them after the day he had dominated them from Jim Rhodes's arms. His courage and his steadfast adherence to his objective won their devotion and their loyalty. They were no longer working for a corporation, but for an ideal vicariously—his ideal—none the less potent because it was not their own and only dimly comprehended.

Thus Blackford solved his problem of accomplishment. He was delivering daily the maximum of coal required for the Dolomite works and sometimes moving a surplus. He was acquiring a fuel reserve at Dolomite against accidents and delays at Cahaba. He was relieved of the burden that had lain so long on him.

He had not only solved his own problem, but he had met the test of the executive. He had built up an organization that he believed would function as well without him as with him. Mudd, Stringfellow, and the others would carry on, whether or not he waved his hand at them from the commissary veranda every afternoon. The coal would still come pouring out of the shaft to feed the hungry furnaces and ovens at Dolomite.

Considering this, Blackford stretched his arms this fine autumn day and found life good—surprisingly good for a man tied to a chair and dependent upon the arms of another for his very means of moving.

Blackford felt within himself the calm poise of those who have suffered and endured and overcome. "He conquers who endures," he murmured. "I ... have endured."

It was the first moment of sentiment he had permitted himself, and he weakened to it now because he felt no longer the urge that had carried him resistlessly forward through the many weary months; that had been the center of his existence so long he had forgotten how it was to be without the burden. And, too, Blackford told himself, now he could turn to his own concerns. It was a luxury he had denied himself.

Blackford had decided within himself that he was to die. Not that he wanted to die: he had never wanted so fiercely to live; but there was something that told him he had not many days before him. He was not rebellious: he accepted this as he accepted other unavoidable things: without repining. He had been afraid he might die before he had accomplished the task he had set himself with the mine. He wanted to say to Reubens that he had done the impossible; to look him in the eye without inward cringing and feel that he had justified himself.

Blackford did not put his feelings into words or thoughts. He was not melodramatic; did not feel himself a martyr. But he stretched his arms in the kindly sunshine on the commissary veranda and found life good.

Reubens was waiting for him up the hill at the Residency: to him he would make his speech and then prepare to die. Blackford was convinced that he was going to die: now that he had beaten the time-clock of his life, it did not particularly matter. Filled with a great lassitude, he surrendered almost luxuriously to the pain that racked his body for a moment. It had been so long since he had felt that he could give way.

Reubens had gone back to Pittsburgh soon after that day at the tipple, telling Blackford that he would come back when he was wanted. Now Blackford had sent for him—he made that concession to his vanity. Blackford wanted to turn over Cahaba to him in person. And up the hill Reubens was waiting.

Alice had not gone. She had steadfastly refused to leave, putting aside all mention of it with a quiet finality that baffled Blackford. She would not talk of her reason for remaining, but Blackford, in his morbid thoughts, told himself that he knew the reason and when he had time for thought resented it. He did not want her because he was crippled, and she could not find it in her heart to leave him.

Blackford was ever willing to stake what he had on a hazard he thought worth while. He had dispassionately decided that he would prefer to be dead rather than tie Alice to a helpless cripple. Blackford loved his wife: that she loved him never occurred to him. In his self-condemnation it would have appeared presumptuous to think she could care as he did. He had committed the unpardonable sin against her for which she had told him there was no forgiveness. He had accepted this as final, and in the crucible through which he had gone, his mind had been swept clear of all else.

Blackford sat on the veranda and said good-bye to every familiar view. His eyes were looking their last on the Cahaba he knew and loved, loved with a hungry devotion because here he had worked out his salvation and proved himself a man.

Blackford did not pity himself. He had gambled for stakes that he thought worth while. Now he would lose with a smile,

without reproach, without regret. He had done his best—no one could do more.

He was almost cheerful as he looked about, cheerful as he greeted Stringfellow and John Mudd when they came up from the top-house.

"I may not be here to-morrow, John," he said quietly. "Things are going so smoothly I think I'll take a rest."

"Great stuff!" exclaimed Mudd. "I'll tell the world you need it, too. I never did see no sense in your killin' yourself for the bloomin' mine. Me and Stringfellow will carry on all right."

"I don't need to tell you anything," continued Blackford. "You will be acting superintendent while I am gone. Make what changes are necessary. I'll leave it to you."

