

THE GOLDEN
FOUNDLING

Sueclai Murray

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By the Same Author.

QUEER PARTNERS

JOHN FRENHAM, K.C.

HUMAN CLAY

SANDS OF FORTUNE

WHISPERING LODGE

THE BROKEN MARRIAGE

DOUBLE LIVES

THE GOLDEN FOUNDLING

BY
SINCLAIR MURRAY

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF CANADA
TORONTO

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CHAPTER I

DISCOVERY

THE girl on the leading horse tightened her bridle, leaned a little forward in the saddle, and stared breathlessly over the western slope of a great rift in the Rockies.

“Good, isn’t it, Dolph?” she said to the young man close behind.

It was very good—so good that the past three weeks’ trail-riding through the mountains seemed to have led up to this swimming revelation of valleys, torrents, cascades and high lonely peaks that shouldered out of an abyss of solitude. But, for all of their beauty, Jennifer Martin had curious feelings about these mountains. She found them rather oppressive.

The young man pulled up. To his right, the naked rocks climbed precipitously: to his left the world fell away into a yawning ravine with a ribbon of white water making music far below.

“About another week before we hit the Fraser, eh?”

“Are you sorry?”

He was not sure. Sorry for some reasons, but not for others. There was Jennifer herself, to whom, by this time, he was expected to be engaged. During these past weeks he appeared to have been making discoveries—both about her and himself—and the engagement hung fire. He had thought that this wilderness journey would uncover something in them both. It had—but something unlooked for. Perhaps he was more puzzled than sorry.

“Well,” he said diplomatically, “it has been wonderful—like nothing else on earth. A far cry from Belgrave Square.”

She had a vision of Belgrave Square with its huge houses, immaculate front steps, shining windows, its air of massive and unalterable formality. Sometimes she felt a little like Belgrave Square herself, because she was apt to give the impression of coldness and reserve when she did not mean to. And ever since they entered the mountains she had been conscious of that other warmer self within herself—the one that nobody saw or understood.

“Dolph,” she asked curiously, “does all this suggest anything—uncover anything in you?”

He gave her a straight look. Level grey eyes, she had, and light brown hair, small, perfectly shaped mouth, small straight nose. Patrician! It was written in the clean modelling of head, the straight set of slim shoulders. One saw the type a

thousand times a day in Mayfair. Not beautiful—but very arresting—with attributes that would endure after mere beauty had faded.

“Do you speak from experience?” he queried.

“Perhaps—a little. Mountains make me feel small—I suppose that’s natural—and as though my affairs and ambitions were not worth considering in the general scheme of things.”

“I fancy we all get a touch of that. Anything else?”

“I’ve got no further—yet.”

“They don’t make you hungry?”

“I have a shocking appetite,” she laughed.

“I don’t mean that, but hungry for something you know not what—hungry to live as you never lived before—more fully—hungry to feel and give and receive at a tremendous rate. That’s what I mean.”

He put this in an odd tone, a little rough and jerky. It conveyed intensity as well as restraint, and he was obviously very much in earnest.

“That sounds rather primitive.” She was sorry the minute she said it.

“Well, it’s honest, anyway. Are you being quite honest too—don’t you get any of it?”

She shook her head, gave the bridle a twitch, and moved on. Another little rift between them. She hated these rifts, and so often they seemed to be of her making. Was it always that way with lovers?

Their affair had been going on for three months, beginning at a dance given by Mrs. Martin, Jennifer’s mother, when Dolph in his explosive way said that she was the girl for him. Jennifer, who had loved him secretly for a year past, took it in her own cool, sedate fashion, so that presently Dolph began to feel that the thing was incomplete. There were no extremes in her, and apparently no passions. She was too sophisticated to be afraid of love, but nature had not given her the ability to express what she really felt. It would have sounded forced and unnatural. And perhaps any sort of abandon was—well—a shade common.

Young Hudson had made this discovery but gradually. But now another Jennifer—the holdback one—seemed to have displaced the first girl to whom he had emptied his heart. He still admired this successor enormously—liked her good looks, her good form, her unconscious air of breeding. Yet he missed something. She was too bloodless.

This transition had already commenced when John Martin, Jennifer’s father, took it into his head to retire from business. He celebrated the event by carrying off his wife and two daughters to trail ride in the Rockies, with an invitation to Dolph, just

down from Cambridge. Dolph, independent as to income, and about to enter his father's shipping business later on, jumped at the chance. That was a little more than a month ago.

All rather wonderful, this journey, and far removed from anything any of them had known before. The effects were variable. Martin and his wife were seeing more of each other than in a long time past. Julianna, three years older than Jennifer, was absorbing the setting for a novel—her first. Jennifer struggled against a sort of austerity that these mountains seemed to impose on her. Dolph, responding in a very different fashion, was stimulated. This magnificence gave him a sort of free rapture, a consciousness of passion. It made him want to tilt the cup of life and drain it in one glorious draught.

The trail had widened, so that now they were able to ride abreast.

"Where do we camp to-night, Dolph?"

He pointed ahead. Three miles away, at the edge of a hanging valley, there was a glint of water near a clearing in the dark carpet of timber. One made out a few tiny buildings, like the miniature villages that children arrange along their pygmy railways. A thread of smoke climbed into the windless air. This human unit looked utterly remote from the rest of the world, plunged in stupendous isolation and fenced off by the jagged rampart of mountains. They seemed to contemplate the camp with a sort of titanic amusement.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"Some mining prospect—fellow looking for a fortune."

"A brave man," she said spontaneously.

"Perhaps—yes—I suppose so. You wouldn't like a bit of that life, I mean a few months, and not just riding past with a wave of the hand?"

"N-no, I don't think so."

"Not under any circumstances?" He put this with a rather curious look.

"You mean you and me?"

"Assume that I do."

"You'd be bored with it and with me in a week, Dolph. Too much of one single thing—and not another scrap."

"You don't feel that we could keep each other going?"

"I feel that we're such a part of the outside world, both of us, that we'd very soon miss it. Does that sound *mondaine* and blasé. You'd make dreadful discoveries about me in no time. You wanted me to be honest just now—so there you are."

He perceived that in her was no flame. Would it be like that if they married, with

none of the sudden burning variations of mood that, though they hurt, made life worth living nevertheless?

He was pondering over this when a clatter of hoofs sounded behind, and Julianna rode up.

“Well, you two, isn’t this marvellous! Jim says we stop here for lunch, and do look at that darling camp. It must be the Stevens’ place.”

Jennifer slid to earth. “Who is Stevens?”

“The mining man who owns it: Jim just told me. Wouldn’t you love to stay there for awhile?”

“I would,” grinned Dolph, “but Jen wouldn’t.”

“Why not, Jen?”

“Too cut off.”

“It’s just what I’d like. I’d wash out my metropolitan mind, and start all over again. Life would have a new taste.”

She said this with a wistful look, and Dolph felt distinctly sympathetic. Julianna’s face was square and freckled, her nose indeterminate, her chin rather mannish. It was the eyes that redeemed her—very candid—very full of understanding and judgment.

It was curious about Julianna. While still a child, she seemed to have realized that Jennifer was the one who would always attract first attention, but this did not upset her in the least, and the result was worth noting. Jennifer acquired a collection of would-be lovers, while Julianna built up a circle of friends who adored her and swore by her. There was no envy in her nature, no feminine rivalry, nothing predatory or acquisitive. She had a clear white spirit. It shone through her eyes, expressing itself in a thousand delicate and charming ways.

It was therefore natural that for her friends she should become the depository of all their troubles, hopes, disappointments and love affairs. These were poured out to her in an endless flood. “Tell Julianna, and find out what she thinks”—that was the thing. But the bringers of troubles never stopped to ask themselves whether this was an imposition, and whether, perhaps, she had troubles of her own.

With the rest came Jennifer, the sister whom she understood to the last degree. Jennifer leaned on that comprehension, because Julianna knew as did no other how deeply and secretly she loved, and that her reticence, when it came to any avowal, was impossible to be overcome. So there were no sensations of envy between these two. But now she recognized symptoms of discord between the lovers. Jennifer looked actually bored with the man she loved. How could that be?

More hoofbeats on the trail, and the girls’ parents came in sight; John Martin

with his broad, good-humoured face burned scarlet, his wife very much what Jennifer would be in some twenty-five years. She had the same distinction of face and figure. With them four guides, of whom the chief, Glacier Jim, was a lithe, lean man who rode as though there were not a bone in his active body.

Mrs. Martin pulled up with a sigh of satisfaction, and shook one foot free of the stirrup.

“Bob, give me a cigarette. Hullo, children, are you famished too? I think this is the best day of all: and, Bob, your nose is a flame of fire.”

She sat there, smiling at them, very happy because in middle life she had acquired a totally new set of sensations. It ought now to be possible to enjoy the rest of her allotted span a good deal more than had seemed possible a month ago. There was just one small fly in the ointment. It had been her idea that Dolph should be invited on this excursion, but the result, so far, fell short of expectations. A touch of romance for lovers in the mountains—that was what she anticipated. But these two youngsters were taking each other in the coolest manner imaginable. She regarded them now with an observant eye till hunger asserted itself in no unmistakable fashion.

“Jim, I’m starving.”

“It’ll be ready right soon, ma’am.”

“Well, hurry, if you don’t want me to die on your hands.”

The guide, busy over a swiftly kindled fire, gave one of his dry chuckles. He had been steering trail-riders through the mountains for years, but liked this party best of them all. Presently there spread the smell of coffee and the sizzling of brook trout in a pan of bacon. These delectable odours encompassed the others, transforming them into ravenous mammals whose entire future centred in that pan.

Mrs. Martin threw away her cigarette. It was instantly stamped on by another guide, and Martin nodded approvingly.

“Forest fires, Mary! I’ve told you a dozen times.”

“Sorry, Bob, but you don’t know how I feel inside.” She threw her leg over the saddle, sat for a moment, then jumped to earth. Touching the ground, she gave a sharp little cry and subsided very quickly.

“Bob, my ankle! What rotten luck!”

Jim, who like most guides was an adept at first aid, was on the spot in an instant. He examined her foot, and looked up with a wry expression.

“Reckon, it’s a sprain, ma’am. Got sort of twisted. Set right where you are, please.”

Martin had out his flask, and the others clustered round. His wife, a little sick with pain, smiled up at them bravely.

“So sorry, everybody, and I’m a perfect fool. But I can get along somehow, can’t I, Jim?”

“You’d oughter lie up two or three days anyway, ma’am. That ain’t going to make any difference, is it?”

“No,” broke in Martin, “certainly not, and that’s what she’ll do. Where do we camp—here?”

“Down yonder at the head of that hanging valley’d be a sight better. More firewood and brush for beds. More shelter, too. That’s if the lady can make it.”

“Of course I can, Jim. Now give me some of that bacon.”

They made the best of it, all of them, for the next ten minutes, at the end of which Dolph slipped away. Then Martin inquired further about the camping-place.

“About a quarter mile this side of Stevens’ mine, sir.”

Martin stared at the distant clearing. “Is it a real mine?”

“Well,” drawled the guide, “there’s them that says a mine is nothing but a hole in the ground with a liar on top; but Stevens is straight enough. He’s white. Been there most of two years now. I ain’t ever camped there before.”

“What a dreadfully lonely life!” speculated Mrs. Martin.

Jim nodded. “That’s right, ma’am, specially when it comes winter with nothing but snowslides for amusement. The camp was near wiped out last March. But there’s many as likes it.”

She shivered a little. “Sounds awful to me. Is there a telephone there—do they get any letters?”

“Folks don’t hanker over much about letters in the mountains: but there’s a mail-carrier happens along every fortnight when the trails are passable. Course there’s shooting and lots of it—elk—black bear—most likely a few grizzlies—partridge and the like. Hidden Valley they call this place, folks being sort of surprised when they see it first.”

Talk dwindled as they sat in the full pouring rays of a midday sun. A river, winding somewhere out of sight, sang to them in faint liquid measures, and they could see cataracts, distant and filmy, gleaming like silver veils against the naked face of the mountain flanks. A golden eagle, deserting its eyrie in the rocky heights, swam lazily through invisible fields of air. There was a sort of forgetfulness about the scene. So immense it was, so wide and untainted, so majestic, and yet so tiny a corner of the still vaster world without.

Presently Martin roused himself with an effort.

“By George, I was nearly asleep. If you think you can stand it, Mary, I think we’d better make a move to camp. Where’s Dolph?”

“Went on by himself most half an hour past, sir. Said he was going to spot the place for Mrs. Martin’s tent.”

“Good—we’d better follow him.”

Ten minutes later there remained only the steaming black coals of a fire over which, obedient to forest law, Glacier Jim had emptied a pan of dishwater.

Stevens’ Hope! Two years ago a mining recorder had entered the name on his map with a not unsympathetic smile. So many Hopes there were, and so few of them had borne fruit.

Stevens came on the lode at the end of a year’s prospecting. His grub had nearly run out, and the prospecting ardour burned low in his breast. This find was good, but nothing sensational—a ribbon of bluish-white quartz projecting from the hillside, and traceable at intervals for a half-mile. Gold in it—he could see that—but only back-breaking work would prove whether the thing was payable.

Stevens went back to the fringes of civilization, returning with four men—and Pirrie of the yellow hair. There was a history about Pirrie, whom he had found in a tent on the Caribou Trail fifteen years previously, a gaunt little skeleton of a wail nearly at the point of death. That was at the tail of the great Caribou Rush, when life was so hard that only the Chinamen washing gravel in the creek-bottoms were able to make a day’s pay by a week’s work.

Who Pirrie was, he never knew, having taken her from the arms of a dying and delirious woman whom he found in a tent by the Caribou Trail, at which the big heart of the man ached with pity. Nor was there anything he could learn of this hapless pair, save that the woman had staked a worthless claim on the gold-bearing stream, and was nearly starved.

Pirrie of the yellow hair grew and nourished. With every successive year she loved this quiet-eyed rescuer the more, till gradually, in the process of this love, the past with its confused unhappy memories was practically obliterated. Stevens did not marry, and adored the girl as the daughter of his heart.

Pirrie was eighteen when she arrived at Stevens’ Hope on the back of an ancient mule following the pack-horses laden with tools, explosives and all the first necessities of a mining camp. Then a year and a half of loneliness till young Hugh Purdey happened along. Purdey had three thousand dollars. When he saw Pirrie, he promptly fell in love with her, this being an understandable procedure for any man. She had become very lovely.

The outcome was that Purdey and his money both stayed. The three thousand went into Stevens’ Hope in consideration of a one-quarter interest. Stevens used this money to engage more labour from a contractor named Danks, who thereupon

came with four Swedes to sink the shaft another hundred feet. It was now down sixty of the hundred—with no great improvement in sight.

Such was the situation at Stevens' Hope when, four miles away, Mrs. Robert Martin, of Belgrave Square, London, landed on a stone and sprained her ankle.

Pirrie at this particular moment was underground, watching her father—she had always called him father—and young Purdey at work. Stevens swung the hammer, while Hugh held the drill, twisting and churning it slightly between strokes. The sharp clink of steel on steel leaped back from the rocky walls, echoing along the dark level toward one glimmering light that marked where the shaft plunged still deeper. Stuck into the breast of the drift, steel holders supported candles to work by.

This scene, this booming cavern, this isolation, these bending, labouring figures, this battle in the solid womb of the earth—there was nothing new about it to Pirrie. Mining was in her blood. She knew every corner of Stevens' Hope, knew how the ore varied, where it was good and where poor. On happy days when free gold could be seen in the quartz, she was elated. When the quartz was low grade, her spirits fell accordingly. Just now they were only fair.

Stevens leaned on his hammer, and wiped a sweating brow.

“Take a spell off, Hugh.”

“Bit tough to-day, isn't it?” The young man straightened his numb fingers. “Hullo, Pirrie! Where did you come from?”

“I'll hold for awhile now,” she said.

Stevens laughed at her. “No you won't—too risky.”

“But, Dad, I often have.”

“I know it—and too often. Better quit now, while your fingers are whole.”

She made a face at him. “Have some fresh water—it's just up from the creek.”

They drank, while she, moving closer, put a brown hand against the jagged face of quartz.

“Any visible gold to-day?”

“Fraid not.”

“There's that—and that,” she said hopefully.

“Pyrites, Pirrie, pyrites.”

She shrugged her shoulders. Pirrie he had called her from the first—this being his contraction of pyrites—the name of a mineral resembling gold that has deceived many an amateur miner. And here it was, staring at her.

“I wish you hadn't christened me that, Dad.”

“But why?”

“It makes me feel that I'm not exactly what people take me to be.”

“I don’t know of anyone being taken in—unless it’s Hugh,” he grinned.

“Don’t waste any sympathy on me,” said Hugh.

Stevens lit his pipe. “Look here, you youngsters had better go up. I’ll load and fire these holes.”

“Let me,” she begged. “I know how, perfectly.”

“If you’re not careful you’ll turn into a disreputable old miner like me. And Hugh, don’t you ever let her hold a drill for you again. Those are orders. Now off with you both. Pirrie, you might pan these samples. Keep half for me to assay.”

She went, rather unwillingly, with a little sack of fragments that Stevens had knocked off across the face of the drift. They were the basis of the daily test of values. Young Purdey gathered up the drills that needed sharpening. Then the sound of scraping feet, and silence rushed in, a silence beyond description.

Now that he was alone, Stevens yielded to a fit of depression that had been growing on him for weeks past. Would the Hope ever make a real mine? Sometimes, when things looked dark, he wondered if a man—if any man—was anything but a fool to set himself against Nature and aspire to hacking a fortune out of her solid bowels.

Nature was queer—tricky—a flirt—a jade. When the mood took her, she would store her shelves with treasure, and fling out wealth haphazard where no wealth was presumed to exist. Again she was mean—niggardly—a skinflint, accepting the sacrifice of men, and paying nothing in return.

Stevens’ Hope hung in the balance. The means of its discoverer were long since exhausted, young Purdey’s money nearly gone, and there were Danks and his Swedish miners to pay. What if no purchaser came along, and they were not paid? And was the Hope too deep in the wilderness to be found by any purchaser?

Thus ruminated Stevens while Pirrie and Hugh were hoisted in the big steel bucket, swaying and twisting as they rose, their heads close together. The girl hoped that Hugh would leave her at the surface. But, once in daylight, he reached for the samples.

“Let me carry them.”

“No, I will.”

“Well, I’ll crush them for you, and you do the panning.”

“I think you need a wash more than they do crushing,” she said with a little laugh.

“And I feel like banging something to-day.”

He looked at her soberly. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing—except that I’m not very good company—for anyone.”

“Am I anyone?”

“Would you mind if I said you were—would that be rude?”

“Not rude—but——”

“Unkind?”

“Perhaps,” he admitted.

“Then, Hugh, I’ve just got to be unkind. I can’t help it—and can’t explain. Don’t ask me to.”

They stood, facing each other, these young folk of the mountains, close to the shaft-mouth, streaked with the grey slime that one collects in every metal mine, their eyes, strangely alike in level candour, boring into each other, and oblivious to the fact that Danks, fifty feet away at the hoisting engine, was watching closely. Something had been roused in each—and stretched itself as though for combat.

“I seem to have asked for it and got it,” said Purdey.

“No, you didn’t, and it’s my fault—but to-day I’ve got to be alone.”

“Tired of me?” he snapped.

She looked at him in the strangest fashion as though with these words he had assumed a new shape, and in the blue pools of her eyes he saw the dawn of a sort of wonder. Then she turned quickly away.

The rest was automatic. She struck into a narrow trail, her special trail that was used by no one else unless invited. It wound through a clump of cedar, between big boulders that had descended from the higher slopes, across a little glade where the black bears came to eat blueberries in summertime, till finally it led to Pirrie’s most private sanctum.

This was a spot beside the hurrying creek, here only a few yards wide, where the shore was moss-covered and cedar-timbered. The stream slid by, its waters milky from melting glaciers high above. There was a stretch of shining sand, and behind submerged rocks one could see the mountain trout winnowing their wide pink tails. Sometimes an elk would come noiselessly to quench his thirst, and always there was the flash of lithe brown bodies where the mink chased each other for the sheer joy of chasing.

A few yards from the opposite shore ran the main trail that led through the foothills to the Pacific. Occasional riders came this way, though they had never camped here, and it always filled her with a great hunger. How free they were! What wonderful clothes the women wore! How they laughed and talked with the men! When she heard them coming she would feel shy as well as hungry, and hide herself so that she could see and not be seen. Then the happy, carefree procession that jogged along to the outside world she longed for. What a silence after the voices and horses’ feet died away! There was only the too familiar chuckle of the stream. And

even the stream was going somewhere. It was moving on.

That idea had dwelt with her now for months past till it amounted to an obsession. Hugh Purdey came, upstanding, broad-shouldered, steady-eyed, and fell in love with her instantly. He was still very much in love. She responded in a way because there was so little else to do, till it seemed unlikely that he could do much to help her to move on. Like herself he was anchored to Stevens' Hope. His money had gone underground.

She thought about that now, and it oppressed her. The bag of samples at her feet meant nothing. Just bits of rock. It was her duty to test these in a gold-pan, but today they were only reminders that she was utterly lonely, and fastened down here. Youth was leaping in her veins—with nothing for youth to feed on. The mountains, her gigantic friends of so many years, closed in on her, shutting off all escape.

Her lips began to tremble, and a great tear trickled down her cheek. They came fast. She hid her face in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break.

Into this desolation cut a young voice, very clear-pitched and tense with sympathy.

“Hullo!—I say, what’s the matter? Want any help?”

In the dappled shadows across the creek a young man sat on a bay horse. His eyes met Pirrie’s, there came a great splashing as the horse floundered through swift water, and the next moment the stranger slid from a drenched saddle, and bent over her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked anxiously.

Pirrie, thrilling to the core, shook her golden head, afraid to look up. “I was only b-being foolish.” This in a very shaky tone.

“But why cry when you’re foolish? I always laugh.”

This was infectious, and very slowly she tilted a streaked face. He was stooping low, his head close to hers, and for just an instant these two searched each other with the wide frank stare that only youth can give. The colour crept to her temples, and Dolph swore that never in his life had he seen anything half so lovely. The yellow of her hair made a patch of pale flame against the dark background of cedar. Then she sent him such a smile as when the sun glints through a summer shower.

“I suppose that’s the most sensible thing to do, but I’m not very sensible.”

He was about to assure her that he hoped she never would be, but choked that back. “May I introduce myself? I’m Dolph Hudson—from London.”

“You live in London!”

“For just as long as I can’t get out of it. This is a sight better. And you—er —?”

"I'm Pirrie Stevens, and live here." She captured a stray curl, and tried to look more sedate.

"You—ah—you live here! You!"

"Yes—because I can't get out of it."

He looked very incredulous. "How perfectly amazing! And for how long?"

"The last two years."

"But who else is there—like yourself?" he demanded, frowning a little.

"Oh, no one—I'm the only woman. It's my father's mine—Stevens' Hope."

This seemed to give the young man a good deal to consider, and there was a perceptible pause before he spoke again.

"Are you often—er—foolish like you were just now?"

"Sometimes—it varies, you know. It comes when everyone seems to be moving on except me." She threw a stick into the creek, and pointed. "Like that. Even that gets somewhere."

"And you've never been to England?"

"I've never been a hundred miles from the Rocky Mountains."

"Good Lord!" He hesitated, feeling for his cigarettes. "Do you smoke?"