They chatted for a time about details of the mine until Blackford motioned for Jim Rhodes and the negro lifted him in his great arms.

"Well, so-long, boys," Blackford said, with a careless wave of his hand. "Luck to you."

"Luck to you, boss," they echoed, and Mudd looked at Stringfellow.

"Didn't he say that kind of funny?"

It was Blackford's good-bye.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GREAT HAZARD

Blackford was almost gay at supper that night. Alice found something foreboding in his cheerfulness. She shivered as she looked furtively at his preternaturally bright eyes and his smile that somehow didn't seem genuine.

She had suffered these last few months. They had left their mark on her. She had matured, learned to be independent of all but herself, to live on her love and be content with unobtrusive service. It had been all that she could do. Her husband had held her at arm's length, gently but unmistakably. She could not get past the impassive barrier of his courtesy.

What was going on behind his dark eyes, she wondered. He hardly seemed human. As he sat now at the table, no one would have known he was a helpless cripple. He had stood the blow gallantly. She honored him for it. Secretly, her father did also, she knew. Blackford had proved that he could manage men. No quality in his subordinates was more highly prized by the ironmaster than this, none more valuable or harder to get. Reubens did not know how to go about making overtures. He had stood a little in awe of Blackford since his own futile attempt to control the men Blackford had mastered. He had said as much to his daughter.

Alice instinctively felt a crisis approaching. Her father's presence warned her. She had greeted him that afternoon in apprehension.

"Daddy, I'm glad you have come. I don't think I could have done without you much longer," she told him. Her head was buried on his breast and his hand stroked her hair.

"Things have been difficult?" he questioned, and she nodded.

"Did he send for you?" she asked.

"Yes; I came as soon as I got his wire. Didn't he tell you?"

"He hasn't said anything. It was a pleasant surprise to see you."

"You've not had many pleasant surprises lately, have you, dear?" And Reubens glanced at her keenly.

Her lips quivered as she shook her head. "I've been so lonesome. I wonder what he wants."

"Something about the mine, I believe. But whatever it is, you still have me. Do you still blame me?"

"No, Daddy. Only myself."

With instinctive delicacy, Reubens did not question her. Even the gentlest touch hurts some wounds and Alice could not have borne it. She was starving for love, starving for understanding and companionship. She blamed no one but herself for the lack of it. Her husband had told her that he loved her, but she had been selfishly occupied with her own hurt. She did not wonder he had never trusted her again. Looking back on that night, Alice felt that it had been another person speaking. The days in Pittsburgh seemed half a lifetime away. If she could only call them back, she would know better now! Only love counted; not how it began so long as it was love! Thrown away, love is seldom offered again. She recognized that now.

Alice's quiet face gave no hint of her thoughts as she ate and watched her husband unobtrusively. How she longed to comfort him, to pillow his head on her shoulder and croon to him and soothe him and mother him! She looked at his hands, long, slender, sensitive hands, and marveled that they should ever have caressed her. Blackford never touched her now. She came out of her musing with a start to find her father speaking to her husband.

"I am here as you requested."

Blackford inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Thank you, sir. Here is your mine. I did what they said could not be done, and I did it so that it will continue being done."

"So you have. I take it that that is what you called me down to say," answered the ironmaster. "Do you think it justified?"

"Yes, I think you owe me that much," Blackford said, with the suggestion of a gesture toward his helpless body. "Of course, I could have written you, but I did not wish that. I don't know whether you'll understand, but I wanted the satisfaction of telling you myself that it had been done. And then Alice wanted to see you and I knew you wished to see her."

So he had been thinking of her, Alice told herself, a little startled at his insight. She had wanted her father.

Reubens found Blackford's answer sufficient. Indeed, he had been glad of the excuse of returning to his daughter and Cahaba.

"It has been good work," he assented. "The company congratulates you. Now what?"

"Exactly; that is what I wish to speak to you about."

Blackford's tone was light. There was a veiled mocking note in it.

"You remember what you wrote him, Daddy," Alice said. "If he did this, he was to have substantial promotion, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and now we will consider what he wants."

Blackford, who had been smoking, rubbed the ashes from his cigar. "That's very kind of you," he answered. "But I believe there are other things to consider first." He waited so long the others thought he was not going on. Then he resumed. "Alice and I seem to have reached an impossible situation," he said quietly, drawing figures on the tablecloth. "Since you know the rest, I see no reason for concealing that from you. We might as well talk the thing out and reach an understanding."

"Quite true; it is always better to understand each other," assented Reubens mechanically. He looked questioningly at his daughter, but she shook her head as bewildered as he.

Blackford spoke again. "I don't know whether you will understand just what it is or why it is. I don't know that it is necessary that you should. Suppose you take things as they are. The fundamental stumbling-block with us is in the fact that I am a cripple. I am helpless." He said it without bitterness, but Alice knew what the words cost him. "Alice conceives it to be her duty to remain with me because I am in that condition. She has not told me, but, knowing her as I do, I am sure of her feelings. You will remember that you suggested a divorce for us in the first anger over ... over ... things as they were. At the time, I was opposed to it, though naturally I could not say so. Now I think it would be the best solution for all involved."

"We have gone over that, Warren," Alice said, her voice sharp with pain; and Reubens echoed:

"But what would you do?"

"That would not interest you. It would not be your concern."

"Warren, how you——You know that we could not do that!" Alice protested. "We have been a part of each other's lives, no matter how we feel now. We could not leave you crippled ... Not knowing where you were going ... or what you were going to do ..."

Blackford glanced at her briefly. "Exactly," he said dryly. "I knew you would feel so, but would you if I were not crippled?" Alice hesitated, and Blackford smiled. "Of course you wouldn't! You told me so just before the——the accident." He sat up impatiently. "Here is our situation. Alice and I both think it would be best to end things, but she will not as long as I am crippled and I shan't allow her to remain with me feeling as she does. Don't you think that rather puts it up to me?"

He spoke to Reubens, but meant his words for his wife. He had been speaking to her, though apparently addressing her father. No one answered, and he replied to his own question.

"It seemed to me that it did, and I have taken such steps as I thought necessary. It was more to apprise you of this that I asked you to come here. I should not have made the request lightly, knowing your feelings, had I not believed circumstances justified. It is my intention——"

Alice answered a knock at the door, and Dr. Rawls stepped into the room. She greeted him apprehensively. He spoke to Reubens and nodded quietly to Blackford, who said:

"Sit down, Doctor. I have one or two questions I wish to ask you in the presence of my wife and her father. Please remember that I am not a child and that absolute frankness will best serve me. I have your promise to be frank?"

"You leave me no choice," said the doctor gravely.

"I am discussing my own case, of course. You have been treating me. You have obtained all the results possible from bloodless surgery, have you not?"

"We no longer get any reaction from external treatment or muscular exercise. I am sorry to say that I anticipate none further."

"If I understand you, then, I shall never be better than I am now unless more drastic steps are taken to overcome the condition."

"In my opinion, no."

"And what other steps are possible?"

"There is but one other—an operation."

"You think that would remedy the trouble?"

"You ask me a hard question," answered the doctor cautiously. "Your condition as well as I can diagnose it is this: I do not believe there is any actual fracture of the vertebræ. While your paralysis is complete, there has been no functional disturbance. Two things may have happened. A vertebra may have been displaced without actual fracture and is now pressing on the nerves governing your movements or the spinal cord may have been permanently injured."

"You think an operation would relieve this?"

"I prefer to put it this way: If you are to overcome the paralysis, there must be relief of the pressure. An operation is the only method of doing this. You will never grow better without it."

Blackford hesitated perceptibly before he put the next question. On the answer depended his future. "And the chances for success?"

It was the doctor's turn to hesitate. He looked at Alice and her father waiting his answer. Then his eyes swung back to Blackford.

"It is a very delicate operation," he said slowly. "It is impossible to give a hard-and-fast opinion. Too many factors must be considered—your own condition, the condition of the heart. Would it stand up under prolonged anæsthesia? What should we find after we reached the seat of the paralysis? If it is merely pressure, removing it should be simple. If the spinal cord is permanently injured, that would complicate it."

"Should I have as good as an even chance?"

Rawls was silent. It was a trying interview. Rawls did not believe that Blackford would survive, and had so warned the superintendent when the operation was first proposed to him. Rawls had offered to bring a specialist from Birmingham, from New York, Pittsburgh, anywhere, but Blackford had rejected them.