"It isn't nice for a girl to smoke."

Dolph blinked at her. "Who on earth told you that?"

"No one—but I don't want to use my mouth for a chimney. Is that foolish too?"

Being very keenly aware of her mouth, he protested that she was entirely right, then glanced at her smooth brown hands. The drill sludge had dried on them so that they showed greyish white patches. Other and similar patches adorned her cheeks.

"I say, have you hurt your hands?"

"It's nothing," she said, feeling suddenly very unpresentable. "You get it underground—you can't help it if you touch anything."

"You go underground—you!"

She smiled brilliantly. "Why not?"

"Well, perhaps there's no reason why not—but it's new in a girl."

"Am I a new girl to you?"

He nodded with great conviction. "Ab-so-lutely!"

She rather liked that and smiled again, so that he developed an extraordinary interest in her eyes. The eyes were new, too.

"Where are you going now?" she asked wistfully.

"Vancouver by steamer when we reach the coast. Then San Francisco, New York, and home."

She sat very still, staring speechless into the vision his words created.

“You’ll be doing all that when I’m underground?” she said in a sort of awed whisper.

“Pirrie!” he exploded, “it isn’t fair—upon my soul it isn’t.”

“Do you feel that way, too?”

“Naturally—the thing’s too one-sided—I hate the thought of it.”

She made a pathetic little gesture, and picked up the bag of quartz samples. “Would you like to help me before you go to New York?”

He nodded, devouring her with a gaze beneath which the colour again pervaded her cheeks.

“Then behind that tree you’ll find an iron mortar and pestle, and these bits of rock must be pounded up till the whole thing will go through this screen. After that, I’ll show you.”

He got to work at once, while she watched with a critical eye, shaking her head when he hit too hard and the fragments jumped out.

“You musn’t lose any, because that’s a sample of the lode to-day. Now screen them—that’s right—now pour them into this pan.”

He did as he was told, only half an eye on his work, and marvelling at his luck. She dipped the pan a third full of water, tilted and began to rock it in a peculiar manner so that the coarser particles of rock were washed over its edge. This continued till there remained only a fine pointed streak of white quartz. At the tail of this a few yellow specks were visible.

“That’s gold.”

Dolph was disappointed. “Not much of it, is there?”

“It means about eight dollars’ worth in a ton of ore.”

“Is that good enough?”

“Not nearly,” she said sombrely. “It would take more than twice as much to make the mine pay.”

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

The answer was startling and unexpected. She dropped the pan, looked at him with complete and appealing helplessness, then began to sob under her breath—deep, dry, breathtaking sobs that nearly broke his heart. Instinctively his arms went out, and he held her close.

“I can’t do anything about it,” she got out in a strangled tone, “and no one can.”

“Don’t, Pirrie! You musn’t! Forget the old mine, and we’ll fix it up somehow. You’re going to move on if I have to take you myself. On my soul you are. Don’t, Pirrie, you darling, don’t!”

His lips found hers and touched them. The sobbing ceased. The world dropped

into silence save for the chuckling stream; and into that silence came a harsh resentful voice:

“Who’s going to take her?”

Dolph, petrified, twisted his head. Ten feet away stood a young miner, dark, curly-haired, shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up. His eyes were blazing.

For the second time that day youth stared at youth, but between these two flamed a sudden and intense antagonism. The newcomer was a little older than Dolph, and more heavily built. His features were blunt, his face square, and he looked distinctly formidable.

Pirrie gave a little cry, but was more fascinated than alarmed. Here, for the first time in her life, were two men apparently about to fight—and about her!

“Hugh! what are you doing here?”

“I’d ask the same question about this fellow.”

Dolph got to his feet, measured the stranger with a critical eye, and decided that chances were rather slim.

“My name’s Hudson,” he said smoothly. “I was riding past, and saw this young lady in trouble, and—er——”

“Offered to take her somewhere else. Thanks for nothing.”

Pirrie tried to speak, but her tongue felt stiff. She glanced at Dolph, liked him more than ever, regarded Hugh, disliked him not a little—and made an indefinite gesture. Why should Hugh be so rude? Just then Dolph smiled and put out his hand.

“Sorry if I’ve mixed things up, Mr.—Mr.——”

“But you haven’t,” flashed Pirrie, now thoroughly roused. “I was having a little private weep, when you came along and thought something was wrong—and why shouldn’t you? Hugh, shake hands with him at once!”

Young Purdey put out an unwilling paw. He had a vague idea of what was wrong, and the advent of this other man in his well-cut clothes and with his general air of breeding did not improve matters. But where did he propose to take Pirrie—and why?

“We’re trail-riding through the mountains,” volunteered Dolph smoothly. “There’s a party of five. Mrs. Martin sprained her ankle, and we’re camping near here for a few days. It’s Mr. Martin’s party, and his two daughters are in it. We come from London, all of us.”

The tension eased, at least superficially, and Hugh, feeling very awkward, said something about Stevens’ Hope. Then came another impasse, ended by Pirrie picking up the pan and quartz samples.

"I've got to go up to camp now," she said to no one in particular.

"Could some of us see the mine?"

"I'd love you to come; we haven't had any visitors for months. It's been awfully slow, hasn't it, Hugh?" This with a provocative little laugh.

Hugh's expression left no doubt as to how he regarded visitors, at any rate under existing conditions, and Dolph, stealing another glance at the girl, admitted that he would have felt the same. Were these two engaged? And, if not, how on earth had they kept out of it? Definitely—very definitely—he did not want them to be engaged.

Pirrie gave him one swift look that he found intoxicating, and turned into the trail. Hugh, after a look of an entirely different character, followed her. They had progressed a hundred yards in complete silence before he spoke.

"Look here, what does this mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"You know as well as I do. That fellow was kissing you."

"Was he really? I must have been crying too hard to notice it." There was a little tremor in her voice, but young Purdey missed that.

"I won't stand for it," he blurted.

She halted, wheeled round, and faced him. "Then you can sit down. And what were you doing there, anyway? It's forbidden ground—and you know it."

"I begin to see why it's forbidden," he parried, very hard hit.

"That's a perfectly horrid thing to say. Where are your manners?"

"I haven't got any in a case like this."

She shook her head as though to ward off a wasp, stared at him—a long steady stare—then revolt burst out unchecked.

"We'd much better settle things now, Hugh."

"Settle what?" His heart sank at her tone.

"You know perfectly well, and I've seen it coming for some time. From now on, I'm free; so are you."

"Pirrie, what nonsense!"

"I mean every word of it. It wouldn't work, Hugh, ever."

"Just because that fellow came along and offered to take you away. I'll kill him first."

"No—you won't kill anyone, and if you try, you'll only make a fool of yourself again. You trespassed on ground that is mine, and always has been. You saw something that had no harm in it—not the least bit—and perhaps if you'd been more understanding yourself it wouldn't have happened. Now you say you're going to kill someone. What nonsense!"

She stood there, tall and straight, eyes very hard and bright, a creature of the woods, but conscious that at last something had been cut away that till that moment had held her bound. As to Hugh, it seemed that the only reason she should have cared was that there was no one else. Even now she did not actually compare him with the trail-rider from London, but something about Dolph had opened the windows of her imagination. And he did understand. That to begin with.

“Then just because some man you’ve never seen before comes along and kisses you, you don’t want me any longer,” growled Hugh.

She choked with anger, tried to speak, and darted up the trail.

CHAPTER II

AT STEVENS' HOPE

DOLPH, left to himself, spent a full quarter-hour in solid reflection, then rode back toward the new camp. It appeared to him that this affair must have been meant, because it came just at the time when his affair with Jennifer was distinctly out of joint.

Quite deliberately, he compared these two. Jennifer was cool, unpassionate, unresponding. She had had many attentions from many men, but he himself was the first to make any impression. Even when he was accepted, the acceptance lacked enthusiasm, and no engagement had ever been announced. They both thought it wiser.

Julianna in her wise, quiet way had tried to explain her sister, arguing with Dolph that she really felt deeply, but it was out of her power to express how much she felt. Some girls were like that. They loved, but any abandonment of love was foreign to them. One had to wait for that till afterwards.

This had left Dolph rather cold. To him the expression of what one felt came as naturally as breathing. It was like breathing. As to Jennifer, he had reckoned that the mountains, this solitude, all this beauty and glamour and mystery would awaken her—if anything could. But it had not. Only the day previously he had taken her in his arms, trying to ruffle and rumple her too perfect calm, and rouse the electric spontaneous answer he craved. But all that happened was that she looked at him as though asking whether he considered this sort of behaviour the privilege of an engaged man. Secretly she was rather pleased, though it was not Jennifer's way to show it.

Now, by a mountain stream, he had found the spirit of the mountain in tears. Not only that—but one who was hungered for life, and, he guessed, not afraid to live. He was still disturbed by her unhappiness, still thrilled by the touch of her lips. She had nothing. He in comparison had everything. Pirrie-Pirrie! he repeated. What a wonderful name. He had never heard it before.

He rode into a glade higher upstream where Glacier Jim and his men were making camp, the white walls of the tents rising but a few paces from the hurrying water. Behind them stood unbroken ranks of pine and hemlock. Mr. Martin was stretching his stiff legs, Jennifer busy with her sketch book, and Julianna fitting her rod together. She waved a hand at him.

“Lots of trout here, Jim says, and we'll have some for supper. Isn't it a lovely

spot?”

“Good—I’ll help. What a ripping pool!”

“Dolph,” she said, lowering her voice, “why don’t you talk to Jennifer? She’s missed you.”

“I don’t flatter myself to that extent.”

“But she has—really, and is rather miserable. Is anything wrong?”

“N-no.”

“Which means there is, so perhaps you’d better not talk to her now. Where have you been?”

“Downstream a mile or so—near the mine.”

“Did you see it—or anyone? You look—well——”

“Like something new and strange?” he laughed.

“Yes, rather. Who did you see?”

“A young lady called Pirrie, also a young man called Hugh. I was talking to her when he came along.”

Julianna, knowing his proclivities, gave him an oblique look, then spent some moments selecting a fly.

“Pirrie what?”

“Stevens; her father owns the mine. She lives there, and is—er—a bit fed up.”

“And you were consoling her when the young man appeared,” said Julianna with startling intuition.

“Oh, I say!”

“Well, weren’t you?”

“It might have been something like that, but nothing happened, and we’re all going to see them presently, and, Jule, please don’t be an ass.”

He strolled off and spent the next half-hour in personal adornment, involving a new khaki shirt, clean riding-breeches and highly polished leggings. Julianna observing him emerge in glory, landed her trout, and took occasion for a chat with the head guide.

“Jim, it’s a Mr. Stevens who has the mine?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Has he a family?”

“There ain’t any Mrs. Stevens, I guess she’s dead, but there’s Pirrie.”

“What a funny name. Girl or boy?”

“Best-looking girl north of the Fraser River. I ain’t never been south.”

“As good-looking as all that?”

“Well, miss, mountain girls are reckoned to be that way where I come from. I

ain't seen her for a year, but she was a peach then, and there's a big fish on the other side if you can get a fly that far."

Ten minutes later a three-pounder was flopping at her feet, and Jim wiped his fingers.

"This here Miss Pirrie," he said reminiscently, "I guess she ain't Stevens' daughter at all. They say he adopted her in the mountains when she was a kid, and she's been with him ever since. Then there's a young fellow who put his money into the mine. He's there yet—so's the money."

Julianna laughed a little. "It's that kind of a mine?"

"You can't exactly tell, can you? Stevens swears by it, but I guess he can't hold on much longer. All going out and nothing coming in."

"Would he mind our going to see it?"

"Gosh, no! And Miss Pirrie'd be tickled to death."

Julianna asked nothing more, and went on with her fishing so successfully that at five o'clock the camp was pervaded by a very appetizing odour. At six, the three younger members of the party started off, Dolph in the lead. They went on foot.

Jennifer was rather silent, even for her, since Julianna had disclosed just enough to make her think very hard. But she was not anxious. The adopted daughter of a miner, probably as wild as a deer, and certainly with no finish. It was silly to be worried.

Then along Pirrie's trail till Stevens' Hope came in view on a slow rise of the foothills. Long low buildings, heavy walled, thick roofed, with hewn benches outside and small deep set windows. There was the shaft headgear, a sloping dump of quartz, the hoist house, the smithy, all the paraphernalia of a mine.

The visitors were making for the nearest building when a girl came out, advancing swiftly, and at sight of her Jennifer caught her breath. Absolutely unexpected she was, in a short skirt, leggings, soft shirt open, showing a smooth and lovely neck tanned a delicate brown. The set of her shoulders was strong and graceful, her eyes like blue mountain lakes, her hair like the gold for which Stevens burrowed so deep. This girl needed no art whatever. Jennifer admitted it at once.

It was a queer gathering, and Julianna missed nothing of its undercurrent. Hugh, still hot with anger and jealousy, did his best to be civil, yet had eyes for none but Pirrie. He felt threatened where she was concerned.

Pirrie herself was full of bubbling, irrepressible curiosity. She noted the other girls' clothes, their boots—the product of Jermyn Street,—their hats, their manner of casual poise, the level inflection of their voices. Especially Jennifer. She had never seen anyone quite like Jennifer before. And what struck her most forcibly was that

these girls looked cared for to an astonishing degree. It was all very absorbing. Presently Dolph managed to get Pirrie to himself.

“Tell me, was there an awful row?”

“No row at all. Why?”

“Didn’t your husky young friend want to kill me?”

“He was very foolish and surprised. He had no right to be on that trail. It’s mine.”

“Yours!”

“Yes, my sanctuary.”

“Had he any right to be angry?” ventured Dolph. “Are you engaged?”

Pirrie tossed her yellow hair. “No, indeed.”

“That’s queer,” he murmured. “I say, Pirrie, there’s something I forgot to tell you this afternoon.”

She glanced at the little group at the shaft-mouth, and her eyes rested thoughtfully on Jennifer. Had anyone else, she wondered, any right to be angry over this affair.

“What is it?” she asked very dubiously.

“That you’re the loveliest, most wonderful thing I ever saw in my life.”

She coloured hotly, then stared at him in utter confusion.

“Please—please—you mustn’t. And it isn’t true.”

She took it so differently from other girls to whom he had confided sentiments not dissimilar that he was more fascinated than ever. This time he really did mean it.

“It’s perfectly true—and what about to-morrow?”

Her lips quivered—and steadied. “To-morrow will be another fine day,” she said, glancing into the west.

“You darling—that’s not what I mean. What are we going to do?”

Her heart was beating riotously, and she experienced a delicious and totally novel kind of fear. But he must not see that.

“For my part, what I always do: try samples in a gold-pan, a bit of cooking, a bit of reading if I can find something I don’t know word for word, and—and——”

“What else?” he demanded.

“A little wondering what’s going to happen to me and the mine.”

“Why do you couple yourself with the mine?”

“Because if nothing happens underground, nothing will happen on the surface.”

“Is it as bad as that?”

She nodded.

“Then we must meet somewhere to-morrow. We must!”

She looked at him rather gravely. His face was eager, his expression very honest. She did not ask herself whether she would be safe with him, because, curiously, she did not want to be too safe. Nothing interesting ever happened to people like that. Nor did she wish to be put down as prim, countrified and unused to modern life. So why not meet him—the most interesting person she had ever found. And she very much liked something in his voice when he called her “darling.”

“You’re evidently not afraid of being killed,” she said lightly.

“He’ll have three days for the job—if he’s keen on it. We’ll be moving on then.”

Moving on! She sent him a wistful look that he only half understood. But it made his pulse jump. And they might never meet again.

“Where shall we meet—and when?” she asked in a low voice.

“At the end of your trail at eight—I’ll bring lunch. Will that do, you darling.”

“Yes,” she whispered, wondering if the end of that trail was to prove the beginning of another.

At the shaft-mouth they were received by Jennifer in a manner there was no misreading. She seemed not to see Dolph at all. Young Purdey’s jaw was thrust out, and he made no attempt to conceal his vexation. It was Julianna, as usual, who came to the rescue.

“Miss Stevens, do you really go underground every day? Aren’t you nervous?”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Won’t you put on some old clothes, and go yourself?”

Julianna shivered a little involuntarily. And at the moment she was wearing what were her oldest clothes. Almost disreputable, she thought. This made her distinctly sympathetic, and there were a lot of things of her own in camp that she would have liked to offer to this girl, were it possible.

“I—I’d like to very much.”

“And you?” said Pirrie with a straight look at Jennifer.

“Certainly I’ll go.” The voice was a shade chilly.

“Then you take them, Hugh.”

Hugh nodded rather sulkily, and just at that moment there came from deep in the shaft the twitching slap of a signal wire. The steel cable began to swarm up. Far, far down grew a tiny spot of yellow flame, till they made out the ascending bucket. In it stood a big man, a lighted candle fixed in his miner’s cap. The bucket halted, and he stepped out, face streaked, hands gritty with quartz sludge.

“Visitors, Dad. They’re camped higher up the creek.”

Stevens gave the smile of a weary man, nodded, spread out his soiled palms in explanation, and listened intently till in lower blackness sounded three solid thuds.

Then he nodded again.

“You young folks trail-riding alone?”

Jennifer told him about the others.

“Well,” he said heartily, “it’s a great thing for Pirrie to have a little company, but there isn’t much to show you.”

“There’s something quite new. Mr. Purdey’s going to take us underground to-morrow.”

“Well, all right, but look out for that bad spot in the shaft, Hugh.”

“Is it really dangerous?”

“Not yet, but it will be.” He paused, glancing into the west. “I don’t want to hurry visitors, but it will soon be dark, and if you’re not used to the woods, why _____”

“Yes, we ought to be off. Will you come and lunch to-morrow? Father is interested in mines in South Africa.”

Stevens grinned at her. “Pleased to hear it, and, miss, we don’t exactly lunch in these parts. Maybe I’ll drop over for a smoke.”

The three struck off for camp in the failing light, and the gleam of Jim’s fire through the trees was very welcome. Then the two girls sought their tent, where springy mattresses of young spruce boughs made beds fit for the weary. Julianna had settled comfortably in hers, and was deep in rather disturbing thoughts, when Jennifer spoke.

“Did you think that girl very pretty?”

“Yes—a new type, and very striking.”

“I think she’s perfectly stunning. You saw it, of course?”

“Saw what?”

“Dolph and her! I’m not blind, and neither are you.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Jen.”

“But you know Dolph as well as I do.”

“I wonder,” said Julianna patiently.

“If I ask you something, will you tell me—honestly?”

“If I know the answer—yes.”

“Then can I do anything I’m not doing to hold him?”

This was a hard question. Jennifer being Jennifer made it difficult to say what more she could do—and remain herself. She loved—no doubt of that—but in a fashion that frowned on any outbursts, any extremes. Julianna, knowing this, wondered what she might safely say.

“I don’t believe you can, Jen.”

“Then I’ve got to sit still and watch this sort of thing going on. I hate it.”

“But we’re only going to be here for three days.”

“Anything may happen in three days—with Dolph.”

“Then, if he’s like that, do you really want to hold him?”

From the other spruce bed came a stifled little sob, and Julianna put out her hand.

“Jen, dear, it’s awfully difficult, but in spite of everything, he really does love you. He doesn’t know himself yet how much he cares, but he’ll find out. Just now he’s got the idea of romance, and a few bumps won’t do him any harm. For him to marry that girl would be a mistake, but she’ll have to demonstrate that—not us. Don’t you see?”

“I see that I don’t occur to him while he’s with her. Of course they spent the afternoon together.”

“Part of it,” admitted Julianna, “but in four days from now there won’t be a thought in his head about her. The thing works both ways.”

“Perhaps—but what about to-morrow?” The voice was quieter, but still very dubious.

“We’ll all be together mostly, and when we’re not I’ll take him fishing.”

“You’re rather a trump, Jule. I wish I could do something for you.”

Julianna sighed a little, but inaudibly. She wished so too. But what could anyone do for a girl who had no complexion, a blunt nose and indeterminate features.

“Don’t you worry about me—and go to sleep. Aren’t these beds heavenly?”

They did not wake till nine, and then only at the musical rhapsody produced by Jim when he beat a steel triangle with a small steel rod. That sound meant worlds in the wilderness.

“Keep it hot for five minutes, Jim,” said Julianna, putting out a drowsy head. “Isn’t Mr. Hudson up yet?”

“Reckon he is, Miss. He lit out most an hour and a half ago, and took a snack of lunch with him. Said he’d be back round sundown. As fer that lunch, I never seen bread cut that thin in all my life.”

Young Purdey went underground with Stevens next morning at seven, and swung a hammer with vicious certitude before he said a word. Then he put the hammer down, and wiped a sweating brow.

“Tough rock to-day,” grunted Stevens, glancing at the seamed quartz.

“And worth only eight dollars a ton!”

“That’s what Pirrie reckoned.”

“What’s the matter with Pirrie?” The tone was very blunt.

“Guess she’s a little excited over the visitors. Nice folks! What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m wondering when we’re going to get out of this hole—if ever.”

“God knows! I thought we’d have struck it before this. The vein was a lot better on the surface.”

“Danks made any more trouble?”

“Yes—it’s the wages—and I can’t blame him either. I haven’t got it.”

“Well,” said Hugh, “I’m broke too. Why not drop it, and clear out? We can find better stuff somewhere else, and what’s the point in banging out our souls here for nothing?”

Stevens looked grave. The same thought had been stirring uncomfortably in his own mind for weeks past, and the weight of this back-breaking, spirit-breaking grind lay heavy upon him. To-day, the end seemed farther off than ever, and he felt older with every sun that set. But always when he reached this stage there came to him the shining hope—the secret, non-understandable assurance that hiding somewhere in this solid defiant rock lurked ultimate fortune if he would but cleave to his purpose. It was that blind faith, that will-o’-the-wisp of a golden future that nerves every true prospector, and fills his dreams with glittering visions.

“That’s been in my own head,” he said sombrely, “but you’ve sunk all you’ve got here, and so have I.”

“I know it, but—well—what about Pirrie? How much longer has she got to stick?”

This struck home. What about Pirrie? Hugh’s money was in the mine—and for Pirrie’s sake. This was understood by both. But it seemed now that Stevens’ Hope was becoming a millstone about the necks of them all.

“Have you and Pirrie fixed it up?”

“I thought we had—till yesterday. Then I found that fellow with his arms round her.”

“Eh!” blinked Stevens.

Purdey exclaimed. “See why we’d better get out of this?” he added.

There was a silence in which they heard the drip of water, and the clatter of the bucket hoisting rock from Danks’ level farther down. Stevens hardly knew what to think, this being the sort of thing in which he had no experience. He had one fantastic idea, but put it away as out of the question. No such luck for Pirrie.

“What do you make of it yourself?” he countered.

“Simple enough! Rich young fellow comes trail-riding along—finds pretty girl in

the dumps—starts making love to her. Then in a day or two he rides on. Look out, Stevens—it's dangerous.”

That sounded reasonable enough, and Stevens started for the shaft. “I'm going to talk to her now.” In twenty minutes he came back, looking greatly disturbed. “She's not in camp, Hugh. What next?”

Purdey's eyes took on a quick dark light. “Where's she gone?”

“Dunno: she left before eight, and said she wouldn't be back till sundown. Look here, what can I do?”

“Pull out of this before it's too late. That's all there is to do!”

“One month—can you stand a month more?” He frowned at the face of quartz behind which fortune must be hiding—somewhere.

“And then?”

“Pull out if we don't strike it. Danks is the only trouble.”

“I'm for that, and if Danks will take an interest instead of cash, why not offer it.”

This was a new idea. It seemed just possible, so the two descended eighty feet of slippery ladders. Half-way down, Stevens held his candle against the shaft wall.

“Bad spot there—I don't like it.”

To any miner it would have looked a bad spot, though the novice would have seen nothing unusual. The wall was fissured, and round a great leaf of rock ran a crack. The leaf weighed many tons, and was wedged in precarious balance. It might stick—if there were no more blasting underground it would stick—but there was always the chance that the whole vast weight might become detached and wreck the shaft in its titanic plunge. And that would mean disaster to Stevens' Hope.

“Ugly, isn't it?” said Stevens again.

“Damned ugly—but it will last out our time.”

Stevens tapped it gingerly, and descended farther. There was something ominous about this gigantic sword of Damocles. It typified impending ruin, and he pictured it crashing down, carrying death and destruction. It would be wiser, he decided, that neither Pirrie nor her visitors come here at all. Then they found Danks and his Swedes at the breast of the second level. The clink of hammers ceased, and Stevens drew Danks aside in the dark.

“Want to talk to you a minute.”

“Well,” said Danks with unconcealed insolence, “I was going to talk if you didn't. I can't hold these fellows any longer.”

“I know.” Stevens' voice was patient. “That's just the point.” He went on, explaining the situation, dwelling on his faith in the mine. If these men deserted him now, Stevens' Hope must close forthwith. And one could not sell an abandoned

property.

“That’s how it stands, and the stuff is here if we can only find it. And we’ve grub and explosives for another month.”

“Men won’t work without pay—not in a mine,” said Danks sullenly.

“I’ll give you a third interest between you for another month.”

Danks stood irresolute. He had worked in many mines, and this one had puzzled him from the start. Gold was here. All the conditions were favourable. He knew that. He could hold the Swedes, under this offer. He knew that too.

“Suppose we strike nothing in thirty days, do we shut down?”

“That’s it.”

Danks scratched his head and pondered the matter. “I’ll talk it with the rest, and tell you at noon.”

He went back to work, his brain very busy. Now was the season when wandering engineers, in search of promising properties, were apt to happen along through the mountains, and the odds were that one would turn up at Stevens’ Hope before the month was out. If this came about, he should, given ordinary luck, be able to do something very practical in the way of aiding a sale. He had done it before, and with considerable success, but avoided that part of the country after the transaction took place.

They were of the same breed, he and Stevens, both adventurers, both men who had starved, suffered, rejoiced and hoped, both animated by the restless spirit whereby the seemingly impossible is often accomplished. In all this there was no difference between them. The real difference lay in the fact that Stevens was as honest as daylight, while Danks in his wandering life had turned many a tricky corner.

Beggars cannot be choosers, and when young Purdey learned that the matter had been arranged he turned to an even more important question.

“Pirrie!” he exploded. “What are you doing about her and that fellow?”

“Dunno that I can do anything much. She’s twenty-one. I can’t blame her for being interested, and it isn’t as though you——” he broke off uncomfortably.

No mistaking what he meant. Hugh was in no position to take care of Pirrie himself. And one could not buy the girl by sinking three thousand dollars in a mine that might prove to be worth nothing.

He would have been even more anxious were he able to read Stevens’ thoughts at this moment. They were queer and unexpected. Would it not be a waste if Pirrie did marry this hotheaded young miner? He might be rich some day—but to-day he was poor. And if he stayed poor, it would be the long hard trail again for Pirrie. No life for a woman, that.

Stevens was suddenly filled with new ambitions for this girl of his—this waif of the Caribou Trail. All she had now was his love—the love of a prospector past his first youth. That was no asset. He aspired that she should move on, and up. He pictured her living as other girls did, dressing as they did, making friends, receiving attention and admiration. Finally she should marry some man of money and position. He found himself wanting a thousand things for her.

With this in mind he gave Purdey a sidelong glance, and seemed to see him in a distinctly disadvantageous light. What real right had he to Pirrie?

“I can’t tell her she’s not to do this or that,” he said, trying to sound entirely unbiased. “She’ll marry the man she wants to marry. Her sort always does. And she’s grown up, Hugh, she’s grown up.”

“Got your eye on the English trail-rider?” snarled Hugh.

Stevens put a gnarled hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Takes two to make a quarrel, son, and you can leave me out. I guess I know how you feel. It’s my experience that life is like this quartz vein. You hammer at the blasted thing till you’re heartsick. Where you expect it to be barren, it’s sometimes good: other times when by all the signs it ought to be good, it turns out rotten. You’ve got to reckon that the rich spot is just ahead and work for that. If it ain’t there at all, it’s no use squealing. If it is, you’ve got to keep your head, and not get lit up. And if some other fellow strikes it instead of yourself, well, you just wish him luck, stick out your jaw, and move on. That’s life as I see it.”

This might be sound enough, but it didn’t reach Hugh. He was too much in love, too inoculated with jealousy. All very well for a middle-aged man who hadn’t an idea in the world except prospecting; but Stevens had forgotten how one felt when young blood is hot, and young arms stretch out, empty, in the dark.

Thus there was set up in the booming levels of Stevens’ Hope the first latent antagonism between these two; Purdey convinced that something better than himself was desired for Pirrie; Stevens anxious only that the girl be happy, trusting her judgment as never before, and sick at heart at the chance of losing her. Any man, he reckoned, should fight things out for himself, but a girl needed all the help one could give.

CHAPTER III

I LOVE YOU, PIRRIE

A BREATHLESS morning, the air sweet and cedar scented, the sun climbing over the Rockies, the mountain stream bubbling and babbling, Pirrie standing at the end of the trail from Stevens' Hope. Her heart beat fast, and the blue eyes were softly bright.

Dolph did not see her at once, so perfectly was she merged in her background of dark green. When she moved, laughing a little, he thought she looked like the spirit of the woods, incarnate and very lovely. She did not speak, and for just a moment these two stared at each other.

That little interlude was very strange to them both, and had a sort of premonitory significance. Perhaps they both felt that something was about to happen—or had indeed begun to happen—something of which they were each a little afraid, but yet was so alluring, so divine to the taste, that not for anything in the world would they miss it.

It was exactly as though on the edge of a new and enchanted land they had for the very first time discovered each other, and each to the other put out a hand ere they ventured into that fairy domain.

“By Jove!” said Dolph in a half-whisper; “then it *is* true, and you *are* coming.”

The blue eyes rounded a little. “But why not?”

“I wondered if you really meant it.”

“I never meant anything more in my life,” she said promptly. “Now what are we going to do?”

Dolph felt beating within him a wild pulse he had never known before. “Whatever you say, it's your country, not mine.”

“Then we'll climb. There's a mountain lake not far off, and it's full of rainbow trout.”

“I didn't bring any tackle.”

“Well, I did, and we'll have trout for lunch, and blueberries, and lots of things. Then we'll explore.” She paused, looking at him oddly. “Won't they be angry with you for coming like this?”

“I'm not on anyone's leading string. Look here, should I have brought a gun?”

“I never carry one: do you want to kill things?”

“For the first time in my life—not to-day. Now why is that?”

“You never would if you lived here. Come on, stranger.”

She took the lead, striking directly south through the big cedars and away from Stevens' Hope. A mile of this, a hushed, moss-carpeted mile where their feet made not a sound, and the ground rose gently till across the valley the mine buildings were visible. Then on and up while the valley broadened beneath them, and they looked down at a vast green blanket interspersed with tender glades where beavers had dammed the stream and raised their strange habitations. They had reached the pine and hemlock when they stopped to rest. Dolph felt for his cigarettes—and remembered.

“Do try one.”

“I did once, and it was horrid.”

“Everybody smokes at home—you would if you lived there.”

“A lot of things I wouldn't do if I lived there.”

“For instance.”

“Well, dress like some of the photographs I've seen in the magazines. Don't women's husbands mind if their wives dress like that?”

“Lord, no! Why should they?”

Pirrie turned rather pink. “I'd have thought that—well—am I so terribly simple?”

“You're terribly lovely,” he said in a low voice. “That's all I know now.”

This frightened her a little. She had hoped for it, dreamed of it, but was hardly ready for it yet. She almost wished he had waited longer. Then she wondered if it was a stock phrase of his, and how a London girl would take it.

“What made you say that?” There was a candour about her that confused him.

“I—I can't help it—you *are* lovely. I've been thinking about you ever since we met. And you're—you're different. I've never seen anyone like you.”

“Supposing that were true,” she said in a whisper, “what's the use?” She pointed to Stevens' Hope lying with its miniature buildings far below. There was a pencil of smoke from the boiler-room. “It all begins and ends there.”

“Pirrie!”

“Yes?”

“What do you want to do most in the world?”

She gave a long, long sigh, and looked at him as in a dream.

“To live—and feel—and see—and learn. The real me is all locked up inside. And I'm free,” she went on with a sudden touch of passion, “free as anything in these mountains. That only happened yesterday. I'm free to go—and I can't go. Do you understand?”

“You mean——”

“I told Hugh—the man who wanted to kill you—that everything was off, and we

were not engaged. There was only a sort of half promise and that was after Hugh put what money he had into the mine. Later on I knew that it wasn't on account of the mine at all, but me. But if he hadn't done it, Father—he isn't my father, really—would have had to shut down."

Dolph put that away for further reflection. "Mr. Stevens is not your father!"

"I can't remember my father or mother. All that comes back is wintertime in a tent with the snow blowing through the flap. And I was often hungry. Then Mr. Stevens came along with a dogteam—I can remember that distinctly—and afterwards it was always just him. Sometimes in some of the camps he got a woman to look after me, but not often, and he did it all. He never wanted anything for himself, and he never married."

"So you've never had sisters or brothers!"

"That would have been too wonderful."

"Who did you play with, Pirrie?"

"Myself—till the men came off work, and then I was sleepy. But they've never been anything but good to me. Two years ago an old man went fifty miles on snowshoes to get me a Christmas present—and froze his feet coming back. So, really, I ought to be perfectly happy—but I'm not. And—and when you go there won't be anyone but Dad and Hugh."

He leaned suddenly forward and took her brown hand.

"Pirrie, supposing I didn't go on with the others—would that help?"

She stared at him with wild incredulous hope. "But—but you couldn't do that!"

"Indeed I could—I'm independent, thanks to my favourite aunt."

She said nothing for a moment, but her eyes reflected innumerable things. "That other girl—the one you call Jennifer—what would she say?"

Dolph's brows went up. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because of the way she looked at us yesterday. Are you engaged?"

"We probably would have been, shortly—but not now."

"Why not—now?" The look in her eyes was wonderful and baffling.

"Because of something I found yesterday," he burst out in a swift flame of feeling. "I love you, Pirrie! Will you marry me?"

The thing had come—swiftly—inevitably—as it had to come. There was no withholding it. The mountains, gathered in a vast encircling group, looked down at these pygmies as though absorbed in their Lilliputian drama. The breeze loitered as though to hear what would come next. Small, bright-eyed things peered from behind tree and rock. And Pirrie! Pirrie only gazed at this man she had met but yesterday, and found herself robbed of all answer.

“Pirrie! darling—don’t you understand? I love you.”

The echoes seemed to catch that, exchanging it, one with another in muted softness till Pirrie almost wondered whether it was merely an echo. Then she gave a tremulous little sigh.

“I—I’m frightened,” she whispered.

At that his arm went round her as it had once before.

“Frightened, you darling! Of what—me?”

“No, not you.” She touched her heart. “It’s something inside me that’s just come to life—and it’s stronger than me.”

His face was very close, so that her eyes were like pools of swimming light. She was marvellous in that moment while there awakened within her the first divine consciousness of love. All the youth and beauty of the world seemed gathered in his embrace. There was no past—no future—nothing in the whole universe except themselves.

“Kiss me, Pirrie!”

Their lips met for an ineffable moment. After that first ecstasy she drew away as though its poignant sweetness were too great to be borne, while Dolph, the world reeling giddily about him, perceived that they were on the edge of a precipice. He stared at her. She was covered with lovely confusion.

“You wonderful, wonderful girl!” He spoke with a sort of awe.

She shook her head, struggling to recapture herself, yet aware that the whole of her life—every hour of it—sleeping or waking—had but led up to this amazing circumstance.

“I—I’m not wonderful. I’m just Pirrie Stevens.”

“That’s exactly it.” He paused, catching something in her eyes that begged him to be strong, now, quickly, and help her to be strong too. No girl had ever looked at him like that before, and he made a prodigious effort.

“Did anything stranger ever happen?” he went on more steadily. “One can’t reason it out, but there it is.”

She sent him another look, very quick and intuitive, and not a little grateful.

“C-can’t reason what out?”

“My finding you here. If Mr. Martin hadn’t asked me to come to Canada, and if Mrs. Martin hadn’t sprained her—oh, what’s the use. There is no reason for it.”

“Do you want one, Dolph?”

She said this last word with so sweet and lingering an accent that he nearly broke loose again. She gave a nervous little laugh, and hurried on.

“Why should there be any reason? Aren’t things about right as they are?”

He nodded with great decision. “Rather—but you’ve not said your part of it yet. Three words, Pirrie.”

They exchanged a long, long gaze that Dolph knew he would remember to the end of his life. Her eyes spoke for her, and they seemed to open her soul like a book for him to read in. He began to tremble, and leaned toward her, but she shook her lovely head.

“We’ve the rest of the day—and aren’t you getting hungry?”

This was very wise, very practical, and he laughed joyously. Jennifer had never heard him laugh like that.

“We-ll, since you mention it, I am. What about you?”

“We’ve got an hour to reach the lake, fifteen minutes to catch our dinner, another fifteen to cook it, so you can’t have anything for an hour and a half.”

“Sounds like a masterful housekeeper already. But that won’t be dinner. It’s lunch, and later we’ll have afternoon tea.”

“What’s that for?” she asked vaguely.

It came over him in a wave how little she knew of life beyond Stevens’ Hope. But how little it mattered. Nothing mattered but one thing.

Pirrie got up, put out her hand, and pulled him to his feet. How strong she was, he thought, feeling the tense young body braced against his own. Then they climbed lakeward, each exploring the other. It was like prospecting, decided Pirrie, and finding gold in plenty. But what would follow this revelation?

Another matter. She wanted Stevens to know about this at once—and Hugh—and the others. Especially Jennifer. And what would they say when they did know? She could guess what Jennifer would feel, but did a London girl, a society girl like her, say anything at all under the circumstances. Or would she have to fight Jennifer for Dolph. This made her silent, and she found Dolph looking at her with smiling interest.

“Don’t try and settle everything beforehand.”

“How did you know?”

“I’ve been trying to do it myself, and just gave it up. One can’t.”

“Shall—shall we tell them to-night?”

He made a grimace. They would certainly have to be told, all of them, and he did not fancy his part of it. One result—and this came to him in a rush—would be his leaving Martin’s party, and rather soon. He could not very well go on trail-riding with Jennifer. As to Jennifer herself, he imagined that she would take the affair with her usual poise and coolness. Fortunate, now, that she was cool. No scenes for Jennifer, thank Heaven.

“Of course we’ll tell them,” he said, “but I’ll have to get Mr. Stevens’ consent first.”

“Did you get Mr. Martin’s consent?” This with astonishing directness.

“No—er—you see it hadn’t quite reached that stage.”

“I’m so glad, Dolph. And after everyone knows, what shall we do?”

He wondered why she had not left it to him to suggest that. This practical attitude of hers was rather extraordinary, but how could he realize that all her life had been faced with practical questions? There had been no side issues, nothing unconnected with the work of man. She had lived the life of the mines, and, like a miner, was accustomed to deal with facts.

Then, watching the beauty of her, recognizing her courage and spirit, conscious of how little she had had, and how much he would be able to give, he felt somewhat ashamed of himself.

“The Martins will be going on in two days, then we’ll have time to settle things,” he said confidently.

“You’ll stay at Stevens’ Hope!” she exclaimed.

“At the risk of my life—yes—if your father doesn’t object.”

Pirrie’s laugh was very gay. She was not unkind, but this situation appealed to her enormously. It would teach Hugh Purdey better manners. She climbed on, thinking very hard.

The lake was like a gigantic sapphire dropped into the gaunt framework of the mountains. Fringed by timber that ascended thinner and ever more straggling to the line above which no timber lives, it lay open to the sky, its burnished surface reflecting a flock of fleecy clouds that drifted over the topmost jagged peaks. The mountains fenced it in as a precious thing. There was no habitation, no mark of any axe, no sound, and no boat. The place was like the soul of silence.

“Jove!” exclaimed Dolph, staring about, “it’s wonderful—like you.”

“I’m not wonderful, but hungry, and I can catch fish. Watch me.”

Leaning on his elbow, he thought it all quite perfect. Pirrie cut a thin pole with the light axe she carried in her belt, produced a line, baited it with a morsel of bacon, and in ten minutes had caught enough iridescent mountain trout for a meal. She made coffee over a fire that appeared to have been kindled by magic. Dolph unpacked sandwiches, the thinnest, she declared, she had ever seen in her life. They ate, eyeing each other with smiling satisfaction, and a sort of joy in their great and mutual discovery. Then Pirrie smoked part of her very first cigarette under instructions, put it beneath her heel, and made a face.

“I hope you’ve something nicer to teach me than that,” said she.

He had, and it took hours, though as he assured her ecstatically this was only the smallest fraction of it, after which they examined each other gravely, a little frightened with the knowledge of what each had to give and was ready to give, till, late in the afternoon they came down the mountain-side hand in hand, stopping now and again to stare incredulously one at the other as though this thing could hardly be true. They had nearly reached camp when Pirrie halted.

“Now what are we going to do?”

“You—nothing yet. Leave it to me,” he said, full of love and confidence, his whole body thrilling with the soft warmth of arms that had been round his neck.

They found Stevens just as he came to the shaft-mouth from underground, blinking as one always blinks on reaching sunlight after the chill darkness of lower levels. He looked very hard at the girl, seemed about to say something, checked himself sharply, and gave Dolph a curt nod. The faces of the two were eloquent.

“Can I talk to you, sir?” struck in Dolph, determined to have his say first.

Stevens motioned towards his cabin, and they followed. Just then the head and shoulders of young Purdey emerged from the ladder-way. He paused, the half of him still underground like an animal quitting its winter lair. His expression was not pretty. In the cabin, Stevens had jammed his pointed miner’s candlestick into the log wall, and stood for a moment, silent, his face grave.

“Well?” he demanded.

Dolph took a long breath, and let himself go in a burst.

“I’m in love with Pirrie, sir,” he blurted, “and want to marry her. I’d like your consent.”

Stevens’ eyes narrowed a little. This was straight talk, and he liked the sound of it, because it wiped out all his doubts. Pirrie, who was standing breathless, lips parted, a lovely colour in her cheeks, seemed to like it too. Her large imploring eyes were fastened on him. There came a little gulf while none of them spoke, and the older man got a fuller realization of what this thing meant. Freedom from his natural anxiety for the girl—her future made—a lifting of her clean out of a setting that he had long since realized was an unfair one for her. It meant all that. And this boy looked straight.

“I ought to tell you at once that in—er—a financial way I’m quite independent,” added Dolph. “Mr. Martin will confirm that.”

Stevens, regarding the girl he had protected for so many years, perceived in her something new. It was the future woman—the lover—the wife—all foreshadowed by her awakening soul. It would hit him hard to part with her. She looked transfigured. He had known that she was pretty, but now she presented a sheer

beauty that astonished him. The youth of these two, their bright confidence in each other, their power of feeling, 'twas all very vivid and unanswerable, and like tasting new air. But at the same time it made him feel old and a bit tired.

“You’ve only known each other a few hours,” he said doubtfully. “I can’t say any more now. I’d have to see Mr. Martin anyway.”

“When?” struck in Dolph.

“When I’ve thought it over for myself, perhaps to-night.” He glanced toward the shaft, and saw the approaching figure of Purdey. It suggested trouble. “Also,” he added, “I must have a talk with you, Pirrie. What are Mr. Hudson’s plans, and how long is his party to be here?”

“I’d like to stay for awhile after the others move on,” said Dolph. “Would that be all right?”

Stevens made a gesture. This boy and Purdey in the same camp! He could not quite imagine it—with comfort.

“We’d better let that part of it stand for the moment. You’re welcome, of course, but——”

Dolph gave a quick laugh and put out his hand. “I think I understand, sir. Other matters to be gone into first—I hoped you’d say that.” Then with a swift look at Pirrie, he went out. Near the cabin he encountered Purdey, nodded, and was passing on when the other man stopped him.

“Look here, stranger, you seem to be making a slight mistake.”

Dolph stared at him. “Mistake—I don’t see it.”

“Well, Pirrie and I are engaged, and you’re running after her. See it now?”

Dolph shook his head. “The mistake is yours, and I’ve her authority for saying so.”

They stood confronting each other, one cool, composed, and painfully polite, the other openly hostile, his square face flushed under its streaks of grey quartz slime, his heavy brows drawn together, his eyes darkly hot. He looked threatening, and was infinitely the stronger of the two.

“You think because you’ve got money you can drop in here and get away with that sort of thing! Well, you can’t—not in this camp.” He jerked out, his colour rising, hating this stranger with his good manners, his pose and well-cut clothes. “Take my advice, and move on—quick!”

“I was thinking of staying for awhile,” said Dolph smoothly. “Free country, isn’t it?”

Purdey clenched a hard fist, but what might have happened was averted by Stevens, who, watching from the cabin door, now came toward them. Dolph, with a

little laugh, did move on, Purdey glowering after him. Stevens laid a heavy hand on his partner's shoulder.

"You're on the wrong tack, Hugh. Quit it!" He spoke very quietly but in a tone that the other man recognized.

"Is—he—staying—on—here?" demanded Purdey thickly. "I'd like to break his damned neck."

"And get your own stretched for your trouble. Don't be a fool. Whether he's staying or not, I don't know. He wants to, and there's nothing I can see to stop him. You can guess what he wants, and I'm going to talk to Mr. Martin about it."

"I've a one-third interest in this mine," creaked Purdey, sticking out his jaw.

"You have—in the mine—but nothing else. Look here, Hugh, we mustn't quarrel at this stage. Be fair—we've both got to be that—to Pirrie. There's been little enough in her life till now, and I only want the best for her, understand that—the best."

"You take my money to save this damned hole in the ground, and then——"

"Steady there!" Stevens' voice hardened like a flint. "You asked to put your money in: I didn't ask you. You told me the gamble was good enough. Later I saw what prompted it, but not till later. I wish to God it had been sooner."

Purdey surveyed the shaft-mouth with a sort of contempt. "Well, it's still there, and likely to stay, but I don't reckon to lose both ways."

"The mine is one thing—Pirrie another—and it isn't healthy for you or any man to mix them. That's all, Hugh. Think it over."

This at Stevens' Hope. Half a mile away in another camp, Martin and his wife were listening to Dolph in voiceless bewilderment. An impetuous story, it came hot and tingling from the young and new-made lover, who sat, hands locked over his knees, trying to explain clearly how inescapable the thing had been, and how completely mutual it was. They had loved each other at sight. He proposed to stay on at the mine for the present. He hated to upset anyone's plans, most of all those of his kindest friends, but, well, there was nothing else for it. He felt that they wouldn't understand in the least, but he hoped they would forgive him. Anyway, the decision was made, quite definite and final, and his whole heart was in it.