"One can only do one's best," the doctor answered at last. "Frankly, I should not care to make any prediction of success. I do not wish to raise false hopes, nor would I give the impression of undue danger. I think we had best leave it that way."

Alice drew a long, sobbing breath. Reubens spoke: "You would perform the operation?"

"If Mr. Blackford insists."

His chin sunk on his chest, Blackford stared at the table in front of him. Behind him in the dusk, Jim Rhodes's lips moved, though he understood only dimly. Blackford raised his head finally and leaned forward, the lights gleaming on

the silver of that thatched hair that had been black only a few months before. His arm moved up with a gesture of decision.

"I'll shoot the works," he announced briefly. "Let's go in the morning."

Alice flung herself across the table, one arm outstretched. "Not for me! No, Warren! I shan't have it!" she pleaded, but Blackford looked over her head to the doctor and nodded.

"I'll be there in the morning, then. I understand. A good night's sleep and no breakfast."

Reubens saw it all, saw the tragedy of the misunderstanding, and because he loved his daughter, he interfered for her happiness. He led Alice to the door as the doctor went out the front.

"Be brave," he whispered. "Perhaps I can help. I will talk with him."

Alice left silently, and Reubens came back to the table to sit across from Blackford, who was looking after Alice. The ironmaster deliberately bit off the end of a cigar as he surveyed his son-in-law.

"You and I have not been exactly friendly," he observed. "Can you put that aside for the moment?"

Blackford turned dark eyes on him. "Certainly."

"Have you considered what this operation will mean to your wife?"

"I am doing it for her."

"Do you think it necessary? You heard what she said."

Blackford shook his head decisively. "She is overly sympathetic," he asserted. "It is best."

"Nothing I could say for her would move you, then?"

Again Blackford negated. "I don't wish to be ungracious, but I honestly think it is best. I must be one thing or the other."

Reubens admired the strength of the man, but he found it difficult to voice what he wished to say.

"I'd like to know to-night that you don't harbor bitterness toward her or myself. You never know what will happen. I'll admit that I was mistaken in you." He swallowed painfully. "I've watched you closer than you realize. I know what you have done. It has been good work. I've never seen better."

Blackford raised surprised brows. He had not expected this, but it was grateful.

"Thank you. I have tried to justify myself to you. If I have succeeded, it is——"

"You have succeeded," Reubens interrupted.

"Then I'm glad," said Blackford simply.

The two were silent. Reubens turned his cigar nervously and finally threw it away. He rose abruptly.

"That's what I wanted to say. I'd be glad if you would shake hands before we go. When you get well, there will be Dolomite for you. My word is good and I want you to have it. You deserve it."

Blackford laid his hand in Reubens's outstretched palm. "Suppose we leave that until I return," he said evenly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DOWN—AND BACK

Blackford woke early the next morning. Lying unstirring he wondered that the thought that this might be his last morning moved him so little. It did not frighten him, only sobered him, and filled him with regret that he had not done more with his life.

Jim Rhodes shaved him and bathed him and dressed him carefully. He was almost debonair as he sat down to breakfast.

"I can't eat anything, of course," he told Alice and her father lightly. "But I couldn't bear not to come down. I want to remember you and this room. It's been the happiest one in the house."

Alice glanced at her father, pain in her eyes. Blackford placidly watched them eat. Peace enveloped him. The struggle lay behind him: the decision was no longer his. With a slight flush in his cheeks, he touched each article of silver the cook set before him. When they had finished, he looked at his watch.

"It is almost time to go. I wonder if you'll indulge me in a whim. Jim, take me through the house, won't you?"

The great negro picked him up and went out. Alice looked at her father, her throat choked.

"You are going to the hospital?" Reubens asked.

"Of course; aren't you?"

"If you do."

Alice and her father were waiting when Jim came out with Blackford. As they passed out the gate, Blackford looked back, and it seemed to Alice that he waved his hand at the flowers and the yard. She pressed her father's arm.

"Oh, Daddy," she said, "he is telling everything good-bye."

Reubens soothed her as best he could and they followed Jim Rhodes and Blackford across the valley to the infirmary, where they were received by Dr. Rawls himself. It was only a tiny little hospital, but, small as it was, every modern appliance was there. Rawls was brisk, all sentiment and hesitation gone. He took Blackford in charge at once.

"You are to be in Room Fourteen. The operation is set for ten o'clock. You are to undress and have a hypodermic immediately. The nurse will give it to you. The operating-room stretcher will come for you at five minutes of ten. I do not know how long you will be on the table, but do not worry."

Blackford laid a hand on his arm. "Doctor, I don't want to go into the operating-room on the stretcher," he begged. "Let Jim here carry me. It won't make any difference, will it?"

Rawls glanced at him keenly, noted his flushed cheeks, and understood the reasons behind his plea. Blackford did not want to go lying down. Instantly the doctor decided to permit it. His patient would need all the encouragement he could give.

"Very well; but get undressed immediately and the nurse will have your hypo ready. It is to make you receptive for the anæsthetic for the operation."

Jim bore him away, and he spoke over his shoulder to Alice. "I'll see you again before I go in."

Alice was white. The odor of ether suffocated her. She felt appalled, helpless! She laid a hand on the doctor's arm.

"Doctor! Save him!" she beseeched. "I want ... I must have—you don't know——"

Rawls patted her hand. "You must not be wrought up," he soothed. "I'll do the best in my power. We always do that."

"But, Doctor! You *must* save him!" she pleaded, and added the request all surgeons dread. "Let me be in the operating-room with him."

Rawls was decisive. "I am sorry. It is impossible."

"Why?"

"For many reasons. You might break down. No surgeon can be interrupted in a delicate operation. Then, too, the feeling that you were watching me would make my hand less steady. Believe me, it is best for you to wait outside."

Alice controlled her emotion. "But if—if—anything should happen?" she whispered.

"You could do nothing. If such a contingency should arise, he—he would not know you, and you would hamper us in our fight to save him. It is much better that you wait outside."

Dumbly she acquiesced, her suffering showing in her eyes, haggard with sleeplessness. Over her head Rawls signaled her father to calm her. Then he spoke.

"I must prepare for the operation now. Do not unsettle your husband more than you can help. Remember, he must do his part."

The surgeon hurried away, and Alice turned to her father. She put her head on his shoulder and stood trembling. "Oh, Daddy, I am so glad you are here!" she said.

To Alice the next few minutes passed in a daze. Dimly she heard her father say that the time had come and followed him down the corridor in the wake of Jim Rhodes, who bore Blackford in his arms.

Alice found herself in the operating-room with its dazzling table and sinister straps. The light beat down mercilessly from the glass skylight. Everything was so white! It hurt her eyes.

Tenderly Jim Rhodes arranged his burden on the table. Dr. Rawls came in accompanied by another surgeon. They donned the long white gowns the nurses held and then washed their hands. They began to draw on rubber gloves. A sterilizer spouted steam from an anteroom where a swift-footed, silent nurse tended it.

The moment of parting was at hand. Alice almost gave way. She patted Blackford's hand where it lay on the table. Her voice shaking, she appealed to her husband in the only way she knew.

"Come back!" she whispered. "There is still so much for you to do."

Blackford was kindly, but there was no softening of his attitude. Rather he grew sterner. "If I can come back whole," he said. "If I can't——" He snapped his fingers to indicate his indifference.

"Here! This won't do, really it won't, Mrs. Blackford! You are only disturbing him needlessly——" Dr. Rawls began when she interrupted.

"Oh, but, Doctor, you don't know——"

"I know this—that you are injuring my patient," snapped the surgeon. Alice lifted her head and moved toward him, but he backed away. "Don't touch me," he ordered sharply. "I am ready to operate."

The anæsthesian took his seat on a little stool at the head of the operating-table and adjusted a mask over Blackford's face. He punctured a can of ether and the pungence permeated the room. Before he could drop any on the cone, Blackford pushed it aside and raised up for a moment.

"Just a minute, Doctor," he begged, and beckoned Jim Rhodes from his place near the door. "You are to have your old job back, Jim," he said. "Just speak to Mr. Mudd about it, and you'll find something else I left for you with him."

"Mist' Blackford, please, suh, don' talk that-away. I sho is gwine have my job with you, ain't I?"

Blackford sank back with a weary smile and relaxed. "Shoot," he said briefly to the white-clad doctor. The ether, dripping on the cone, began to steal his senses.