Martin heard the boy with secret sympathy, it being not so many years since he had experienced something of the same kind himself, but his wife was deeply troubled. What about Jennifer? One had become accustomed to coupling Dolph with the elder girl, though there had never been anything ardent about the affair. Now, when her mother thought about Jennifer, who was fishing in a pool two hundred yards off, this sudden attachment seemed dislocating. She glanced anxiously

at her husband, but Martin offered no help.

“But, my dear Dolph, you don’t know anything about her, or even who she is. She’s pretty, and looks quite a nice girl, but—really——”

“I know what she is,” said he stoutly, choking a little at the idea of Pirrie being called “quite nice.”

“In twenty-four hours? Dolph, you can’t!”

“I know you think I’m a fool, but twenty-four minutes was enough.” He paused, sending them a look that was entirely candid. “Of course you’re thinking of Jennifer and me. Well, naturally I expected that. I’ve been thinking too, and I would soon have——” he hesitated an instant.

“Soon what?” came the kindly voice of Martin.

“Told you that she and I weren’t really meant for each other. It’s frightfully hard to talk like this,” he went on, getting very red, “because you’ve all been so good to me, always. But now—well—I’ve got to be honest, haven’t I? And I can’t very well stay on with the party, can I?”

With this he broke off, very troubled and confused.

He looked honest, they had to admit that, and Martin gave a little sigh at the thought of losing him. Then, again, he had a throb of sympathy. Presently he smiled.

“Cheer up, Dolph. It isn’t as though you were the only man in the world. As to Jennifer—well—young people settle these things for themselves nowadays. At the same time, aren’t you going it a bit blind?”

“Who’s going it blind?” interjected Jule, emerging from her tent. “Dolph, have you been flirting with the Maid of the Mountain?”

“I’m afraid he has, and rather more,” said Mrs. Martin, trying to treat the thing lightly.

“Careful, my child, careful!” She frowned a little, her round, good-natured face distinctly perplexed. “That’s rather a devastating young person if you ask me. Am I entitled to hear just a shade more?”

“I want to marry her,” blurted Dolph. “Fact is, I’ve asked her.”

Jule gave a low whistle, and glanced upstream where the figure of her sister could be seen casting a very precise and professional line across the wrinkled pool. She stood on a large flat boulder, and beside her crouched a guide with a landing-net. While they watched, she had a rise, struck, and there came the thin scream of a whizzing reel. Then Jule turned her large expressive eyes on the young man.

“Asked her! Whew! that’s rather torn it. Why on earth did you do that?”

“Because I want her more than anything else in the world, and don’t care who knows it.” Dolph’s voice was a little ragged.

Jule smiled at him in the most friendly way possible.

“And what did the young lady say?”

He laughed back at her. “I’ve just told your father all about it, and—er—Mr. Stevens will be here in an hour. I’m going to stay on at the mine for a while.”

She said nothing for a moment, and the others waited. The Martin family had in the last few years acquired a peculiar respect for this girl’s sense and instinct. She had judgment, she was utterly unselfish—therefore fair, and she had the gift of seeing a good deal below the surface of things. Now she gave the boy a long steady look from steady brown eyes, and perceived that the soul of him was awake as never before.

“Dolph,” she asked slowly, “is it the real, real thing this time?”

“On my honour, yes. And who she is doesn’t matter.”

Jule nodded with a sort of conviction. “In a way I’m not surprised. And, Dad, we’ve no right to object.”

“We’re not objecting, but just a bit anxious. Go on, Jule.”

“What do you want to do, Dolph?”

“Stay here, to begin with. I won’t leave her.”

Jule shook her head. “I wouldn’t do that. Mother?”

“Yes, Jule?”

“What occurs to me is that this girl has never had the least bit of a chance—at anything. No one knows what she would be like if she had, and I rather think it’s up to us.”

“Just what do you mean?”

“That we’ve all got to take a hand in, and see it through. Funny to strike this away off in the mountains, but here it is. Dolph certainly ought not to stay here, so Pirrie will have to come with us.”

“To England!” gasped her mother.

Jule nodded. Dolph’s mouth was open, and his eyes glowed. Martin was fondling his pipe in sudden perplexity, but the corners of his lips had a smiling curve.

“Why not?” went on the girl, as though this sort of thing were nothing out of the ordinary. “We might as well thrash it out now while Dolph is here. I’ll admit that she’s a beauty, and a few months in England will prove whether she’s the right sort. If she isn’t, there’s no real harm done. Don’t mind my talking like this, do you, Dolph?”

“It’s a great idea,” said he; “carry on.”

“Well, it’s the only one I’ve got and it seems much better than having you mooning lovesick round a mining-camp with a black-haired and very husky young miner loathing the sight of you. Fact is, Dolph, that wouldn’t do at all, and there’d

certainly be trouble. I'll do what I can, but, of course, it all depends on mother—whether she's willing.”

“It sounds very altruistic, but what about Jennifer?” quavered Mrs. Martin.

“Ye—es, I'd thought of that. Perhaps you'd better leave her to me, and we'll have a talk somewhere through the night. There are ways of reaching her, if one knows them. Gracious, it seems I'm attempting to settle everything for everyone. I'll lend her some clothes to start with. Has anyone anything else to suggest?”

The elder Martins glanced at each other interrogatively, and shrugged. It appeared that no one could think of an alternative. Dolph took a long breath, and felt excessively grateful. Pirrie on the train! Pirrie on board ship! Pirrie in London! And all within a month. It was unbelievable.

“Jule,” he exploded, “you're a perfect brick!”

She gave him a wistful little smile.

“Bricks are always being tapped into place to build walls to shelter some—no—I didn't mean that. And, please, nothing to Jennifer till to-morrow. I may have rather a trying night of it.”

She rose, and made her way upstream toward her sister. Martin relit his pipe very thoughtfully. There was a pause.

“The girl is quite right, y'know; and I fancy that Stevens will be here any minute. Better leave that end of it to me.”

Mrs. Martin and Dolph vanished, one puzzling her head over new and undreamed-of responsibilities, the other charged with gratitude to Jule. Martin waited, thinking very hard. Presently a broad-shouldered figure came up the trail, and he put out his hand.

“Glad to see you. A certain rather excited young man told me you were coming. It appears,” he added with a laugh, “those two have been moving rather fast.”

Stevens nodded. “Yes, they have, and I'm sorry. Pirrie has been talking to me.”

“Sorry! Why?”

“Well,” said the other man regretfully, “affairs like this don't often come to anything, though it seems quite mutual. But it will make the girl lonely later on. I've been trying to see the matter from your angle, and it's difficult. Pirrie, you see—well—she has no people she can call her own.”

“Tell me all you can,” said Martin quietly.

That didn't take long, and he listened, studying Stevens himself with close attention. What he found, he liked. A straight man this, superlatively honest, unselfish to a degree, one who had worked hard all his life, and got but little for it. And it struck the Londoner that if Pirrie had absorbed some of these qualities, she ought to

be good enough for anyone. When the visitor came to the end of his story, he gave a short mirthless laugh.

“So that’s that,” he concluded. “Now you know all that I do.”

“And this mine of yours? I’d be glad to hear anything you care to say further on that subject.”

“All I have is in it, and two years’ work. I believe in it, and geologically speaking it’s well situated. The next few months will tell the story, if I can see them through.”

He said this without any sort of appeal, but Martin perceived his anxiety.

“You own the property outright?”

“There are three of us with equal interests; Purdey, Danks and myself.”

“Danks?”

“He’s the contractor driving the levels. I had to offer him a one-third ownership in lieu of wages.”

“That seems a pity. No other way?”

“There’s nothing on paper, but I’ve promised,” said Stevens evenly.

“What do you consider the mine worth?” asked Martin, liking the man more and more.

“As it stands, it’s a prospect, not a mine, and I can’t tell you. If we find what I believe is there, I’d say fifty thousand pounds at the least. If we don’t, it isn’t worth a cent. Miner’s luck,” he added, “and it’s always like that. You have it—or you haven’t. Nothing between.”

“Could I acquire a one-quarter interest now from you three by putting some money in?”

Stevens blinked at him. “You certainly could, but—well—do you realize the risk?”

The Londoner leaned forward. “Mr. Stevens, I’ve been in business for over thirty years, and have learned that you can either back a man or an undertaking. Sometimes one is advisable, sometimes the other. This time it’s the man, from which you can fairly well assume what I feel about you personally. Also I’m not afraid to take a reasonable gamble with my eyes open, and make this proposal. So soon as we reach Vancouver, I’ll send in an engineer to inspect the Hope. If his report is favourable, I’ll join you, acquire an interest, and put up some more working capital to balance what you have already found. Is that satisfactory?”

Stevens nodded jerkily. He could not speak.

“Then we might revert to that later. Now, another thing, and getting back to this girl of yours. Would you be willing to trust her to us for, say, a year? Our guest, of course, and all she’d have to provide would be her own very charming self. My wife

and I have talked the matter over, and we'll be delighted to treat her as one of our own. Young Hudson wants to stay on at the Hope, but I suggest the other plan is better for them both. Come, what do you say?"

Stevens stammered something inarticulate. So much of the past was crowding back on him, that it dimmed the future. He saw Pirrie living in camps, tents, shacks, always on the move, sharing his own rough, comfortless, uncertain life, long-legged, ragged, golden-haired, a lovely sprite, a smiling fairy, a fine delicate thing that had bloomed through many a blistering winter, flower of the forest, exquisite and unsullied. So little life had offered her, and so much had he craved for her. And now this! His lips quivered, and the eyes of the man grew misty.

"I hardly know what to say," he murmured with difficulty, "and there can be only one answer. A thousand times I've dreamed of something like that for her, but it was always out of the question." He put out a big hand, crushing Martin's palm in a hard, tight grip. "Does she know—has she any idea at all?"

Martin, smiling, and wincing a little, shook his head.

"No, it was only suggested half an hour ago, and I think it's wise. 'Twill give those two youngsters a chance to study each other. By the way, I take it that your partner—Purdey, isn't it?—has no voice in the matter? They are not engaged?"

"No voice whatever. He's wanted her for months, but I was against it from the start. Purdey's all right underground, but no husband for Pirrie."

"Good! My wife will be able to come to see her to-morrow, and we'll move on towards the coast next day. Rather hard on you, I fear."

"Hard—yes—but I'll be happier than in a long time."

"Well, you can rest assured that we'll do our best for her in England. Don't worry about her outfit; that's our affair. And in case, you've any doubts about young Hudson, I've known the lad all his life. Straight as a string, that boy. And he's very well off."

"Pirrie goes empty handed," said Stevens in a low tone.

Martin clapped him on the shoulder.

"My friend, what more can those of our age do for these youngsters than try and help them to be happy. As it stands, you're giving up a great deal, and I'm not blind to what it's costing you. Now let us get back to this mining proposition."

Stevens went off in the dusk half an hour later, his heart very full, and feeling years younger. He found Pirrie waiting for him on the doorstep, and began his story. Suddenly she was sobbing on his breast, her arms tight round his neck.

"Dad!" she cried, "I do love him with all my soul, but I love you too, and I don't want to leave you. Always you've done everything for me."

"It's just right," he said, stroking the bright hair, "and so much better than anything I could imagine. They're awfully kind people—they'll do a thousand things I couldn't. And, child, you mustn't stay on here. I had decided that, anyway."

"Hugh?"

"Partly Hugh, and for many other reasons. This is a man's place, not yours, and you're going to see the world, Pirrie, the world of which you know so little. And that new friend of yours—well——"

She began to smile through her tears. "Well—what?"

"Youth to youth—that's the way of things. Hugh isn't the man for you."

"I've always known that," said she.

"Then leave it to me to settle with him."

"He'll be simply furious, Dad."

"I've had to deal with angry men before this."

"But you're going to be dreadfully lonely."

"I'm afraid that can't be helped. But there's something else."

He told her of Martin's other proposal, and she was delighted.

"It means that you and he will be partners, which in one way will keep us all together?"

"Something like that."

"And just when you wanted it most. You won't be anxious now?"

"No," he said confidently, "because—well—if there's gold anywhere in these mountains it's not far from the second level of the Hope."

"Hugh has no idea of this, has he?"

"Not the faintest; I'm just going to tell him. Better go to bed, child. I wonder if you'll dream to-night. I will."

She kissed him again, hugging him with strong young arms, trying to express a thousand things that could never be put into words. Then he went across to Purdey's shack, and found him smoking in sullen solitude.

"Good news for you, Hugh! Good news for the Hope."

"Let's have it: I need some."

Stevens told him of Martin's proposal to join them, and the dark eyes fixed in a hard stare. When it came to the Pirrie part of it, the young man stiffened, but he did not speak. Stevens regarded him with surprise.

"Well, how about it?"

Purdey knocked out his pipe, and deliberated.

"You're telling me that if his engineer's report is favourable, Martin is buying a quarter interest from us three for five thousand pounds, and putting up another five

for development?”

“That’s it.”

“Making something over eight thousand dollars to each of us?”

“Yes.”

“I’m agreeable: Danks will be too.”

“Where is he?”

“In the first level with the night shift. And, look here, about Pirrie!”

“Well?” asked the older man uncomfortably.

“You’re reckoning that a bit of money in my pocket will compensate?”

Stevens shook his head. “Compensation doesn’t enter into it. You’ve no claim there, and we’ve thrashed that out before.”

Purdey looked grimly at the Hope headgear, a stumpy, rough-hewn, timber skeleton standing out against a star-studded sky. Compared to the mountains leaning above it, one got the impression that it was a toy made of matches. The winding-wheel began to revolve as Danks sent up broken quartz to the dump. The steel bucket swayed, clanging, out of the abyss, tilted, and spilled itself into a car that a big Swede pushed along a narrow-gauge track. Then a sharp, loose, crystalline clatter. He pitched his mind underground, thinking very hard. His expression was furtive. Favourable report! At this he gave a sudden and very secret smile.

“Look here,” he said, “we’ve come to the end of it.”

“End of what, Hugh?”

“Our partnership. When Martin pays up, I’ll sell out my one-quarter to you for five thousand dollars. That means you’ll be half owner. Are you on?”

“Why sell out now?”

“Because I don’t propose to stay here without Pirrie. I’d sooner go prospecting on my own.”

He said this with an assumption of cheerfulness, but something very different was in his head, of which the other man, being by nature unsuspecting, had not the slightest conception.

Stevens smothered an exclamation. In his view, nothing better could possibly happen, and it would put a finish to an awkward situation. He felt infinitely relieved, and extended his hand.

“I think you’re wise, Hugh. No bad feeling, is there?”

“Not on my side,” said Purdey with feigned good fellowship.

“Then we’ll shake on it. Five thousand dollars for your interest. You won’t curse me if it turns out to be worth fifty?”

Purdey, smiling, took the proffered hand. They gripped, the one honest as

daylight, the other crafty, hotly desirous for the girl he was privately determined to have, and already deep in the scheme that, he reckoned, would meet his particular need.

“Well, good night, Hugh. It’s been a pretty fair day all round.”

Purdey nodded, thinking how easy some men were.

“Good night. I’ll go down now and fix it with Danks.”

Jule was talking to Jennifer in their tent. The door-flap had been fastened open, and, ten feet away, the mountain stream hurried on in swift tumult to the Fraser River. Its voice was very musical. Jennifer sat clasping her knees, while Jule lay on her back, staring at the ridge pole.

“But I’m somebody and she’s nobody,” put in Jen after a long and very eloquent pause.

“Exactly, and that’s just the point. Somebody has obligations, consequently it’s up to her to play the game. It’s *noblesse oblige*, though I hate to sound Victorian.”

“I think Dolph has gone perfectly mad.”

“Perhaps he has—he looked a bit that way when he got back to camp to-night—but there’s no other way to find out. Do be a sport, Jen! I can’t do it all myself. She’ll either go with a bang, or fall dead flat. And—she’s—never—had—anything—all—her—life! That’s what I can’t get over. It beats me.”

“Dolph isn’t a bad beginning for a novice,” said Jen caustically.

She was very hurt, and gave way to a shiver of anger. Happenings came back to her now, moments when Dolph had been emotional and what she called silly, when he said extreme things, and was demonstrative to the point of roughness. Once, months ago, he had snatched her in his arms, and kissed her passionately till she felt sick and weak. Then he stood back, white and trembling, with a light in his eyes from which she recoiled. But this was only once. After that, when she thought she saw other such moments approaching, she staved them off by becoming cool, and rather distant, and, she admitted to herself, unattractive to any man. Then they had ceased altogether.

In reality she was frightened, frightened to give herself, to surrender, frightened of what marriage involved. It was too physical. The love she had for him was the kind that would be very particular about his appearance, and manners, and the sort of head of a family he made, and the impression he created for others. She thought of all this now, when it was too late, and blamed herself fiercely. What a coward she had been!

“You know it won’t be exactly easy for Pirrie,” put in Jule, feeling about for her

cigarettes.

“Why?”

“She’ll have to live for awhile by imitation—imitating us. You and I will be the living patterns. I’ll bet she’s thinking of that now—this very minute. Jen, she’s never had a low-necked dress, or silk undies, or suède shoes, or a lace hanky. She’s never played tennis, or flirted, or mixed bathed, or had a girl friend. In fact, she’s a new proposition. Are you on?”

“On what?”

“To do our very best and darndest.” Jule gave a little sigh as she said this because it seemed her lot always to be helping some other girl. “In other words, to be sportsmen. And, besides, you don’t want Dolph if he loves her, do you?”

“Is it likely?”

“I’ve known such a thing happen,” said the other girl sagely.

“It won’t this time.”

“Well, I’m glad; and, Jen, she’s lovely—we’ve got to admit that. There’s good blood showing there. I wish one knew, but don’t, suppose we ever will. Gracious, I seem to have done most of the talking, don’t I?”

Her sister nodded. “That’s all right. You’re a more naturally decent sort than I am, Jule, and I can’t fight you. Dolph’s become quite different since he found her; anyone can see that. If he could be his new self to me; if, now, I could waken him as she has, I’d never give him up. But—but I can’t—so what’s the use?”

She fell silent, struggling with her own pride, and picturing Pirrie in an evening frock, the corn-yellow hair shingled and waved, blue eyes alight. Pirrie would take in London. No doubt of that, and she would be something new, for which there was always a demand. And she moved like a young deer.

“I could manage to be away a good deal of the time, Jule.”

“Which would only suggest to every one of our friends that you were afraid of comparisons. That would not do, Jen, and mother wouldn’t like it either. Come on! It will be quite good fun if we go the right way about it.”

“All right—I’ll try.”

Jule leaned over and patted her arm. “Splendid, and now what can we let her have in the way of clothes. Do look at those stars! Aren’t they wonderful!”

CHAPTER IV
UNDERGROUND

THE hour was somewhere near midnight in Martin's camp. Underground in the Hope, the night shift was pounding drill steel into a face of flinty quartz that did not look over rich. No free gold visible. Danks, with his crew, swung a skilful hammer to keep his hand in. Wiping the sweat from his brows he felt a touch on the shoulder.

"Come back here a bit: I want to talk to you."

"What's up?"

Purdey jerked his head toward the landing, where square sets of heavy timber, wedged solidly against the rock, made a platform from which ladders ascended to daylight, and led downward through the abyss to the lower level. The clink of hammers came faint but clear. A hundred feet overhead glimmered a grey patch, the gateway to the outer world.

Danks, wiping his moist hands, filled his pipe, and looked expectant. The other man began to talk to the accompaniment of a slow, regular drip-drip from a seam in the formation nearby. It sounded like a water-clock, perfectly timed.

"Y'understand now?" said he, reaching the end of his story.

Danks nodded, thinking it almost too good to be true. Then, in a husky tone:

"And supposing the report isn't favourable?"

"Hell! What do you think we're here for?" Purdey's tone had a lift of contempt. "It's got to be, and you know more about the game than I do."

"Perhaps," admitted Danks. "I know a thing or two."

"Happened before, hasn't it?"

"Once or twice."

"You pulled it off?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's up to you again."

Danks, sucking wetly at his pipe, looked reflective.

"A lot depends on the sort of man Martin sends in, how he takes his samples, who's with him at the time, the kind of thing he carries them in, and—well, a lot more. I've struck engineers who were too smart for me. With others, I was the smart one. But it's five years if you're nabbed. A fellow got that in Red Mountain, Nevada, when I was there, just because he was a trifle clumsy."

"It's eight thousand dollars apiece for this hole in the ground if you're not

clumsy.”

“Y’know,” said Danks, looking slowly about through the darkness in an oddly critical fashion, “I’m not so sure this is just a hole in the ground.”

“Twill never make a mine.”

“Your saying so doesn’t prove it. I can’t tell, no one can yet, but I’ve an idea the real stuff is here.”

“Ten dollars a ton won’t pay, and that’s our average.”

“Yes-es, right enough, but—well——” he broke off, pulling down his brows, “if we were to strike the real paystreak, the Hope is a winner.”

“Which will you have—the chance of that or the eight thousand?”

“How much of a damn fool do you think I am? And, anyway——”

He gave a grunt of amusement, and for a moment they were both silent. The hammers had ceased clinking at the breast of the level, and the Swedes were taking a spell. A vast noiselessness spread underground, and the mine was like a huge, moist, hollow ear, a sort of rocky drum, an enormous sounding-box that transmitted the slightest movement of air. The drip-drip measured out its eternal seconds, and the flinty wall enclosing the two conspirators reflected little yellow facets of light cast by guttering candles, suspended in steel holders against tiny crannies where the hooks had caught. This booming, man-made cavity in the earth’s bosom seemed to have its secrets, secrets that millions of years ago were folded away in threadlike golden seams against the hour when humanity with sweat and steel and dynamite should burrow after them. And in the case of the Hope they were well hidden.

Something of this must have penetrated the thoughts of Danks, for presently he gave a strange laugh.

“Well, let’s get to business. We’ll say the engineer—and I hope to God he’s a cub—arrives here. He comes underground, having finished with surface geology, and inspects and measures. Then he chips off samples across the face of the vein—say ten pounds of chips to a sample. These go—and he puts them himself, mind you—into small canvas sacks. The sacks are sealed and numbered then and there. He hangs on to ’em, never letting them out of his sight. He gets back to the surface, still with his eyes on ’em, loads his pack-horse, and clears out. That’s the usual programme. Now what do you reckon is the safest way to salt those samples—remembering it’s five years if you’re nabbed?”

“You’re the doctor. I’m damned if I know.”

“Well,” conceded the other man, “you do it with a squirt—sort of hypodermic.”

“Wha-at!”

“The sacks—you dope them—not the engineer,” grinned Danks. “Dissolved

gold—that's the stuff.”

“Got any?”

“It might be that I tote a little round with me: you never know when you'll need it, and a few ounces in the right place goes a long way. It's a gold solution, hydrofluoric acid being one of the few things that will dissolve gold. I'm no chemist, but I got that far. It looks like water. You give each sack a jab with the squirt, and the trick's done. But not too much, and you've got to do it quick. It don't show except in the assays. The only thing that beats it is if the engineer washes his samples in clean water, but they don't often do it.”

“God! but that's clever.”

Danks nodded with obvious self-approbation, then drifted off into rambling stories about the salting of other claims in which the job had had the desired result. While he talked, bringing in without the slightest reserve the names of those who were involved, it occurred to Purdey that no one seemed to have made any permanent gain out of this nefarious business. No one kept his money for long. It was too slippery, and what one pocketed to-day, one appeared to lose to-morrow. And all the time this recital went on, Stevens' Hope seemed to be listening with its great cavernous ear, chuckling mysteriously in the dark, maintaining its own secrets, and opposing its massive and silent gloom to the schemes of these pygmies who plotted in its bowels.