Suddenly Alice spoke clearly: "Warren, whatever happens, I want these words to be the last you hear from me. I can say them now. Remember, no matter what happens, I love you."

The ether was already dulling Blackford's mind, and he made no sign that he heard. In response to an impatient frown from Rawls, Reubens led Alice out, but not before she had seen the nurse fumbling with the straps that were to bind Blackford to the table.

That was the thought she carried with her from the gleaming room. She saw Blackford's shrouded figure with the white-gowned doctors bending over it while a nurse strapped her husband's hands to his side. Through the hours of waiting she resented those straps: she thought of them as she crouched at the door to the operating-room.

Reubens attempted to coax her away, but she refused wordlessly. Jim Rhodes did not make the same mistake. He, too, was there, waiting dumbly for what the closed door would give up. He stood immobile until Alice spoke to him.

"You here, Jim?" she said.

"Yessum. Heah I is an' heah I'se gwine stay."

"Mr. Blackford is fond of you, Jim. I know he is."

"Yessum, me an' him got 'long pow'ful well. I ain't never had no white folks treat me better."

"He will still need you a long time while he is getting well. We are thinking of taking him away. Will you go with us?"

"Yessum, I'll go anywheres Mist' Warren goes. All these here folks at Cahaba gwine be pow'ful sorro'ful 'bout him leavin'. He been the best boss us ever had."

"What do you mean by the best boss, Jim?" Alice asked, striving to divert her mind from the thought of what was going on behind the door.

The negro was puzzled. "I don' zackly know how to say, ma'am, but he—he—kind of looked after ev'body."

Alice recognized the description with a quick throb of reproach. Her husband had looked after her, too. "That was like him," she observed.

"Yessum, didn' make no diffrunce if he wa'n't feelin' good, he allus had time t' lis'en an' he'p out."

"You helped him a lot, Jim."

"I done my bes' fo' him just like I knowed he'd do his bes' fr me. I sho aims to keep on doin' it f'r 'im long 's he'll let me."

Alice envied loyalty such as this. It made things so simple. If she had had that ...

She was beginning to grow impatient ... She did not feel that she could bear it if they did not come soon ... It was so quiet ... She felt suffocated ...

Blackford felt himself sinking. "Breathe deeply through your nose," he heard the doctor's voice at his ear and mechanically obeyed. A long deep breath and he felt himself sinking ... sinking ... It was not unpleasant ... He was so light ... He just floated down like a feather ... down ... down ... Would he get to the bottom of the shaft?... From far away he heard a voice say: "I love you." ... Was it Alice?... He struggled to answer ... He could not ... He was still sinking ... He remembered suddenly and breathed through his nose ... He wished he could answer Alice ... He ... So light ... Sinking ...

Blackford struggled up out of an infinite gulf. His first sensation was thirst ... His mouth was dry ... He had been fighting a long time ... His head hurt ... Why?... He fought on like a swimmer striving to rise ... He must get a drink ... His lips tried to form the word "water," but his tongue was thick and he could not ... Then he became conscious of pain ... His head hurt ... He felt numb ... He wanted to groan and could not ... Knew he could not because he could not hear himself ...

Where was he? His eyelids were heavy. He tried to open them ... Couldn't, they were so heavy and he was so tired ... He was conscious some one was in the room ... He heard a voice: "He is coming out now." ... Then he began to remember ... So that was why he hurt ... It didn't matter much ... All that mattered was that he was thirsty and tired, so tired ... He wanted water ...

Abruptly, like turning on an electric light, full consciousness returned, and with it pain. Blackford saw dimly the figures about him. Alice was there and her father; Dr. Rawls and a nurse. He was absurdly weak. Just a little while before he had been strong—now he could scarcely open his lips. A nurse slipped a piece of ice into his mouth and it was grateful to his parched tongue.

Rawls bent over him with a quiet word. "Easy now, and don't try to move."

Blackford found his voice. "I don't want to move ... ever," he said fretfully. "How did it come out?"

"I can't tell yet," the surgeon soothed.

"When?"

"In a couple of days."

"Don't matter much, anyway," Blackford said faintly. "Shan't move."

The recurring wave of ether gripped him and the doctor turned to the others. "Do not worry," he reassured. "It will be this afternoon before he is fully conscious."

"Doctor, can't you tell?" Alice asked.