“And forgetting that part of it, there's something else that strikes me,” added Danks with a touch of satire.

“What?”

“For a he-man you're handing over that girl of yours pretty readily. Haven't turned a hair that I can see.”

Purdey looked at him hard. “Maybe there's a side of it you don't see. I was just coming to that: it's part of the rest of it. I've got to have money first, then—” he hesitated a moment, and decided that since some confederate was necessary, it might as well be Danks, “she's going to England with that tenderfoot. All right—I can't stop it, but Stevens tells me she won't be married for months. No harm done if she isn't.”

“I don't exactly see her coming back here,” struck in Danks.

“You wait, and think this over. No one knows who she is. I've had that from Stevens many a time. Well, if within the next two or three months,” here Purdey's voice took on an ugly tone, “I can produce a document—we'll call it an affidavit—of certain facts, all sworn to and witnessed by someone who happens to know, that'll be about all I want. That gilt-edged crowd she's going with will sort of lose interest,

and she'll be glad enough to have me."

"What facts are you talking about?" asked Danks harshly.

"Concerning her birth. They'll cost something, and that's why I need the money first."

Danks screwed up his eyes, and did not answer at once. In his heart he didn't like it. Remnants of decent feeling still clung to him. He had no objections to salting a mine, or jumping a claim, or playing any of the recognized games that so often accompany the pursuit of precious metal, but this was different; and somehow in the corners of the consciousness of men like himself there persisted a sort of uncouth regard for women—simply because they were women.

A woman, for instance, a decent woman, could go alone and unprotected through the mining country of the West, and be safer than in any city. They aroused a sense of chivalry in those whose lives were, perforce, devoid of any gentleness or softness. Men did ridiculous and heroic things for them without any thought of reward.

And Pirrie was something of a personage amongst the foothills of the Rockies. She was known and talked about in many a camp. Grizzled prospectors had played with her when she was a child, and she had accumulated a store of their gifts, nuggets, bits of quartz with free gold running through them like yellow threads, skins of sable and mink, agates from the beds of mountain streams, all making a little treasure-house of the wilderness. She had played with these things all her life. Women—women of the camps who had lost all that women have to lose—had been roused to tenderness and fleeting remorse by the golden hair and blue eyes of Stevens' foundling, and built up romances about her. Who she was mattered not a whit to them, and her spirit, her gaiety and quick friendliness with all she met had meant a taste of something different and rather precious.

Danks, aware of all this, was ill at ease.

"You mean to marry her?" said he stiffly.

"Sure I do."

"How sure?"

Purdey glanced at him puzzled. "I don't see that it's your business, anyway. What are you getting at?"

"If you don't, look out for yourself. You can monkey with the Hope, and I'll help, but you play tricks with that girl, and, by God, you've got two to reckon with. Oh yes, 'twould let me in too—I know that—but it don't matter. She's always been nice to me—sort of girl I'd have liked for a daughter. Salt this damned prospect all you please, but double-cross Pirrie, and I'll fill you full of lead. Now you've got it

straight.”

Ordinarily Purdey would have hotly resented anything of this sort, but to-night somehow he could not, and for a moment or two sat perfectly still. In one way the outburst had surprised him; in another it didn't. He wanted Pirrie, wanted her horribly with a savage hunger now sharpened by the fact that she was going out of his sight and far away. He hated that, and was helpless to stop it. What he felt for her was not love, but desire for possession. There was admiration in it, but no touch of homage. He would risk anything to get her, but was not of the kind to make any sacrifice for her sake. The thing was rather animal and primitive, blind and unreasoning.

“Well,” broke in Danks, “I've said my say, so what about it?”

“I'll ask you to my wedding,” countered Purdey. “Will that satisfy you?”

As he spoke, the night shift, having loaded their first round of holes, moved back toward the shaft with a sackful of drill steel to be hoisted for re-sharpening. Two jerks on the bell-wire brought down the plunging bucket. One man got in, two stood precariously on the rim, and the bucket slid upward. It came down again empty. Again the sound of hurrying feet from the breast of the level, and the conspirators, joining this last miner, who was loader and firer, were borne swiftly to the upper world. There, at the edge of the dump, they were constrained by habit to wait, and in thirty seconds the earth under their feet transmitted three slight vibrations, accompanied by three dull equidistant thuds, and a muffled sliding of splintered quartz, not loud, but cushioned and deadened by a hundred intervening feet of solid rock. It meant that the three holes drilled during the shift had all gone off. A faint cloud of vapour curled from the shaft mouth, hanging about the legs of the headgear.

“So that's all right!” nodded Purdey.

Danks glanced at the sky. A wonderful night! The heavens seemed to have depth, immeasurable depth, and to be hung thick with tiny torches, all blazing diamond white, suspended not far above the earth, and palpitating with an intense and crystalline light. Around lay the mountains, half filling the sky, their huge amorphous masses resting on their circumambient foothills. Here and there a naked peak projected sharply, its flanks gathering and reflecting the nocturnal illumination, its tip touched with snow, a gigantic finger pointing austere to the zenith. There was no sound except the low cough of the compressor as it forced air into the gas-laden atmosphere of the first level. And there was no wind. Something about it all, whether the space, the silence, the immensity or the peacefulness, communicated itself to Danks with a queer and unexpected significance. It was like a rebuke.

“Lord!” he said, “what a night. Did you ever see such stars!”

For the first time in her life, Pirrie felt frightened. She was riding beside Mrs. Martin, and five minutes ago had waved good-bye to a group of tiny figures that stood beside the headgear of Stevens' Hope and watched her out of sight. So sharply had the trail climbed, that at the point where the mine finally disappeared from sight it was a thousand feet below her, and perhaps a mile away. The crack, very thin and distant, of Stevens' rifle sending its parting salute was still in her ears.

The separation had been hard, harder even than she anticipated, and what she felt about Stevens was quite impossible to be put into words. When she mounted her horse, Dolph's eyes, adoring though they were, had not done much to help. It was always for her that Stevens had wanted things, and never for himself, and with a man's strength and a woman's tenderness he had been father and mother since she could remember anything. To-day his face, strive as he would, could not mask his sense of loss. As to Purdey, the girl had been surprised. She had feared trouble between him and Dolph, but there was none. He had joked a little and said that with luck he would call on her in London before long, and that was all.

Jennifer and Jule, especially Jule, had been wonderful. Under the circumstances, she had expected some sign of resentment, or at least indifference, but there was none. In Jule's brown eyes she read honesty; in Jennifer's patrician features no trace of jealousy. Pirrie marvelled at this, admitting that had the position been reversed, it would have taxed her to be as friendly and hospitable—even to sharing wardrobes.

During the previous evening, she had had a long talk with Dolph, the outcome of much thought on her part, and had left that youthful lover distinctly impressed with her sagacity.

"I see it this way," she argued. "I'm really on trial, not with you, but them. If you're always making love to me, it will never do. I do love you, Dolph, and I'm going to love you more, but I've so much to learn that—well, it's going to keep me awfully busy."

"Aren't we ever to be alone?" he objected promptly.

"Not too often; I don't think we should. And we mustn't run away from the others."

"I thought we were engaged." This with sudden gloom.

"We are—and we aren't."

"That's a new way of putting it."

"Sorry, Dolph, but you've got to help. Don't you see? My pride, or something that goes for pride, is sending me signals. In six months I want the Martins—all of them—to say I've been a success. I've nothing to start with except a face that you

seem to like, and some yellow hair and a couple of blue eyes, and that isn't nearly enough. I'll need a good deal more to satisfy your friends, and I'm bound to make mistakes. Jule tells me I'm going to meet a lot of people, and other men, of course, and—well, can't you understand how any girl would feel?"

"Why drag in other men?"

She laughed a little. "Jule says they'll come without dragging."

Dolph felt rebellious. "Look here, I don't want you to change. I'm in love with what you are now—this minute."

"Aren't you going to help?"

"You said six months," he protested.

She nodded. "I won't be ready to be married before then. And," she added with a little shake in her voice, "there's something else."

"What, darling?"

"Instincts—or something of that sort. You and the rest of you are the first people of your kind I've ever met, and—and——" She faltered, with something in her eyes he had not seen before.

"Yes?" said he, watching her closely.

"In the first moment you seemed just strange, and in the next perfectly natural, as though in a way you were my own sort of people. To-day, talking with Jule, it was like finding something that used to be mine, and that I'd lost for awhile. Part of me waked up. I seemed to have had it all the time, but forgotten about it. And now, while we're together, bits of things come back, things that happened before Dad found me on the Caribou Trail, and a sort of picture of a woman, quite young, who must have been very like me, and a little song she used to sing. But I can't remember that, and—and——"

She broke off, sudden tears filling her eyes, then flung herself into his arms, and clung. "Dolph—Dolph—be just a brother to begin with. I couldn't stand any more."

He had a wave of understanding, gave her a bearlike, brotherly hug, and kissed her without passion.

"Gad! But I'm a selfish beast. You're perfectly right. To-morrow you ride with Mother Martin, and forget about me."

Thus it came that when Pirrie waved good-bye to Stevens' Hope, it was Mrs. Martin who was with her, wisely silent and very curious. The others had ridden ahead over the divide that separated the mine from the next valley, and there could be heard only the slither of horses' feet in loose stones and the raucous voice of a pack-mule. Then Pirrie rubbed her eyes very hard, took a long breath, and sent this godgiven friend of hers a wistful look.

“Is it any use my trying to say thank you? I couldn’t sleep last night for thinking about it.”

“No, my dear: no thanks are necessary.”

“I wonder you don’t hate me,” said the girl abruptly, “yet you ask me to stay with you.”

“Hate you!” Mrs. Martin’s tone was very gentle.

“I think I would, if I were you. Please forgive me, but I’ve got to say it. I didn’t—” she stammered confusedly, “I didn’t try to attract Dolph, and I didn’t know anything about Jennifer, and—and it just happened. One minute I was alone, and miserable about the mine and Hugh Purdey, and the next I was in Dolph’s arms, not knowing or caring much who he was and where he came from. It was all quite mad, and very wonderful—as though—” she paused, then added chaotically, “as though he’d dropped out of a tree.”

Mrs. Martin, laughing, took occasion for a good look at this outspoken child whose honesty was so refreshing. It was quite obvious that in London Pirrie would be rather devastating—to men, and that Dolph was in for competition. No doubt of that. Pirrie’s carriage—the lift of her graceful head from the supple shoulders—the light that changed so swiftly in the deep sapphire of her eyes—the mouth, at once tender, provocative and humorous—a most kissable mouth—the hair, at the same moment tawny, bronze and yellow—all this meant a great deal more than the girl could yet realize. Yes—it would keep Dolph busy to hold his own. She was thinking of this, and that her own responsibilities in the matter promised to be arduous, when Pirrie’s voice came in again.

“Of course I know why you’ve asked me to England, and it would not be fair if I didn’t tell you.”

“I wonder, my dear, if you know it all.”

Pirrie turned in her saddle. “All!”

“My husband and I don’t attempt to settle these affairs for our young people. All we can do is to try and help them to decide wisely, and the decision must be their own. So we think that it would be a good thing for you to meet other people, especially other men, before matters are settled between you and Dolph.”

Pirrie gave her a brilliant smile. “Other men! I’d simply love to.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way to Dolph.”

“No, I suppose not, but——”

She was silent for a moment, eyes fixed on the trail that wound sinuously toward a hanging valley outspread at their feet. Through it ran a glacier-fed stream, milky blue, between banks carpeted with tall, green, conical-pointed spruce. Farther on, a

patch of meadowland marked the location of deserted beaver dams, and in the middle of this they could see a small dark spot. Simultaneously Jim's voice came drifting back that the spot was a black bear feeding on blueberries, and while they watched, the beast ran for shelter, bouncing over the tall grass like an animated rubber ball. At the lower lip of the valley, the stream spilled itself into a wrinkle of the foothills. Its feathery cascade was as yet out of sight, but its liquid voice sang aloud in the stillness, and from it rose a vaporous plume that dissipated in the sun's strengthening rays.

It was all wild, lonely, beautiful, but Pirrie hardly saw it. Other men! She remembered Dolph's expression when that was brought up the day before, and it came to her with a sort of breathless significance that he was but one of the many it was promised she would meet. Supposing that——! She shook her head, then felt suddenly thankful for the perfection of her slim agile body and the contour of the oval face that had stared back at her so many thousands of times from a cracked piece of looking-glass hung from a log wall.

"You didn't finish what you were saying," put in Mrs. Martin with genuine curiosity.

Pirrie smiled, shaking her golden head.

"I'll have to tell you the rest just in bits. I've said good-bye to all I've known all my life, and can't tell what's coming, except that I'm with the kindest people in the world."

Mrs. Martin smiled back at her, but said nothing more, and at a turn in the trail they rejoined the rest of the party. She had a shrewd idea of certain things that were bound to happen to a girl like this. Also she felt a little apprehensive for Dolph.

There are mining engineers—and mining engineers. They vary in quality and value. To some of them the letters M.E. are like the tail to a dog, not much practical use. They call themselves M.E. because without that appellation they would get no business whatever, but their qualifications are slim, being merely what a little superficial reading, the ability to talk glibly, and an "at-homeness" in mining camps has provided. In mining circles the word liar is sometimes expressed comparatively as follows: liar—damned liar—mining expert.

Some two weeks after Pirrie set forth, there dismounted at Stevens' Hope, a stout, middle-aged, sunburned and saddle-sore man, who produced a letter from Martin, authorizing him to inspect the property on his behalf. Then he asked for a drink—not liquor—and looked about with interested eyes. He was, he announced, the George Bustard, M.E., to whom the matter of Martin's possible investment had

been referred. He had a genial manner, and Stevens liked the look of him. He spoke like one of experience. He said that he was excessively busy, but had been persuaded by his bank to take a few days off to oblige the Britisher.

That is what he said, the actual truth being that this was the first real job which had come his way for months, and he'd jumped at it. Work of his kind had been slack in Vancouver for a year, and long since he had smelted down his collection of rich samples to keep the pot boiling. There had been a little assaying to do for casual prospectors at two dollars an assay, but nothing more, so when Providence in the shape of Henry Martin came along he could hardly believe his luck. Five hundred dollars was the agreed fee. Martin, who had been informed that the man was honest, closed the bargain, and with his party took the Montreal express. Results were to follow by cable to England.

To be honest—to be good-natured—to be an optimist—these are qualities which make an individual acceptable to his fellows. They provide the natural lubricant for pleasurable human intercommunication. But in the mining engineer they need to be reinforced by the added instinct for precaution, and Bustard was not by nature cautious. In the case of his brief association with Stevens' Hope, this shortage was destined to have curious results. Had he been cautious, much would not have happened that did happen, one life of questionable value would have been saved, and a deal of mental suffering avoided.

The five hundred, having been deposited at the bank to be paid over in exchange for his report, Bustard wasted little time on preliminaries. The surface inspection was brief, the equipment spoke for itself, and, next morning, he went underground with Purdey and Danks. Stevens remained above, because in such affairs as these there is a sort of ritual. He wanted Bustard to feel free, and it was not dignified to follow him about. The mine was emptied of miners, and its booming caverns left at the disposition of the engineer. Danks suggested that he and Purdey should give what help was needed, and this ingenuous offer being immediately accepted, Bustard put on his oilskin hat, and, fixing the candle in its brim, started down the ladder between the two.

Purdey, going first, gripped the rungs in suppressed excitement. The night before he had spent a secret hour with Danks, when the latter produced a glass syringe and a bottle of colourless liquid that looked extremely inoffensive. It might have been water. The syringe had a metal base, prolonged into a hollow steel needle. He filled the cylinder with care, balanced it for a reflective moment, and gave it to Purdey.

“Carry it point up inside your shirt. If it leaks, your shirt will assay about a hundred dollars to the ton. I've known engineers assay their sample-bags apart from

the samples, and get surprising results, but this bird doesn't look smart enough for that."

Purdey fingered the thing as though it were a bomb.

"Yes—but when do I use it?"

"Can't tell you before I've seen him at work. Keep your eye on me, and for God's sake don't get rattled and empty it all into one bag. I've known that happen too. You keep your nerve. I'll make the chance."

This sharply in his mind, Purdey reached the upper level, where the others joined him, and affairs progressed very much as predicted. Bustard spread a wide strip of canvas on the floor, and chipped across the face of the vein with a prospecting pick. He did it very neatly, and the strip caught practically all the chippings. He mixed these thoroughly, quartered them, put one-quarter in a bag with a slip of paper, and tied the mouth very tight. Sample Number 1. So on from point to point along the level, keeping the accumulating bags always under his nose.

Purdey, glancing at Danks, felt bewildered, and walked stiffly lest the thing inside his shirt should leak. The needle end scraped his skin. Danks was apparently quite cheerful. He did not touch anything, and even threw water on the vein so that Bustard might get clean samples. Time passed, and the bags grew in number. The three were at the breast of the second level, and the work about finished, when the moment came. Bustard was chipping busily against the flinty face, steel ringing on quartz, when Danks gave an oath, put his hand over his eyes, and reeled back.

"What's up?" Bustard's pick hung in mid air.

"Got it in the eye. God! it hurts."

Bustard turned, all sympathetic in an instant.

"Here—hold this candle—no—higher—that's it—let me look."

What happened then took a full two minutes, the longest that Purdey had ever known. Danks backed away several feet, keeping his face toward the little pile of bags, and stood, candle uplifted, while Bustard, wiping his slimy hands, explored the eye with a touch remarkably delicate for so big a man. Finally he nodded, moistened his handkerchief, wrapped a corner of it round a split match, and ran it back and forth under the lid. Presently he gave a grunt.

"Now—just a second—there, I've got it. Sharp, eh?"

It was sharp, and the eye bled a little, but Danks, very grateful, did not seem to mind, nor did he cast a single look at Purdey, who, hands rather shaky, was thrusting the syringe back under his shirt. His mouth was dry, and the syringe empty. Twenty swift jabs into twenty bulging bags. Danks had made time for that.

"All right now?" said Bustard. "That's all of it?"

“Fine—yes—that’s all. Much obliged to you too. Funny how a little thing like that can hurt.”

“I know—had ’em myself. Well, I’m about finished, so we’ll get this stuff to the surface. No, don’t trouble, I’ll do it. Samples, y’know—well, no one’s supposed to touch ’em. You fellows understand. I can see that by the way you’ve acted. Makes the job a pleasure compared to some I’ve struck.”

“Sure!” agreed Danks heartily. “We understand. What do you make of her, anyway—speaking generally?”

“I’ll know a good deal more in a few days. It’s a nice-looking vein, and the geology is right, and—well, that’s all I care to say. We’ll go up now.”

They went up, the partners first, stepping carefully round the heap of bags. The bucket snatched them out of sight. Then followed Bustard with his hundredweight of carefully guarded quartz fragments. Danks watched him gravely as he put these all into a larger sack that he loaded on his pack-horse. Stevens, whom they found waiting at the surface, watched also, glad that the thing was over, and wondering greatly what the issue would be. He counted the samples, the determining factors in how many a month of back-breaking labour. It was queer, in a way, that another man should come along, and, after a few easy hours of work make or break the greatest effort of one’s life. Perhaps, he reflected, that *was* life.

When Bustard left, which was almost at once, Stevens looked inquiringly at the two.

“What did he seem to make of it?”

“We don’t know a thing,” said Danks with a shrug. “He sampled pretty thoroughly, and they were fair enough, so we stood back and left him to it. He knows his way about, I’ll say that. I guess we might as well get to work now.”

Stevens nodded, and the two moved off. When they were out of hearing, Danks gave a chuckle.

“Well, what did I tell you. All went like a clock, didn’t it? He was smarter than I expected by the looks of him, but not quite spry enough for yours truly. I guess I’ll have to use the other eye next time.”

Purdey gaped at him. “Don’t tell me that you——!”

“Of course I did. I saw you getting rattled, but had to put it off as long as I dared to let those samples pile up. Then I shoved the thing in, and damned near put my eye out. He *had* to find something, and it *had* to take a certain time to find it. I watched you all right with the other eye, and would have laughed, too, if it hadn’t hurt so much. And I don’t mind saying that as an amateur mine-salter you’ll pass.”

Purdey had no words. He had gone beyond the law. The thing was done, and

could never be undone. He choked at the thought of it, then, with a sudden surge of recklessness, wondered how effective the job would be. It was all a terrific gamble, but, certainly, the assay value of the ore in Stevens' Hope had considerably increased. Perhaps doubled! He hazarded something about this.

"You can never tell within a dollar or two," said Danks, glowing with the consciousness of a good job neatly done. "I reckon 'twill make her run something over twenty dollars to the ton, which is enough to swing the deal. What are you sweating about?"

"If Stevens should ever get a whisper of this!" breathed Purdey.

"Do you talk in your sleep?"

"No."

"Then don't start now. Here—give me that squirt! I hate to part with an old friend, but it's better out of the way."

He took the thing, and flung it into the ravine that ran in a deep gash immediately behind his cabin. They heard the tinkle of splintered glass.

"Now," he went on, "what is there left? Just you and me. You forget everything except the eight thousand that's coming to you, and trust me to keep my trap shut. You can bet your little interest in the Hope on that. As a subject for conversation it's the last one I'll ever choose."

And in this, though he did not know it at the time, Danks was absolutely correct.

CHAPTER V

IN LONDON

“JULE—I can’t—I feel awful! Isn’t it far too low?”

This in a rather pleased little gasp from Pirrie, as she stood in front of a tall wall mirror in Jule’s room in Belgrave Square.

Jule put back her head, and laughed. “It’s no lower than anyone else’s, and you look simply ripping. Dolph will adore it.”

That helped somewhat, and Pirrie took another half-terrified, half-fascinated stare. She saw her own white shoulders rising bare and creamy out of a pale blue evening frock, a more fragile and filmy garment than she had ever dreamed of. It possessed, to her mind, neither weight nor substance, and when she moved she could not feel it. All she did feel was the silky texture of what came next her skin, which in itself was a sort of caress. For the rest of it, she was wearing pale diaphanous stockings that might have been cut out of the sky, and slippers the colour of her hair. The hair had been shingled, and lay in deep tawny waves that set off the fine poise of her small head. The head looked classical with its clear-cut features and suggestion of native vitality. Jule examined the whole effect with a critical eye.

“I have a growing suspicion that you will be very much it to-night. Jen, come here a minute!”

Jennifer floated in from an adjoining room, and after one swift glance felt a little stab of envy. Was this transformation the girl they had picked up at Stevens’ Hope? In the same moment she caught a fugitive and pleading look from Pirrie, signalling that she was only doing what they wished her to do, wearing the things they had chosen for her, that she was in all matters entirely in their hands, and didn’t want to compete with anybody—for anything. The look implored Jennifer to understand this, and it won in return a smile of complete friendship.

“It’s just perfect, and don’t touch it. Two minutes after we get there, you’ll have forgotten all about it. I think we’d better go down now: they’re waiting.”

Pirrie gulped, and they went down. In front of the mantel were ranged three young men, very sleek and Mayfairish, with Dolph in the middle. That youth, bunking hard when he saw the vision in pale blue, suppressed his emotions with an effort, and introduced his friends.

“Pirrie, I present a worthless person known as Toots. His tailor calls him Sir John Berwick. The massive gent on my left, hailed by his intimates as The Infant, is Mr. Matthew Lynch. When not otherwise interested, he assists his father, who has a

bevy of coalmines in Yorkshire. Beware of them both, because neither is to be trusted.”

They all laughed, and Pirrie put out her hand. It was held for a perceptible moment by Toots, a long, lean, carefree person with a very merry eye, till he was displaced by the bulk of The Infant, who, she later learned, was the amateur middleweight champion of the North of England. Then they embarked for Cavendish Square in three cars, all owner-driven. Pirrie was confided to The Infant. It seemed that he was in no hurry, and the others were out of sight when he turned into Buckingham Palace Road.

“You—ah—er—first time in England, Dolph tells me,” said he, reducing speed to a crawl.

Pirrie nodded.

“You—er—ah—like it?”

“Awfully: everyone is so kind.”

He sent her an oblique glance. “Quite—they would be. Like—ah—dancing?”

“Yes,” said she, “but I’ve had practically none.”

“Lord! Don’t Canadians dance?”

“Not much, where I came from.”

“Where’s that?”

She told him as much as there seemed time to tell, and he listened with mounting interest. Also he looked a shade incredulous.

“Sounds a bit romantic—what. Staying long with the Martins?”

“Six months—perhaps. I really don’t know yet.”

“Good! Make it the six, anyway. We’ll see something of each other. I’m an old friend of theirs.”

“That would be very nice,” she conceded cautiously.

“You’ll have a good time all right.” He gave a little laugh. “I see now what Dolph was driving at.”

“Driving at?”

“Hum—yes—when he told me to keep my distance.”

“Did Dolph say that?”

He nodded, chuckling. “Said it several times in several different ways. Bit shirty about it too. But he needn’t have worried his worshipping soul over me. You see—er—ah—I’m in love as it is: all dished up and ready to serve.”

“How perfectly splendid!” she murmured, smitten with laughter.

“No, it ain’t splendid—or funny either. She doesn’t know anything about it.”

“You haven’t told her!”

“Can’t—’fraid to—gives me the prickles whenever I think of it. Got the wind up proper, I have. I’ll tell you sometime—perhaps. Meanwhile you just let old Dolph stew a bit. It won’t hurt him. I suppose we’d better push along.”

Pirrie leaned back, silent, thinking very hard. It was her second week in London, her first big dance—the very first in all her life, and one month since she had left Stevens’ Hope. No use trying to analyse her multitude of sensations. That had been impossible since the start. She was just feeling—feeling with every fibre of her body—that somehow she had been saving herself up for exactly such an experience as this.

The extraordinary fact was that in spite of its novelty, the transition should have seemed so natural. No other word for it. Surprise had followed surprise, yet, in a way, they were not surprises, because so soon as they had taken place, she saw them to be what she had more or less expected—which was in itself ridiculous. She knew, and was thankful for it, that she had committed no *gaucheries*; but what she did not know was the closeness with which the Martins were watching her, and the constant glances they exchanged, all of the same significance. Pirrie might have been born on the Caribou Trail, but she was no real child of the wilderness.

“Look here,” struck in Mr. Matthew Lynch, “I don’t know why I’ve been bleating about my affairs to you, except that—well—”

“Well what?” smiled Pirrie.

“Something about you—dunno what. Forget it, will you. There are the rest of our gang waiting. Perhaps you’ll note the slightly acid expression on Dolph. Childish, I call it.”

A canopy led from the kerb to the front door, and two minutes later Pirrie found herself shaking hands with a tall and beautifully dressed woman who murmured something, and turned immediately to her next guest. Pirrie moved on to fairyland. All exactly as though some of the pictures she had seen in occasional copies of English illustrated papers had come to life. She used to pore over these on her doorstep at Stevens’ Hope, and try to imagine the real thing. Now she was in it and of it. The grace and charm of the girls’ frocks took her breath away. The severe black and white of the men impressed her. She had never seen such flowers as were banked against the wall, or such a table as formed the buffet in an adjoining room, and had a grotesque idea that her hostess must have saved up for a long time to be able to afford all this. The men were mostly fair, held themselves very well, and had wonderful manners. The girls were slim, very straight, very sure of themselves. The whole atmosphere was, she thought, rather sedate, with low modulated voices and very little laughter. She had never danced on such a floor, or to such music, and the

contrast with the last dance she had attended was vivid.

As time passed, her ideas about this sort of thing became changed, because she met no more men. There were men a-plenty, but no new ones for her, though she caught many a glance in her direction. It seemed that in England the male was at a premium, and girls brought their own partners to these affairs, and clung to them jealously. At this she laughed outright. Berwick, who was with her at the time, looked inquiring.

“Is it a private joke?”

She told him of dances at Stevens’ Hope and on the Caribou Trail to which men had travelled fifty miles over mountain passes, where the floor was the rough-hewn boards of a cook-camp, the music that of a tin whistle and an accordion, where a white collar was a thing to be remarked, and the six-shooters of the male guests had by general consent been deposited with the host at the door before entrance.

“You’ve been through all that?” said he, watching her closely.

She nodded. “It seems strange now, but it didn’t then. It was all right. Nothing ever happened that shouldn’t. The men were quite wonderful. They’d do anything for you, or give you anything they possessed if they thought you’d take it.”

“You’ll never go back to it,” he announced with conviction.

“I wonder.”

“I don’t. Mind if I’m—well—a bit abrupt?”

“I’m rather used to that,” said Pirrie.

“Are you engaged to Dolph?” he asked with a little lift in voice.

“He wants me to be, but the date remains unsettled,” she parried.

“I—er—I say!”

“Yes, Sir John?” Her tone was very demure.

“My name is Toots—to you.”

“Yes, Sir Toots?”

“Do you mind taking me seriously for one moment.”

“Certainly,” she laughed, “or even two.”

“Then what kind of life do you most want to live?” he put this with a touch of earnestness that did not escape her.

“Why do you ask? I’m not quite sure myself.”

“Well, when you make up your mind, the betting is you’ll live it.”

“That sounds prophetic, and the next time we turn, please tell me who the old lady is in the corner—the one by herself.”

“Which corner?”

“Behind us.”

He saw a woman of perhaps sixty-five, with grey hair, large dark, dominant eyes, dark brows and a very firm mouth. She was in black, sat very erect in her chair, and wore wonderful diamonds.

“That—oh—Lady Bentley. Supposed to be quite a character, widow and monstrous rich. No family of her own, and her husband died years ago. My people know her, and she’s a friend of our hostess. Got a habit of going to this sort of show by herself, picking out a commanding corner, and sitting there dumb as an oyster. She has an old Tudor house in Kent, stuffed with antiques. Everyone knows her. Why did you ask?”

“She’s been staring at me.”

“She does nothing else all evening. But in your case it’s a little odd, because she asked me who you were an hour ago.”

Pirrie opened her eyes wide. “Me! Why?”

“Dunno, unless she wants to adopt you. About half the girls here would jump at the chance. Oodles of boodle, y’know. I told her your name and that you hailed from Canada. That seemed to put the lid on it.”

The girl stole another look. The dark eyes still followed her, sphinxlike in their uncommunicative calm. The face was like a mask, detached, expressing nothing. It seemed very proud, and the whole effect was rather forbidding.

“If I wanted to be adopted, I wouldn’t apply there,” said Pirrie.

Berwick’s arm tightened a shade. “What about that future life of yours? Are suggestions in order?”

“Always, if I needn’t take them seriously.”

“Direct sort of person, aren’t you? Well, what about a good shoot in Scotland for the autumn—little season in town till Christmas—then Sicily or Egypt—then a dash of Deauville or the Pyrenees—followed by *the* season, say till Goodwood—and finish up at Cowes. How about it?”

Pirrie, who had picked up quite enough in the last few weeks to follow this intelligently, shook her head.

“It wouldn’t suit me at all.”

“In all humility—why?”

“Because I believe I’ve got a brain, and would like to use it.”

He stared at her with a totally changed expression, seemed about to speak, checked himself, and stared again.

“Perfectly ’strordinary!” he murmured.

“My having a brain?”

“No, not that; oh, very much not that. But how did you know?”

“Know what?” she was quite puzzled.

“Never mind just now. Sorry I spoke. Here’s Dolph!”

He vanished. Pirrie felt Dolph’s arm round her, and was swung into a dance.

“Toots been making love to you?”

“No, nothing of that sort, just sketching what he thought was the ideal life.”

“Which was?”

She told him, and he looked at her hard. “You know what he’s driving at?”

“I’m not sure.”

“He just gave you a pretty exact picture of the life he leads himself, with the idea of finding out if you’d care to share it. I rather expected that. It’s the oblique method of proposing.”

“And I thought that the English were slow,” she murmured wickedly. Then, with sudden compunction, “Dolph, do your friends know that I’m a nobody—just a foundling?”

“That’s no one’s affair,” he answered hastily. “It’s nothing at all, and doesn’t matter two straws.” He pressed her arm with quick solicitude. “Aren’t you happy here—was it a mistake to come—do you—shall we go back—now?”

She sent him a wistful smile. What she could not tell him—because it would hurt him too much—was that loneliness had overcome her. The sight of hundreds of her own age, most of whom knew each other, all of whom were somebody, established, with homes, friends, associations, traditions, with a past and a future: all this had gone hard with the girl from the Caribou Trail. Love could not quite make up for it, or even the exceeding kindness of the Martins.

“Go home?” she said, wondering at the sound of the word, her real home being six thousand miles away.

“To Stevens’ Hope, if you like. If this isn’t what you want, you needn’t stick to it.”

She found it hard to answer. This was his life—the life he was used to, and it touched her enormously that he should be ready to surrender it. She visualized him at the mine, the animosity of Hugh Purdey, the discomfort for Stevens. That would never work, and she knew it.

Was it even fair, she asked herself, to allow him to marry her? A foundling bride! That had a certain romance. But, later, would his immediate circle accept her. She could not be sure. In the faces around her, she could distinguish something, a sort of pride, or, at any rate, a consciousness of position and birth. A month ago she would have tossed her golden head and smiled. To-day, with a more correct interpretation, she felt lost and unattached. A drifter! Her instinct might feel at home here, and the

scene awakened something in her blood. But the grim truth remained. She was a nobody.

“Pirrie,” said he with swift intuition, “are you sorry you came?”

She did not answer at once. The whole evening had developed so unexpectedly. She was neither unhappy nor at peace. While she hesitated, Lady Bentley got up and moved across the floor with statuesque dignity. No further glance at the girl. She walked toward the hall like another lonely soul, gave a nod of acknowledgment to her hostess, and disappeared.

“Dolph, would it be very bad manners if I went back now, before the others?”

“Of course not, and whenever you like. I’ll go too.”

“Sure they wouldn’t mind?”

“Not a bit. Now?”

“Please.”

They slipped out, and found the car. On the way home, Dolph laid his hand on hers with a touch of complete understanding. A thousand things he wanted to tell her, but in a wisdom for which she was utterly thankful he said not a word. At the Martins’ door he did not try to kiss her, but just gave her fingers a tight squeeze, and went off.

And Pirrie? Pirrie ran upstairs to her room, flung herself on the bed, and buried her face in the pillow.

There was one custom in the Martin house to which Pirrie found it impossible to surrender. The women of the family never came downstairs to breakfast.

Mrs. Martin had reached an age when she preferred to begin the day by herself, and spent the first part of every morning in her boudoir where she interviewed servants, gave her orders and attended to her correspondence. Jennifer and Jule forgathered in Jule’s room in dressing-gowns to discuss the previous evening, and though Pirrie knew that she was always welcome, she rarely turned up before the talk was over.

Custom had too firm a hold to allow her to lie in bed. Always in the past she had seen the sun rise over Stevens’ Hope, and now, in London, she would wake early, lie for a while listening to the muted murmur of London traffic, gaze with unfading interest round the luxurious room that was her own, ask herself for the thousandth time if all this were true, and then, dressing quickly, be downstairs by the time Martin had seated himself at the table and was unfolding the morning paper.

Of all these new friends, she seemed to feel for him something that was quite apart. He was so utterly kind. So fair in everything he said. His money—and he was

a much richer man than Pirrie realized—did nothing to spoil him. She loved to see his brain at work, to hear his reasons for things, and so keen and intelligent was her interest, so practical her point of view, that he found a real pleasure in talking to her. He cared very deeply for his family, but none of his own, he said to himself, had the natural penetration of this mountain maid. Thus it came that across this breakfast-table in Belgrave Square was laid the foundation of something very real and permanent.

Then, one day, he asked if she would like to drive to the office with him, and so it came that while Jule and Jennifer were at their morning meal, Pirrie would be watching the gulls winging lazily upriver as the car slid along the Embankment. She found it delightful to begin the day thus, and Martin would lean forward a little, noting the changing expression of the blue eyes as the City drew near and the human tide thickened and deepened and swelled in its daily rush to battle in the markets of the world. The girl had ambition, he could see that; and courage, and imagination, but what must these multitudes express to one who had passed all her conscious life in the solitude of mountain ranges, and to whom the coming of one single stranger was an event of note.

He felt more and more curious on this point, so one day he asked her. The car was held up where the Embankment reaches Blackfriars Bridge, and the roadway ahead swarmed with traffic. She watched the crowding vehicles for a full moment before answering.

“At first I was confused, and perhaps a little frightened, but now it fascinates me,” she said thoughtfully. “I try to follow them home and see how they live, and to the offices to see how they work. But you won’t guess what strikes me most about it all.”

“What?” asked he, curiously.

“How many secrets they must have from each other.”

“Secrets!”

She nodded. “Look at their faces—how apt they are to frown—and how concentrated on their own thoughts. They don’t seem to see each other. Each man seems to be guarding something, and totally indifferent to the next one. They jostle each other without knowing it; and, Mr. Martin, they look so anxious. That’s the strange thing to me.”

“You’re right, child. They are anxious, most of them. That’s the effect of competition, and one of the penalties of life in a great city. As to seeing them at work, have you ever been into my office?”

“You never asked me,” she smiled, “but I’d love to. Dad’s was in a corner of

our shack, and had four pigeonholes made from split cedar. One winter, the ink froze solid and burst the bottle, and it took us two weeks to get more. Perhaps, some day, we'll have a telephone."

The car moved on to Bishopsgate, and for the next half-hour she sat in a leather chair in a corner of Martin's sanctum, and observed the modern business man in action. Her eyes were very keen, and she did not stir. Martin talked to Paris, dictated letters, and was reading the monthly returns of a coalmine in Yorkshire when his secretary laid a cablegram on his desk. He glanced at this, made an odd little noise in his throat, and sent Pirrie a quizzical look.

"Still interested? You've been very quiet."

"Yes, Mr. Martin; it's like opening a new book."

"Any particular need of anything at the moment?"

"No, I'm perfectly happy, but I suppose I must be in the way."

"I wonder how you happened to come up here this particular morning."

"Shouldn't I?" she asked quickly.

"On the contrary, you should. It's most appropriate. Can you think of anything—I mean any given occurrence—that would please you more than any other?"

Reflecting for a moment, she gave a decisive nod. "One thing most of all. Stevens' Hope—if that should turn out——"

"You're a mind-reader, Pirrie. Look at this!" He handed her the cablegram.

"This was sent from Vancouver yesterday. As to what's in it you and I and the man who sent it are the only ones who know."

MARTIN, 27 Bishopsgate, London, E.C.4.

My examination Stevens Hope gives recoverable gold values twenty one dollars plus silver three dollars a ton stop average width of lode is sixty inches stop geological conditions favourable to development of large tonnage and advise this be commenced at once stop full report by next mail.

BUSTARD.

Pirrie stared at this, her eyes misty. The paper trembled in her hand. She could not speak. Martin's office was blotted out, and she saw again a cluster of log-roofed shacks ringed with unconquered mountains, heard the cough of the compressor and the whine of a headgear wheel that sorely needed lubrication. Then she sent Martin a very uncertain smile.

"Is it true—really?"

"Bustard says so, and he's paid to know. It's what you wanted, isn't it?"

“It’s so much more than I dreamed of,” she said shakily.

“How—more? I think it’s just right.”

“Our average was ten dollars a ton. Of course that was by panning tests, but I was very careful, and made them every day. Of course we couldn’t tell about the silver.”

“Pirrie!”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you see—you were too careful; and you can’t put a panning test against a scientific assay. My dear, as it turns out, the property is worth rather more than twice what you all reckoned, and I don’t mind saying that this is the first time anything of the sort has happened in this office, and I’m more than ever ready to pay up and carry on. It’s generally the other way on. It looks as though you’d be rather rich before long.”

Pirrie, dabbing at her eyes, began to smile. She did not and could not understand this cablegram unless important discoveries had been made underground since she left the mine. Perhaps they had, and there was no time to let her know. This brought her a sudden comfort. And why put her own slight experience against that of an engineer? How silly to be anxious about—nothing! She met Martin’s affectionate look, and behind him had a vision of another man in miner’s clothes straightening his shoulders, with a smile on his face she had never seen there before. And at that her heart gave a leap.

“Dad! I’m thinking of him, and how happy he must be.”

“Will be,” corrected Martin. “He doesn’t know yet. Will you send the wire?”

“May I—really?”

“If you don’t object to a few condensations on my part. Or, better still, just repeat this as it stands, and tell him I’m cabling the purchase money to Vancouver to-day. Sign it yourself.”

Pirrie, beaming at him, began to write. Presently she looked up.

“The mine is forty miles from the nearest telegraph office, and it costs ten dollars to send a message on. Will that be all right?”

“Then add ‘forwarding charges guaranteed,’” he smiled. “The mine is worth it.”

Finishing the telegram, she pushed it over. “Will that do?”

“Excellently, and congratulations on your first bit of office work. If you’d like to tell them at home, the car is waiting for you.”

“I’d like to think about it first, Mr. Martin.”

“Think about it!”

She nodded. "Get a little more used to it. I'm happier than ever I was, but—but not so happy as I thought I would be. It doesn't seem real—yet. There's been so much work and hope, and so many disappointments that—that——" Her voice quavered into silence.

Martin, being an understanding man, came round and put his hand on her shoulder.

"My dear, I think I know what you feel, and wish I were young enough to have some of the same kind of sensations myself. Now look here. Don't go back in the car, but take the top of a bus to Hyde Park Corner, and have a look at London as you go. There's a lot to see. Then walk to the house. I'll tell them you're coming shortly, and you'll give your own news. Nothing like being alone for awhile and sorting things out. And," he added with a grin, "if you want to be really cheered up, just imagine that Bustard had reported ten dollars a ton while you had been counting on twenty-one."

Kissing him gratefully, and still in a daze, she walked as far as the Bank, and there caught a bus. Climbing up, she regarded the swirling population of the City with thoughtful eyes. She had so much, she admitted, to be thankful for, but somehow she could not grasp it yet, and her chief sensation was that of excessive loneliness. Martin had said that soon she would be rich, and how many a golden dream there had been under the timbered roofs of Stevens' Hope, but now that assurance had come, it seemed almost empty.

Haphazardly she picked individuals in the teeming thousands around her, and imagined them learning what she had just been told. How they would have welcomed it! But, on the other hand, they had, all of them, something that was not hers; a home—intimacies—familiar things and well-known voices. That was what they went back to at the end of the day, and, whatever their anxieties, she envied them with all her soul.

Then, slowly, and still caught up in such reflections as these, she distinguished through the City's drone of work the underlying gospel of this great centre of world activity. Its message throbbed in the very air. It told her that without confidence and faith, life, life, however gilded, was worth little. She was young, strong and good to look upon. She must be wise and brave. Her loneliness was a small affair compared to what others were carrying, and with love stirring in her breast she ought to be happy.

This came to her as the bus reached St. Paul's, and she began to see in the faces of those around her what she had not perceived before, the elements of endurance and fortitude. They were pale faces compared to the men of the Far West, but had

an underlying strength. Whatever the burden of existence, these people believed in themselves. And, decided Pirrie, she must do the same.

At Hyde Park Corner, the first man she saw was Mr. Matthew Lynch.

“Well met,” said he cheerfully. “I was betaking me to Belgrave Square on the chance that you were in. Any hurry?”

“No, the sun is too lovely. It’s almost like home.”

“Have a toddle with me?”

She nodded, and they turned north, presently finding chairs. The Infant balanced his bulk and felt for his cigarette-case.

“No, thanks.”

“Never smoke?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m old-fashioned enough to think you’re right. Also it’s rotten for the wind. Are you aware that you look as though you’d come in for a fortune?”

“I have,” she smiled.

“Wha-at!”

She told him everything, and he gave a whistle.

“Some cablegram—what! So you’re the girl of the golden west! Your father must be frightfully bucked.”

“He’s not my father,” said she in a small voice.

“But I thought——”

“Everyone does, except the Martins and Dolph. They know.”

“Sounds a trifle mysterious, if you ask me. Are questions invited?”

“Any you like, but I’m afraid I can’t answer them. I don’t know who my father and mother were. Isn’t it strange?” She tried to smile, but her lips began to quiver. “And here I am a sort of heiress.”

“Most interestin’,” said he with a quick glance. “As for the rest of it, I wouldn’t worry, if I were you. Practically all the trouble we younger ones have nowadays is over our parents, so don’t lose any sleep over that. You mightn’t fancy ’em if you did spot ’em. Been in love much, that is—er—frequently?”

“I imagined I was before I came to England,” she confessed, thinking how easy it was to talk to him.

“Has the party survived your absence?”

“Yes; but he didn’t like my leaving.”

“I sympathize completely.”

“And he expects me to come back.”

“Ah!” said The Infant heavily, “that’s where he misses it. Does he know you’re

an heiress.”

“He will to-morrow,” said Pirrie, wondering how it was that that side of things had not occurred to her before.

“Then the gent will probably pack his bag and come after you, in which case you might leave him to me. We are not in favour of exporting commodities like yourself. Fact is, I could be in love with you myself were it not for—well——”

“Please don’t trouble, and tell me some more.”

“About what?”

“Her.”

The Infant regarded her thoughtfully. “Look here, we’ve something in common, you and I, and we ought to talk matters over. I’m in love, and the unfortunate girl doesn’t know it. You’re standing with more or less reluctant feet where the brook and river meet, and not quite sure whether to wet them or not. I haven’t any sweet nothings to impart to you, and you’re not in any way disturbed by me. That suggests a council of war, so how about it?”

“What’s in your mind now?”

“Dine with me to-night, and we’ll discuss it afterwards.”

“But Dolph wouldn’t like it. And there’s Jule and Jennifer.”

“Bless its simple little heart, of course there is. The two J’s will understand perfectly. As for Dolph, he hasn’t a habeas corpus that I’m aware of.”

“If you tell me it’s quite all right, I’ll believe you,” she said uncertainly. “You see, I don’t know—yet.”

“Then come along to Belgrave Square, and I’ll prove it. I want an outside opinion badly. Trouble with me is that I’m out of my depth and blowing bubbles.”

CHAPTER VI

NEWS FROM THE ROCKIES

“D EAREST PIRRIE,

“It seems a long time since you left Stevens’ Hope, and the place has been quite different without you. First I want to say that I’m sorry for anything in what I may have said or done to upset you before you started off. I was very upset myself, and it all happened so quickly that I felt lost. Jealous, yes, I was that and more, but couldn’t help it. Since then I’ve been comforting myself with the thought that you would be back before long. Then, yesterday, something happened.”