"It is impossible so soon."

The surgeon banished them all but the nurse with the promise to call them as soon as Blackford waked again.

CHAPTER XXXV

UNDERSTANDING

To Blackford had come his moment of atonement, of expiation and repentance. He had recognized it and the justice of it even as he had shrunk from the pain.

Spent and shaken by the conflict, he lay now on the narrow hospital cot and told himself that Alice should not know. Not even by an unuttered appeal would he seek a new sacrifice of her to his need.

He loved her. Sadly Blackford acknowledged it. He knew what love was now; he had not recognized it until too late.

Alice's name had rung through his thoughts in the hours he had waited for the doctor's verdict that was to open the world to him or bind him forever to a chair. But the words that had liberated his body had meant the end of hope for his heart. It was just. She had sacrificed for him—uncomplainingly, generously, completely; could he do less? Proudly Blackford told himself that he could not. Freedom he could give her, freedom to live her own life unhampered by any memory of a wound left behind that would not heal. That gift would she take from him.

Blackford battled with himself. He believed he had but to cry out to Alice and she would remain with him. Not because she loved him or ever could love him, but because the greatness of her nature would not permit a deaf ear to one who had been to her what he had—no matter what he was now. Blackford believed that he could keep his wife, but to him had come love and he would not. Would she be happy? In his new humility of spirit, Blackford did not believe it, and her happiness was all he desired now. He loved her, and from his nature had been swept the selfishness and egotism that had sent him headlong to his goal, careless of consequences to others. Love meant service to him now.

He was no longer bitter. The sweetness of nature of the boy who had roamed these same red hills years ago had come back, tempered by regret and an aching desire to repair what he had done. He had seen himself through a glass darkly.

He was waiting now to tell her what Dr. Rawls had told him, to bid her go gladly as she desired, without bitterness, without pain, without anger. He was even choosing the words he would say to her. She would protest, but in her heart she would know it was best and that he thought only of her.

So he made his renunciation and lay quietly, so quietly that Alice thought him asleep when she tiptoed in. He did not open his eyes. Quietly he lay and quietly she gazed down on him, then turned to a window.

The pathos of the still figure behind her was in her thoughts as she watched the hurrying forms about the mine. Down there they were working for him. Shyly they had told him so, those of them who had been admitted to his room in uncomfortable groups, awed by his pallor and weakness. The doctor had protested, but Blackford had insisted when they asked for him. They had seen him and taken his messages back to the tipple to spread to the remotest room far underground.

Alice had been proud of these visits. The devotion of the men to her husband was sweet to her. In honoring him, she felt they were honoring her. She had had a new conception of her husband's strength, even when helpless, swathed in bandages and scarce able to speak above a whisper.

He would not accept her as a comforter—that had hurt her worst. In her presence he would not give way to his pain. There had been pain that twisted the gray face and turned the thin lips purple, but he had borne it soundlessly.

That was over now, and she breathed a prayer of thankfulness for him. He had endured so much and it had been so needless ... all her fault. Weary tears brimmed over on her cheeks.

On the bed, her husband opened his eyes to fill them with the sight of her. A tiny pulse began to beat in his neck and his fingers trembled as he picked at the cover. He wanted her. Conscious at length of his gaze, Alice turned grave eyes toward him.

"Awake? I thought you were sleeping. Did I disturb you?"

"Oh, no. You could not do that."

"How do you feel?"

"Better than in days. And you?"

"I am all right ... when you are."

"You look tired. I'm afraid this has been hard on you. I'm sorry; you need not have worried. I didn't."

"I could do nothing." Regretfully. "Dr. Rawls grew quite cross when I tried." She stood looking down on him, her eyes sober. "The doctor says you are ever so much better."

Blackford moved his head indifferently. Being better did not interest him now. It only brought nearer the inevitable moment of parting. He wished he could sit up; he would not feel so futile then.

"Yes; he told me last night he had been successful in removing the pressure. He said I've only to regain my strength to be well again. I can move my feet. I tried it this morning. He said I shall be as good as ever."

"Oh, I am so glad for you!"

Blackford sighed. "I ought to be glad and I shall be. I don't know ..."

She recognized his despondence in quick alarm. The doctor had warned her that now her work must commence.