Pirrie, preparing to go out with Mr. Matthew Lynch, was sitting at her dressing-table when Hugh Purdey’s unexpected letter was delivered, and at this point she stopped and frowned into her mirror. The date was eighteen days previously, being, though she did not know it, just after a certain conversation between the writer and Danks. So he looked forward to her return! Why should she return, especially now? She read on with increasing discomfort.

“I have arranged with Stevens that he buys my interest in the Hope for five thousand dollars, payable when Martin makes his first deposit. The fact is that I can’t stick it here any longer without you. The mine is looking ever so much better underground, and I’m convinced that all of us have been putting the value of the ore too low. I would not be surprised if the assays prove nearly double what we’ve been accepting. So I don’t think there’s any doubt about Martin coming across with the cash.”

“What an extraordinary thing!” she murmured. He *expected* twenty dollars a ton. Why? Putting aside for a moment the promised embarrassment of his arrival—for to that he must be leading up—she puzzled over this. She had not the slightest thought of any possibility of fraud. The mine looked better! But there had been no word of it in Stevens’ last letter, and it was not the sort of news he was likely to omit.

Then she began to smile. Hugh was out of the property, and out just in time to miss a fortune. She pictured his face when Bustard’s report was received. That would be on the morrow. And Stevens had got for five thousand dollars an interest that was worth infinitely more. Now he was half-owner, leaving Martin and Danks a

quarter each. Her heart lifting at the knowledge of this, she read further.

“What’s more important still, there is news about yourself, but before I give it, please believe that it doesn’t make the least difference to me. I want you just the same, and, I guess, worse than ever. I’ve just had a letter from the Caribou country, written by a man who lives to-day on Jasper Creek. This is what he says in his own words.

“Eighteen years ago, I struck a good patch of gravel near here, cleaned up a few thousand in dust and nuggets during the summer, and settled down where I was for the rest of my days. I had enough to keep me, and that’s all I wanted, so I sat back and watched the other fellows hiking up the trail. It passed about thirty feet in front of my shack.

“That winter was a hard one. It came early, and caught a lot who were washing gravel two miles away and further down the creek. There was quite a camp, with women in it, women of both kinds. One of them lived by herself with a child, a small girl two or three years old. The woman had faded yellow hair, blue eyes and I guess was pretty good-looking once on a time. She was the sort you’d expect in a mining-camp, and——”

Pirrie gave a little cry of pain. Her heart was pounding, and she could scarcely breathe. Yellow hair, blue eyes, the sort you’d expect in a mining-camp! A throb of intolerable anguish shot through her, and Purdey’s writing began to swim. He was telling her about her mother! It was blasphemous and horrible and all a lie! The girl felt as though she had been stabbed. And Stevens, who must have known it all these long years, and cared for her so tenderly, had kept mercifully silent. At this her heart grew cold with fear, but, dazedly, she forced herself on.

“——in a mining-camp, and we were all sorry for the kid, who was a small image of her. But she was mighty fond of it just the same. I never had anything to do with her myself. In November, about the time of the first snow, she looked pretty sick, and got sicker, and it was then that a fellow came along with a dogteam. It seems he stopped in at her place, then pushed on to my shack, and said the woman was dying. His name was Stevens, and there were five big Malamutes in the team. We both went there, and found her very low. She couldn’t speak, and the kid was hungry and crying. We did what we could, but she was too far gone, and there wasn’t a doctor in three days’ journey. That day she did die, and

there was nothing in the tent to give any information. Stevens said he would take the kid with him right away, because no one else wanted her, and she musn't see her mother put underground. So he struck off toward the Fraser River country. I got an old squaw to sit beside the woman and keep the fire going, and that night we buried her close by. I put up a sort of cross. Not knowing her real name, I carved on it "HERE LIES A PILGRIM BROKE ON THE CARIBOU TRAIL," and let it go at that. As to the kid's father, what's the use of asking. The Caribou was pretty tough in those days. There's nothing else I can tell you, but this is the best of my memory, and if you want it in an affidavit, I'll send it along."

Pirrie shuddered and became numb. She lost all consciousness of feeling, and in some extraordinary fashion seemed to be contemplating the tragic history of another girl. What a desolating thing to happen to anyone! How terrible a death for any woman—in the heart of a mountain range—bereft of her child—with only a mumbling squaw and a dying fire beside her! Did God allow such things to be?

Thus, till like an avalanche the truth rushed at her. It was of herself and her own mother that this man wrote. Her—own—mother! But of her father not one word. At this the world seemed to stop and crash in ruins. There was nothing left. Brokenly she turned to the rest of Purdey's letter.

"Well, there's the fact as nearly as one can get at it, and, Pirrie, dear, don't take it too hard. Nothing is your fault. Again I say that it makes no difference at all to me, but I guess it will to you and the way you feel about the people you're with now. You'll want to get away from them—I can understand that—so just as soon as Martin makes his payment, I'm coming for you, and we'll clear out to some other country where we can make a corner for ourselves. I reckon I ought to be in London three weeks after the deal goes through, and I'll come straight to the house. It will be like old times to see you again. I leave it to you to tell the Martins yourself, as I'm sure you'll want to. So cheer up, Pirrie, I won't be long.

"Ever your lover,

"HUGH."

Still dazed, she was fingering the thing, when a rap sounded at her door.

"Pirrie, may I come in?"

She thrust the letter into a drawer. "Yes, come in."

It was Jennifer, and she looked surprised. "Aren't you ready yet? Matthew will

be here any minute.”

“I’m afraid I’ve been dreaming,” said Pirrie with an effort. “What shall I put on?”

“I like the black best, it goes so well with your hair. Black and gold—the Girl of the Golden West. How do you feel to-night?”

“Why to-night?”

“Aren’t you thrilled at being an heiress? The Martins are all frightfully excited, except father—who never is.”

“It’s queer,” said Pirrie, “but I’d forgotten about that.”

“Forgotten! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing very special or new,” countered Pirrie stoutly.

“Sure?” Jennifer sounded dubious.

“Perfectly: I suppose it’s reaction, or something like that.”

“H’m! One doesn’t get news like yours every day. I wouldn’t be so placid.”

“No—not every day,” said the other girl under her breath.

“Pirrie, may I be frightfully frank?”

“I’d much sooner you were.”

“You’re not in love—or beginning to be—with Matthew, are you?”

“Gracious! No.”

“Or he with you?”

Pirrie shook her yellow locks. “Not the least little sign of it. There’s someone else, and he wants to talk about her. That’s why he asked just me.”

“Someone else?” repeated Jennifer in an odd tone.

“Yes, but he didn’t mention her name, and why he wants to talk to me, Heaven only knows. I can’t help him.”

“She doesn’t reciprocate?”

Pirrie sent her a grave smile. “She’s never had a chance. He’s never told her.”

“But why?”

“Says he’s frightened, funny as it sounds. I’ve no idea who it is.”

“I rather like him—in fact, I like him very much,” said Jennifer. “He’d wear well as a husband.”

Pirrie nodded. “I think so too. Now will you tell me something quite honestly?”

“What?”

“It’s—well—it’s about Dolph.” She paused, wrinkling her fair brows. “Please, please don’t misunderstand, but I’ve been trying to put myself in your place.”

Jennifer stiffened a little. “I don’t think I want to talk about that.”

“Just for a minute,” pleaded the other girl nervously. “Then I won’t speak of it again. You’ve been so perfectly splendid from the start, and it’s made me feel

anything but that. I expected you to be dreadfully angry—I would myself—but it's been just the opposite."

"Then do you mind if we don't say anything more about it?"

"But it's this! I can't tell if you're still in love with him or not. If you're not, what I want to say won't mean anything. If you are—well, it's quite different."

Jennifer, glancing at her sharply, saw something that had not been there before. The brave blue eyes were cloudy with pain. No fortitude could conceal that.

"Pirrie!" she said quickly. "What's the matter; what's happened?"

"Just what happened years ago, but being here with you all, and seeing what I have, and meeting people, and knowing what I have always known about myself, has made me feel differently. I will never marry Dolph. I can't!"

"Pirrie! You're mad. It would break his heart."

"No, dear, I'm only sane, though I have been a little mad. Don't you understand? Dolph wouldn't know—none of you would—*what* he was marrying. It wouldn't be fair or right. Do try and help me by seeing it that way. I wasn't happy when he found me, and everything about it was so wonderful that I couldn't refuse all that everyone has done for me. But I ought to have known better. So now I must—must——"

She broke off with a catch in her breath, and all in a moment looked strangely old and utterly tired. Her beauty remained, but it was that of a valiant soul facing the bitterness of a punishing hour, and to Jennifer it brought a sudden and illuminating glimpse of the kind of girl this really was.

Whatever jealousy or enmity she might have experienced in the past was submerged and obliterated, and she felt vividly convinced that whatever Pirrie's antecedents might have been, Dolph was making no mistake here. How strange to be so completely converted, and it needed nothing more to prove that her own love for Dolph had died a natural death. The swiftness of this revelation moved her the more, and impulsively she put her arms round the bare white shoulders.

"Pirrie dear," she protested, "don't talk like that, and don't dwell on a past with which you had nothing to do. We've all cared for you the more on account of it. I'm sure Dolph has too, and there's nothing in our minds except just yourself. As to myself and Dolph, there's nothing to worry about—nothing. I thought I cared, and I know he did, but it wasn't the real thing, and would never have worked. We both see that now, and are still friends, perhaps better friends than before. And, Pirrie, there's something else."

"What?" asked Pirrie chokily, thinking how wonderful was this unexpected demonstration—and from Jennifer.

“You’re unhappy because you don’t know who your people were.”

“Wouldn’t you be too?” whispered the girl, “though if I had any they couldn’t do more for me than is being done now.”

“Pirrie, listen to this. Mother was speaking of it only yesterday. When you first came to us, and with us, we thought—I’ll be quite frank about it now—that you’d be a bit strange and gauche, and we’d have to show you all sorts of things: I mean the ones that go with the sort of life we lead, and argued to each other that you couldn’t possibly acclimatize yourself without a good many breaks. We wondered how you’d sit and talk and eat, and——”

“So did I,” interjected Pirrie, with a faint smile.

“Well, it was perfectly ridiculous because we’ve been able to show you practically nothing—certainly nothing of the slightest importance, and you’ve known it all by instinct.”

“Do you mean that, Jennifer?”

“Ask Jule or mother if you doubt me. In fact, you’ve made us three feel like fools. It’s your instinct, Pirrie, with no imitation about it, and that proves a lot. It’s in your blood, and your people must have been just like us—if I can put it that way—and perhaps much more distinguished, which we’re not. I don’t want to sound snobbish, but you have felt for yourself, and without any prompting from any of us, that there are a good many things that simply aren’t done by our sort. Any girl without natural breeding would have been bound to flounder—yes, a lot—but automatically you’ve avoided every single one. Can’t you see what that means?”

Pirrie gazed at her with pleading eyes. “Is that true, Jen, all of it, or are you just trying to cheer me up? It has been so strange, but from the very first I felt completely at home with all of you. I’ve never wondered what I should say or do. It surprised me very often.”

“Of course it’s true, and why should you wonder? Oh, my dear, you’re one of us, and whatever dark thoughts you’ve had about anything else are all mistaken. Don’t let that ghost trouble you again. And as to Dolph, don’t let him down. He’d never get over it, and——”

“Mr. Lynch has called for Miss Stevens,” said a voice at the door.

The Infant was twenty-six years old, large, broad and of considerable thickness. He had fair hair, a square good-natured face, steely blue eyes and a formidable chin. His wealth had in no way affected a very natural modesty, and as a result he was possessed of many friends drawn from many classes. Ordinarily he moved his big body slowly and deliberately, but in the ring exhibited the lithe swiftness of a cat.

And of all the men she had met since coming to London, Pirrie liked him the best. He scored further by the fact that he had never tried to make love to her.

To-night he seemed rather subdued, and she watched the muscular hand on the steering-wheel till they reached Hyde Park Corner. Then he gave an odd little grunt.

“The world is before us, Pirrie. Where shall we go?”

“Wherever you say.”

“Grub at the Berkeley, do a theatre—one of the late ones—supper and dance at the Mayfair. What about that?”

“It sounds very expensive and—and——”

“Bless you, that’s all right. And what?”

“Respectable!” she flashed.

“Don’t you feel respectable to-night?” he grinned.

“I’m a bit reckless,” she confessed, “and I’ve never been to a night club.”

Pulling in to the kerb he jammed on his brakes and stared at her.

“Your education has been neglected to that extent?”

“It has, and I’d like to go to one. I’ve been to miners’ dance-halls, which are supposed to be rather rough, and where most of the men wore shooting-irons and flannel shirts and long boots, but they were all frightfully polite to me.”

“They would be. I’m afraid we can’t touch that here, but we’ll do our best. You don’t mind the chance of having your name taken?”

“Who would take it?”

“Some large husky gents in blue clothes might be interested to know who you were.”

“The police!”

“They drop in occasionally. Nothing very serious, y’know. It happens in the best families. They’d recognize me on sight.”

“Would the Martins mind?” Pirrie’s eyes had taken on a little glint.

“They’d think you a very modern young woman, that’s all.”

At this something woke up in the girl, and she laughed. Modern! A Londoner! Sophisticated! She gave way to a surge of daring, and decided that a touch of adventure was exactly what she needed. Also she had wondered a good deal about certain vagaries of the younger set, concerning which Jule and Jennifer had talked, a little horrified, but with a shade of envy.

“Then I’d like to be as modern as possible,” she said.

“Right you are, and later on.”

The Infant, concealing his surprise, got the car into motion, feeling not entirely comfortable about the turn matters had taken. This was Dolph’s girl, and he couldn’t

be sure that Dolph would approve. Presently he hazarded something about this, but Pirrie laughed at him.

“You needn’t be anxious about that. He hasn’t anything to do with it.”

“I’d bet he thinks he has—sort of proprietary interest.”

“Proprietary!” she flashed.

“Something like that,” said he, thinking that Dolph would probably have his hands full later on.

“I don’t feel like a piece of property—to-night.” This with a little toss of the head so eloquent that it left him nothing to say, though he thought rather hard.

A little later, in a corner at the Berkeley, he veered back to it, it being for many reasons important that he know exactly how this affair stood.

“I say, you are engaged, aren’t you?”

“No,” said Pirrie promptly. “I’m as free as free air.”

“But you’re going to be?”

“I wonder.”

This with so sudden a change of tone that his eyes rounded in surprise. What a strange girl she was! Then, inexplicably, his gaze met hers, and there passed between them a long, straight stare. There was no love in it, but a sort of mutual and quite fearless searching, in which each expressed to the other a great deal that cannot be put into words. Simultaneously there was established between them a bond of confidence and trust that neither would have dreamed of betraying. Never before had Pirrie experienced anything just like this with any man, and it fortified her enormously.

Suddenly she thrust something into his hand.

“Read that, Matthew, all of it. I was wondering what made me bring it, but now I know.”

He nodded, and she, studying his face in wistful silence, became aware that the music of violins and the chatter from other tables had died away, and was replaced by the whine of a headgear and the muffled thud of underground explosions. The rose-coloured walls, the suave waiters, the soft glitter of the sumptuous room were all obliterated, and she saw again the huddled cabins of Stevens’ Hope and the dark arrogant features of Hugh Purdey. That was the real world, the one that would soon claim her again, and the scene around her was only a bit of make-believe. Matthew sat perfectly motionless, reading—reading, and when at last he looked up, he seemed a different man.

“Well,” said she, trying to sound diffident, “now do you see why I have my doubts about being engaged?”

The Infant made an odd little sound that some of his pugilistic friends had reason to remember. His jaw was set, the eyes had receded a little, and his face had the flattened aspect of the fighter. Then he shook his head.

“Two things to begin with. This,” he tapped the letter, “is a lie. That’s written between every line. Pirrie, it isn’t possible that you want this man!”

“Once I thought I might: now I hate him.”

“He doesn’t know it?”

“He’s not clever enough for that.”

“When did you get this?”

“About an hour before you called for me,” said she ruefully.

“Shown it to anyone else?”

“No, but I nearly did to Jennifer.”

“Thank Heaven for that.” He paused, and leaned forward a little. “Pirrie, why did you show it to me? I’m frightfully complimented.”

“I—I don’t know,” she replied shakily. “First I thought I ought to hand it straight to Dolph, but something stopped that; then I meant to give it to Mr. Martin tomorrow, and didn’t look forward to that, either. Finally, I knew I had to tell someone, and chose you. I couldn’t carry it all myself.”

“Well,” said The Infant grimly, “the fellow who wrote it will have something to carry when he gets here and I meet him—which I certainly will. You are a brick to let me in on it. Now promise something!”

“I’m a little frightened of promises.”

“You needn’t be this time. Don’t breathe a word to anyone else about this—not a peep. The miserable thing is fabricated with enough truth in it to be dangerous. Stevens did find you on the Caribou Trail, didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes; he’s often told me.”

“But you’re English, every single inch of you, and—” he paused again, cupped his chin in a big hand, and stared at her intently, “I say, will you trust me completely, not asking any questions?”

She nodded, vastly comforted. “I would trust you with anything.”

“Then have you a good photograph of yourself as you are to-day?”

“There’s one I had taken for Dad a fortnight ago.”

“Good! Will you send me a copy—no, two copies?”

“Yes, but——”

“And not a whimper to anyone, especially Dolph. I don’t usually ask for pictures of other fellows’ girls.”

“I’ll send them,” she smiled, thinking it was the first time anyone had asked for

her photograph.

“And this letter, I’m going to keep it for the present. It’s a pretty foul thing, and better out of your hands.”

“All right,” said she. “Any more orders?”

“Not at the moment, except to forget all about this skunk, and go on with your dinner. It should help your appetite to know that you’re the best-looking girl in this room, where the average is unusually high. I’ve spotted five of my friends already who will be asking further information to-morrow. I see one of yours too.”

“Who?” she asked, glancing about.

“Jack Berwick. I hear that he put a hypothetical question to you, but the prospect of a title left you cold, considering the brain, or lack of one, that went with it.”

Pirrie laughed at that, and felt a great deal better.

“It looked like a fearful waste of—of everything. Matthew, we came here to talk about you, not me.”

“More important business has preference, and my little affair is rather tame beside yours. It’s the old story, Pirrie. She doesn’t weigh more than eight stone ten, while I’m fourteen stripped, and can’t stand up to her and talk out.”

“You’re talking rather well to-night.”

“Thanks, but I’m not in love with you, and my tongue doesn’t stiffen. I suppose it’s lack of moral courage. Also I’ve known she was rather interested elsewhere, which didn’t help. Then another girl cut her out. Nice girl too.”

“You’re supposed to be very eligible, aren’t you?” said Pirrie demurely.

“I’m of a marriageable age, and can afford to keep house,” he grinned, “but when I get near her I go to pieces.”

“Then why not shut your eyes and speak out?”

“Can’t talk with my eyes shut—never could. Mightn’t it be arranged that she find out indirectly?”

“You don’t want someone else to tell her!” gasped Pirrie.

“I dunno—why not? ’Twould give her the chance to think it over, and help my inferiority complex. She’s got a first-class brain, much better than mine. Then, if I wasn’t up to scratch, she could let me know, also indirectly, which would be easier on us both. Fact is,” he added, “I’m the complete ass about making love. How about that—now that we’ve started a sort of mutual aid society?”

“I haven’t much experience myself,” said Pirrie, smiling, “but if you just blurt out that you love her——”

“Any old way?” he asked earnestly.

"I think so. I wouldn't prepare it, or rehearse it, but just get it out somehow, and the rest ought to come quite easily."

He thought this over, then shook his head.

"I won't sidestep any longer," he announced heavily. "There's one thing that would help a lot."

"Tell me."

"Will you do it?"

"Could I?"

"Easy as rolling off a log."

"Of course I will."

"Then marry Dolph as soon as the law allows."

"Wha-at!"

"Marry him, I say, and don't be upset by what some rotter chooses to put on paper, and which he will swallow when I get hold of him. It's Jennifer I'm talking about."

"Jennifer!"

"No, none else. I've been in love with her for years. She scares me stiff sometimes, but that doesn't alter it. She's a highbrow, and frightfully well read, while about all I know is the Queensberry rules and the coal market. When Dolph went off with her and the family to Canada, I thought the thing was settled. Of course he doesn't know anything about me. Then you blew over here with them, and I breathed again. But to-night you've got the wild idea that for a preposterous reason you mustn't marry Dolph, and if you don't, Jennifer will. See where I get off?"

"Don't put it that way, Matthew."

The Infant, twirling his glass, looked very determined.

"You love him, I take it?"

"I do," said Pirrie softly. "It was the most natural thing in all my life. One minute I was alone and perfectly miserable, and the next——"

"No details, please," he interrupted hastily; "they give me the prickles. Now listen! I've a feeling that I can prove that this skunk Purdey is a liar. I won't say how it's to be done, or you'd laugh at me. And all I ask is that you sit tight for the next three weeks."

It was strange and very comforting to have him so wholeheartedly with her, and she sent him a grateful little nod.

"I promise."

"Pirrie?"

"Matthew?"

“About your mother—I want to ask something. She *was* English?”

The blue eyes grew misty. “It’s so strange,” she said. “While Dad was prospecting in the mountains, and afterwards at Stevens’ Hope, my memories seemed all wiped out. We were never in one place very long, and so many different people helped to look after me. But now that I’m in England, things are drifting back in a ghostly sort of way, things that mother must have said and talked about. But nothing is very clear. Her voice was very soft and sweet, like the voices of women I’ve heard here. I remember her hair—it was like mine, and her eyes too. I think the word England was familiar, though it couldn’t have meant anything to me then. I remember the tent, and the patches in it, and a rusty stove, with a pipe that went through a tin plate fastened in the roof, and how cold it was at night when the fire went out, and how mother used to shiver when she got up to light it in the morning.”

“You poor, unhappy, little mortal!” creaked The Infant. “It makes me feel like an overfed beast. Is there any more?”

Pirrie hesitated, pressing her hand on her forehead.

“I can remember wondering why mother, wouldn’t let anyone, man or woman, come into our tent, and I was with her, always, never out of her sight. But when she got ill, they did come, and one day a man with wonderful dogs turned up. The dogs were pulling a toboggan, and I can still see how their tails curled tight over their backs. Mother talked a great deal that day, all to herself, in such a queer high voice. I could not understand a word of it. Then she went to sleep—at least I thought that’s what it was—and the man wrapped me up in a big fur coat and put me on the toboggan. I can still remember him walking ahead, and calling to the dogs. And—and I don’t seem to recall much more till some years after that.”

“Good Lord!” said he under his breath. “You went through all that while I——!” He shook his head as though at war with existence in general. “Look here, Pirrie, you can’t forget: that’s impossible, and I don’t suppose you want to, but when you think of such things, do believe that the reason you didn’t die was that you were meant for happiness. It can’t be anything else. I know a heap of people who’d be better stuff to-day if they’d experienced something of the same sort. And, what’s more, every word you say makes that letter more outrageous. There’s just enough truth in it to back up the main lie, which I’ll have particular pleasure in demonstrating when the writer gets here.

“I’d love to see the demonstration, Matthew. Now what about Jennifer?”

“We’ll let that stand over till your little affair is settled. Then, indirectly, y’know, you might do something.”

“If you don’t, I certainly will,” she warned him.

“Right. Now we might toddle along to the Green Cow. Don’t expect anything startling, because you won’t find it.”