"I have done all I can for him," Dr. Rawls had said. "He must do the rest. I don't understand his attitude. Something is troubling him."

She spoke in simulated brightness. "You must not feel that way. Dr. Rawls said we might take you home in another week."

"Home?" Wistfully. "You mean the Residency?"

"Of course. That is home, isn't it?"

"Do you feel it is?"

"It is home to me," she said simply. "I have tried to make it so for you."

Blackford looked back. "Do you remember ... that day in your father's office? You said ... you would try to make a home for me."

"Yes, I have tried."

"Would it mean anything to you to know that you have succeeded?"

Alice was baffled by his voice, filled with detached regretfulness. He lay so quietly, not fretting, yet there was something of impatience about his figure. Her throat filled and she spoke almost in a whisper. "It would mean much to me. I am glad."

For an instant, Blackford lifted the curtain. "You made it home for me, more home than any place I have ever known, I think ... When I was a youngster I used to plan for the time when I should have a home of my own. I always had to live in some one else's home. You've always had one. You've no idea how you long for a place of your own."

Alice glimpsed more than the words revealed. "You will love it now," she said softly, bending over him. "You remember the ferns Daddy and I brought from the river? Every one of them lived and the roses and the laurel and the rhododendron. You'll scarcely know it when you get back."

"When I get back," Blackford repeated musingly. "Does one ever get back to the yesterdays, I wonder?"

"Perhaps not to the yesterdays," she soothed, "but there are always the to-morrows."

"For some," commented her husband, and fell silent, his eyes closed.

"Does the light annoy you?" asked Alice, and without waiting for an answer lowered the shades. Then she attempted a

cheerfulness she did not feel.

"You'll grow stronger rapidly at the Residency and, as soon as you are able to travel, we are going away."

Blackford opened his eyes suddenly. "Did you say 'we'?"

"Certainly." Wondering.

"Meaning me?"

"Why, of course."

Blackford spoke very gently. His hour was at hand. "You need not have said 'we.'"

"But I meant 'we.' All three of us—you and Daddy and me."

Blackford shook his head, though the vision conjured by her words dazzled him. Traveling! With her! "Ah, dear, but you forget. I am whole now."

"Whole?"

"Surely, don't you remember? You would not leave me when I was but half a man because you did not think—because you were too compassionate ... But I am whole now, so you need not feel ... bound."

Alice was silent, but her feelings were different: she was no longer hopeless. She no longer doubted his love for her. The days in the hospital had shown her that. And she loved him. The rest was non-essential. She must make him understand.

She sat down in a low chair that brought her face on a level with his. Blackford gazed at her and refused to read the message in her eyes. It was part of his pledge to himself. "You are ... wonderful," he whispered. "You never think of yourself—always of some one less worthy. Remember what you said. We can't have back our yesterdays, but there are the to-morrows. That is what I am giving you—your to-morrows."

Alice covered one of his hands with her own. "But you are not," she said. "There are none without——"

"I am trying to undo what I have done," he interrupted.

"But there is nothing to undo."

"Oh, yes, there is. Remember Pittsburgh."

"That is all past, dear. I've forgotten it. Do you remember what happened just before you went under ether?"

"I know what you mean. You said, 'I love you.' I've treasured that. I know just why you did it. You thought I needed encouragement; you thought that would help me and you didn't think of yourself—then or ever. Dear, I'm stronger now and I don't want such a sacrifice."

Alice bent over him. "Look at me, Warren. It is not a sacrifice, dear." She crimsoned under his intent gaze and then made her proffer superbly—her voice clear.

"I am here. I am yours if you want me, yours wholly, mind and soul and body. Let's be honest, dear. Don't you want me that way?"

"Are you sure? You are not doing this because you think you owe me something?"

"I have told you," she said steadfastly.

"Please sit down," her husband begged, his voice shaking in spite of his effort for mastery.

Magically his bruised spirit healed. He could be blind no longer. He looked at her and the mask was off his face.

"You asked for honesty," he said humbly, his voice cadenced low. "You must believe me as I believe you. I love you. I have always loved you. I'll love you forever." He smiled, smiled as she had never seen him smile before. "I can't come

to you, dear one; won't you come to me?"

And Alice came, with a tired sob and a gesture of utter surrender.

THE END

[The end of *Bed Rock* by Jack Bethea]