He nodded to Ferraro, and they strolled into Berkeley Square, where the tall iron railings were ringed with motors, their long glistening bodies and glowing sidelights suggesting a vast herd of prehistoric animals that, breathing softly, had gathered to rest in a great circle in the heart of modern London. Then eastward across Regent Street till they reached a very different section of the city, twisting along narrow roadways whose pavements were crowded with dark-eyed people speaking strange languages.

“Soho!” remarked The Infant, “and in some respects the most alluring part of all London. Mostly Italians here, some Spanish, and the rest a general mixture of Continentals who have their own private reasons for living in England. I fancy a good many little foreign revolutions are planned here, but the plotters are careful not to get in trouble with our authorities.”

He stopped at an old building that looked like a four-storey tenement. Its dingy front was scantily lighted, but above this all was darkness. At the kerb he ventured a word of caution.

“If anyone speaks to you, don’t take any notice. I—er—think that’s about all.”

She nodded, eyes very bright. The Infant knocked twice, then, after a pause, three times. Immediately the door swung open. Pirrie saw no one inside, only a narrow, uncarpeted hall, quite empty, with steep, wooden stairs rising from the far end.

“How awfully queer!” said she.

“Rather neat, isn’t it?” he grinned. “I don’t know where the peephole is, but they’ve certainly got one. It might be across the road in another house. We go one up.”

At the top of the stairs they were confronted by another door, this one of heavy oak and strongly built. Sunk in the wall beside it, was a square of glass, head high. The Infant knocked again, reversing the order to three and two. A light flashed, and through the glass they had a glimpse of a man’s face. Then the second door opened, and inside stood a swarthy individual in semi-evening dress. He smiled at Matthew and bowed to Pirrie.

“The signore has not forgotten. Good evening, sir.”

“Well, Tony, how’s business?”

Came an inimitable shrug. “It might be better—and worse.”

“Anyone interesting here to-night?”

“Not before the signore and the lady came. I think the music will please you.

That is new.”

“Any little difficulties of late?”

“Not of any kind. This way, sir.”

They went in. Pirrie, very much alert, found a big room, with polished floor, and small tables ranged round the walls. At the end was the orchestra on a low platform. They too were dark men with bright eyes, and at once she noticed that they had no music. The rest of the company were a mixture, with numerous foreigners, very few English, and a sprinkling of artists and their models. There was no pretence at formality and a good deal of noise. Pirrie, walking to their table, was aware of the sharp scrutiny of many eyes. The Infant, seeming very pleased with himself, ordered champagne, and just then the music began.

It was unlike anything the girl had heard before, and commenced with an odd plucking of strings at once wild and plaintive. Presently there joined in what seemed to be haphazard notes from a flute, but were far more mellow, and after that a horn, whose throbbing, overriding note carried with it a strange suggestion of reckless freedom. Then out of this melodious confusion, grew rhythm, and with the rhythm there swelled the motif of the composition, a thing known to the shepherds of Hungary when the world was young. The conjunction of these instruments, played by men to whom music was the first form of expression, produced in their auditors a sort of intoxication. It swept through them, setting the blood tingling. It lodged in one’s feet, it invaded the brain, it invited and allured the senses, till never in her life had Pirrie longed to dance as she did now.

The Infant, watching her, nodded approvingly.

“It gets you, doesn’t it? Come on!”

Music was in her blood, and she danced beautifully.

“By Jove, Pirrie! Who taught you—what’s the address?”

“No one: I seemed to know.”

“Seemed to know! Great Scot! Look here, I think perhaps we’d better not linger here too long.”

“But, Matthew, we’ve just started, and I think it’s wonderful!”

“Trouble is that so are you, and fair-haired girls of your sort are apt to raise a riot amongst these dark-skinned chaps.”

“Please, I’ll be very good.”

“P’r’aps, but will they? They can’t exactly help it, y’know. I was in Sicily last winter and there were three duels—the real thing too—over a yellow-headed girl who wasn’t in your class by a long chalk. Then she married an American from Oshkosh, Wis.”

Pirrie laughed, but there was more truth in what he said than she imagined. Her golden hair, its gleam intensified by the sheer blackness of her frock, was like a torch in the brain of more than one olive-faced, dark-locked man whose eyes followed her with unwinking fascination, and utterly forgetful of the woman beside him. She was so straight, so supple, she moved with such ease and perfection of balance, her shoulders were so exquisitely modelled, and the curve of her young breast so tender, that with her brilliant colouring and sapphire eyes she represented to these Latins the living and lovely embodiment of all that their ardent imagination could picture. The natural music in her expressed itself with every step she took. And because no girl could miss the instinctive tribute that was being paid to her, Pirrie's cheeks took on a wonderful glow.

Suddenly the throbbing music ceased, the leader of the orchestra, a small fiery man with an impressive moustache, gave her a profound bow, and, very breathless, she regained her table.

"I'd like to come here every night," she sighed.

"H'm! Better talk to Dolph about that. I'm not oversure he'd fancy your being here now."

"But, Matthew, they're all so kind and friendly."

"A bit too friendly, I take it: but you started the thing."

"Isn't that English!" she laughed. "You're not a bit demonstrative, are you, and don't approve of it in others either."

He shrugged. "I dunno that there's any special virtue in getting lit up over what you feel. But we feel as much as other people, even if we don't advertise it. Yes—you tow-headed incendiary?"

"Will you promise not to look round?"

"Eh?"

"Please don't."

"Right! I'd much sooner look at you."

"There's a man just behind you drinking my health, and signalling me over the glass. May we please go away now. It's—it's rather horrible."

The Infant stiffened. "Is—he—doing—that—now?"

She nodded, cheeks flushing hotly. "Please come!"

With that she got up. So did he, and turned swiftly. So did the stranger, a big, coarse-looking man with black hair, wide, thin mouth and narrow sensual eyes. It must have been that he thought that Pirrie's nod was meant for him, and he came forward with a sleek smile on his Oriental face, holding out a card.

"If the lady is not engaged for to-morrow evening, perhaps——"

Came a thud, so quick that Pirrie did not see what had happened, but the stranger's arm was knocked aside, and he gave a howl of pain. The card fell to the floor. He glared at The Infant, spreading his bluish lips and showing large yellowish teeth. Pirrie somehow found herself back in her chair, with The Infant between them. The man lunged forward. There followed a clean hard smack, and he staggered back, cursing.

As by magic, a ring had formed. Tony, gesticulating, rushed into the middle of it. For some reason best known to himself, he disregarded the stranger, and implored Lynch not to make a disturbance. The Infant, eyeing the stranger with entire abhorrence, shook his head.

“The swine will apologize first.”

That got home. The swine, by this time quite livid, pushed Tony aside, and struck. The Infant, stepping back, laughed at him. At this point a bearded man in loose tweeds joined in.

“It's all right, Tony, and I saw it all. The fellow has asked for it, and I hope he'll get it. Carry on, sir.”

The Infant gave him a nod, smiled, and in the same instant sent home his left. The thing began in earnest. The stranger, bigger, and perhaps the stronger, fought furiously, but always came a shade short. The Infant's footwork was too good, and the man's science was unequal to his strength. When his arm straightened, The Infant was just beyond it. The latter wore a faintly contemptuous smile, and moved very lightly. Pirrie, eyes round with excitement, felt no fear for him, and he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Lynch, with a grunt, landed his full weight with a rapid right and left on chin and jaw, two clean sharp concussions of bone and bone. At this the man's head was flung back, he swayed for an instant, crashed mountainously, and lay perfectly still. His mouth was open, his jaw at an unnatural angle, and odd greyish patches were spreading on his cheeks.

The Infant, his hair a little ruffled, looked down at him with disgust.

“I think that will be enough for this time.” He crooked a finger at the padrone. “Look here, Tony, this wasn't your fault, so don't worry about it. Come on, Pirrie! I'm frightfully sorry, but, really——”

Pirrie, feeling very queer, stood up. Something was happening in her brain. This scene, so harsh, primitive and so quickly over, had wakened memories of other scenes, not dissimilar, and much more deadly, enacted in the dance-halls of mining-camps. And the cause was always a woman, and always it had been a certain kind of woman who occasioned the fight.

Here, in London, listening to the strains of such an orchestra as would never be heard in the mountains of the West, it had occurred again. There were variations, but, fundamentally, it was the same thing: men fighting over a woman. And it would not have happened this time unless the stranger had taken her to be the kind of woman she was not.

The knowledge of this burst over her in a flood. Why should any man think thus? Did she look it—did she invite it—was there something about her that, unknown to herself, invited it? All in a moment the comfort drawn from her talk with Matthew, the relief she had found in his contemptuous dismissal of Purdey's letter, all this vanished. The man had taken her to be what Purdey maintained her mother had been!

This worked like poison in her brain, and clutching Lynch's protective arm, she hurried to the street. No man she had ever known in the West had mistaken her thus. Why should it be so in London? Would it always be so? It all suggested one thing. She had better marry Hugh Purdey, and have done with it.

"Awfully sorry, old thing," said The Infant again when they were in the car. "Wouldn't have had that happen for worlds."

Pirrie, looking away from him, did not speak.

"Don't be so upset. That fellow made a mistake, and he paid for it. I shouldn't have taken you there."

"*Why* did he make the mistake?" she asked in a low tone.

This carried such an intensity of bitter meaning, that he stopped the car and stared at her.

"Pirrie?"

"Well?"

"What are you driving at?"

"What any girl would think," she said shakily. "Oh, I'm not a child any longer. When a thing like that happens, it's for one reason only. The man thinks he's safe, and——"

"That fellow was drunk," exploded The Infant.

"No, Matthew, he wasn't. Please take me home quickly."

Cursing himself savagely, he snatched into gear, and slid on. Why had he been such a fool? He could appreciate what she felt, was horribly sorry for her, and equally angry with himself for thus exposing one whom he was so anxious to serve. Then something clicked in his head.

"You're a little fool," he blurted, "blind as a bat and stubborn as a mule."

"Thank you so much. What an attractive combination!"

“Well, I mean what I say.”

“I’m sure of that from the way you say it.”

“And what’s more, I can prove it.”

“Which would doubtless give you a good deal of pleasure; but if you can, I’ll believe it. Go on.”

“You’re thinking there’s something about you that—er—encourages a man to be insolent.”

“Have I reason to think anything else to-night?”

“Several hundred. I’ll give you three of them, straight, to start with. If there were the slightest foundation for that, Dolph wouldn’t have fallen in love with you, the Martins most certainly wouldn’t have brought you to England, and I’m darned if I’d have asked you to dine—not by any means. Want any more? As for that fellow, he wasn’t a man as we know ’em, but a sort of crossbred outcast. I don’t suppose he’s ever met a decent woman in his life.”

She sent him a quick sidelong glance. Obviously, he was angry now, lips compressed, eyes hard, and altogether quite a different and antagonized person. The strength behind his gentleness was in action, and of a sudden she realized as never before of what value were his friendship and judgment to one in her position. Most certainly he would not lie—not to oblige anyone, and better than most of her sex she could accept and profit by straight speech when it came her way.

“Matthew?” Her voice was much softer now.

“Well?” said he stiffly.

“You’re quite right.”

“Of course I’m right. In some respects I’m a cheerful sort of ass, but not this time. Also I object to you using yourself up by imagining ridiculous things which have no existence whatever. Do you retract?”

“I’m awfully sorry,” said she penitently. There was no escaping his argument, and he was right.

“Well, so long as it doesn’t happen again.”

“It won’t, Matthew—ever.”

He burst into a roar of laughter. “Good! Now we’re back where we started.”

“I’m so glad. Is—is that man much hurt?”

“Slight cerebral concussion, and I fancy his jaw is dislocated: nothing very serious.”

“Hugh Purdey is supposed to be a very good boxer,” she said provocatively.

“I hate a thing being too one-sided, even if the other fellow is a rotter. Look here, I wouldn’t say anything to Dolph about this business if I were you.”

“Never?”

“Well, not till after you’re married,” chuckled The Infant.

CHAPTER VII

TROUBLE AT THE HOPE

SIX thousand miles from Belgrave Square, three flannel-shirted men sat in a log shack, and gazed with fascinated eyes at a bundle of notes on the table in front of them. It was late afternoon in the Rockies, and the jagged peaks that shut out the western horizon flung their prodigious shadows over the plateau where the headgear of Stevens' Hope raised its tall wooden frame.

The money on the table had a strangely silencing effect, and the three regarded it each with his own secret thoughts. One of these men, the eldest, was honest, and to him it meant reward after years of toil, back-breaking and soul-destroying labour, when time after time the goal seemed attained only to prove an illusion, fairy gold without substance.

"But now," said Stevens to himself, "the thing had been gripped, and the evidence was before them, justification for every effort, independent fortune for the child he loved, and ease for himself when working days were over." As to Bustard's report, that document had amazed him. He thought he knew the Hope from surface to bottom level, thought he understood quartz and gold values, but, this time, perhaps only out of weariness he had been wrong. Bustard's opinion, the unbiased verdict of one who had nothing to gain or lose thereby, was conclusive. So Stevens could only marvel and give thanks. And of any possible trickery he had not the faintest conception. It was foreign to the colour of his mind.

To Hugh Purdey, his dark eyes riveted on the package just brought in from Vancouver, it meant something different. First, he was rather proud of himself. He, with Danks, had put it over a man reputed to be an expert, and there was now no chance of detecting how the thing had been done. The lean ore of Stevens' Hope was officially credited with more than double its real value. Gold in solution had had, for him, materialized into visible thousands of dollars that would shortly be his. More than that, Stevens was about to hand him another five thousand for his quarter interest. That meant independence—and Pirrie!

Hungry with desire for possession of her, he could not reason otherwise, and he reckoned that his letter with its fabricated implications must have been delivered by now. He had manufactured the thing with a certain diabolical cleverness, weaving the main lie with just enough truth to make it credible, and that truth he had stated with great care, using odds and ends of information dropped by Stevens at various times.

This, though he had received no letter from a one time prospector on the

Caribou Trail, enabled him to assemble a sort of intimate mosaic that should hang together long enough for his purpose, and now, eyeing the money, he felt that he had produced a masterpiece. He pictured its effect on Pirrie, imagined himself alone with her, and was filled with passionate desire. To him she was like ripe fruit.

The third man at the table wore a cynical if satisfied expression. Danks, smiling a little to himself, decided that though he had pulled off other affairs of this nature, none of them had been quite so neat. In this particular branch of crime, he was, therefore, something of an artist, and this pleased him. He had wanted money, not for any woman, or to put into some other mine and make more, but just for money's sake. And he had got it.

Now he did not intend to stay at the Hope any longer than necessary. Perhaps a few days. To leave sooner would not be diplomatic. There was no fear of immediate discovery, because the larger programme of work now assured would mean the installation of heavier machinery, and this would be a matter of perhaps two months. Later on, however, discovery was bound to come, and the re-assay of the mine was bound to be startling. But long before then he would be across the border.

Concerning one angle of this business, however, he admitted to a shade of regret. He wished that it might have meant nothing to Pirrie. He liked her. She had always been nice to him, and in these solitudes a word or a smile from a girl—especially one like herself—went a long way. He knew that she would take it hard when the truth came out, and so would Stevens—who had played straight with everyone—but Stevens, being a man, could look after himself. Yes, he was sorry about Pirrie, but the thing had gone too far to be altered. So he just stared at the money, then at the other two, and kept silent.

“Well,” said Stevens, “six weeks ago I wouldn't have believed it, but here it is. Hugh, will you look over this; it's our agreement as to your one-quarter share.”

Purdey, nodding, read the document carefully, signed, and gave it to Danks to witness.

“That's all right.”

“One minute—before I sign. There's this about it! I want to be perfectly fair. When you undertook to sell, you hadn't any expectation that Bustard's report would be so favourable. None of us had.”

“Naturally,” said Purdey, lowering his gaze. Had he looked straight into Stevens' eyes, the lie would have been much more difficult.

“Then I'll put it this way. If you feel that I'm getting too much the better of you, I won't hold you to it. We'll tear this thing up. We all reckoned on a ten-dollar proposition, and it's twenty-one, without the silver. Stay with us if you want to, and

keep your interest.”

Purdey, imagining the expression that must be in Danks’ face, grew very uncomfortable.

“That’s white of you, Stevens, but I’ll stick to it. I’m not complaining if the luck’s on your side.”

“I don’t want you to say anything else later on.”

Purdey shook his head. “Needn’t be afraid of that, and a bargain’s a bargain anywhere, I’d have to wait for my profits out of the mine, and the money is more use to me now. I’m going to knock about for awhile.”

“I’d be glad to have you stay, Hugh. You know the place, and that’s worth a good deal.”

“Perhaps I do,” said he, thinking how well he knew it, “but I’m going to move on. Arizona, I think. There’s a new silver-lead strike on.”

Stevens gave a shrug, inspected the two signatures, wrote his name, and, watched by unblinking eyes, began slowly to count the money. Danks saw in the background unlimited whiskey, of which, strictly against camp orders, he had a supply already hidden in his shack. Purdey, lips dry and heart beating fast, visioned a girl with hair of fairy gold who would not escape him much longer. He would not be able to keep her indefinitely, for the truth about Stevens’ Hope was bound to come out at some not far distant date, but it would be distant enough to have satisfied the wild hunger that possessed him now. This was in his mind while he followed the deliberate movements of the big, toil-scarred fingers.

“Six—seven—eight thousand—three hundred—thirty—and three dollars,” said Stevens impressively. “Haven’t any silver, so we’ll let the cents go. That’s your proportion of Martin’s payment in respect of your interest in the property. And in purchase of that interest by me—one—two—three—four—five—” he took five notes from his own share, “that’s purchase money paid by me for that interest. Which makes Danks, Martin and myself the present owners. Is that right?”

Purdey nodded. There were thirteen notes of a thousand dollars each, and some smaller ones. Pinching the bundle, he experienced a glow of triumph, it being far more money than he had ever touched before. It made him feel strong, powerful, rich. With this in his pocket, he was free, and afraid of none. His confidence was growing, but he was still ill at ease, and restless to get away for a few private words with Danks, whose cynical eyes he had persistently avoided. Nor had he by any means forgotten the other man’s warning about fair play to Pirrie.

As to Stevens, he harboured no regret whatever. He had put what money he possessed into the mine, apparently lost it, and now, by a neat turn, got it back with

a bit more. That was that. Also when young Hudson arrived with his fine airs and London clothes, and made love to Pirrie, Stevens had instantly taken his side, and, furthermore, sent the girl out of reach, as he thought, out of reach of the man who had wanted her since first he saw her.

That rankled intensely. It had warped Purdey's mind, destroyed his balance, and made him stoop to a level that, a year previously, he would not have contemplated. And now the picture of the smooth-cheeked young Englishman with his arms round Pirrie, bit like acid in his brain.

"I'm sorry you're going, Hugh," said Stevens good-naturedly. "The place won't be the same without you. Pirrie will be sorry too when she hears of it. Of course you'll write to her?"

Purdey nodded, there being nothing else he could do.

"And I can just imagine her face when she sent that cablegram."

Danks gave a sort of grunt. He too could imagine it, and the fact gave him no pleasure. It was disturbing to realize that in double-crossing Martin he had done the same to this girl, for though in his fraternity it was the accepted code that in a mining deal all tricks were permissible so long as they remained undiscovered, it was equally contrary to that code to play anything but fair with a woman. That sort of thing, he argued, gave a man a bad name even amongst crooks. But the job, being done, could not be undone.

"And I guess," continued Stevens, "she was just as surprised as we were." Here he paused, thought hard, shook his head and banged the table with a muscular fist. "Hanged if I can fathom it. I'm not questioning Bustard's figures, but they puzzle me. I asked about him in Vancouver, and he's said to be straight as a string. Did you fellows notice anything special about his sampling?"

"No," drawled Danks; "he took 'em right across the drift, roof, breast and floor, just as anyone would. I offered to help him, but he wasn't needing help, and now I'm glad he didn't. Did his own mixing and quartering, tied up his own sacks, and, well, he knew his way about right enough."

"Then how do you reckon I've been so far out? That's what beats me."

"Too conservative by nature, that's all."

"But, damn it! the stuff doesn't look worth twenty dollars a ton. I've worked in ore that was, and we saw free gold every day. That was in the Cascades."

"Well," said Danks carelessly, "we've got Bustard's word for it, so why worry. You were down in the mouth when things went wrong, but you're just as bad now."

At this Stevens gave a great laugh, and his secret anxiety dropped from him.

"You'll stay with me anyway, Bob?"

“Dunno that I will either. For awhile—yes, but I’ve sort of got the wandering foot, like Hugh.”

“You’re still a quarter owner in the Hope.”

“Yes, I know, but—well, I never stay more than six months in any camp, and only one boss is needed here now. That’s you.”

“One boss!” That was quite true, and Stevens thought it unwise to press the point. With two owners on the spot, there was always the chance of friction. But he liked Danks, who was a good worker, and was sorry to see him go.

“Well, you’re your own master, Bob, and I hope you’ll do well. What if anything comes up that affects the mine and your interest?”

Danks had not considered this, nor had he felt safe in offering to sell out, like Purdey. Two such proposals could only have aroused suspicion. As things stood, he owned one-quarter of a prospect, now reported by an engineer to be rich, but which he knew to have only a problematical value. Some day, if enough work were done, and in the right place, there might be uncovered the paystreak that he honestly believed was somewhere close by. But blasting through solid rock to find that of which the location was unknown, was an expensive business, and many an owner abandoned the attempt just too soon. Later, some other man would happen along, and with a few fortunate strokes unearth the treasure. This, he argued, might very well be the story of the Hope.

“That’s true,” he admitted, “but I guess my interest is safe enough in your hands.”

“But if anything happens to you,” said Stevens seriously, “what then. Got any relations?”

“Nary a one I know of. Look here—I’ll give you power to act for me, and if I go west, well—well——”

“Who is your heir. I’ve got to know that.”

“Pirrie!” announced Danks in a voice suddenly loud and clear. “Darned if I don’t leave it to Pirrie. She’s always been white to me. Give me a piece of paper, and we’ll fix it now. You witness.”

Stevens, not a little touched, pushed over a pad, while Purdey blinked with astonishment. It was quite impossible for him to follow the workings of Danks’ brain, and perceive that this was the man’s way, his only way, of making some atonement, however small, for what he had done. The stirrings of a genuine remorse were in action here, and his interest in the Hope was all that he had to give.

“You may be, and you probably are, leaving her a fortune,” said Stevens earnestly. “Don’t do it on impulse, Bob. She’ll have enough as it stands.”

“I suppose I can do what I like with my own, can’t I? What do you think about

it, Hugh?" He sent Purdey a hard, penetrating glance as though defying him to differ.

But Purdey, being bound to this man in the secrecy of crime, found his lips sealed. He thought it a mad thing to do, yet could only approve. Then it occurred that this might be Danks' method of unloading something he did not want.

"All right—I've nothing to say. It just means that when your number goes up, Pirrie, Martin and Stevens own the whole thing between them. I guess that's as it ought to be."

Danks, who had begun to write, looked up at him, and gave a nod.

"Maybe she'll be married when it happens, and maybe she won't. If she is, well, she can consult her husband. Is this all right, Stevie?"

"I, Robert Danks, being of sound mind, leave all my right, title and interest in Stevens' Hope to Pirrie Stevens. This is my first will and there won't be another."

Stevens, smiling a little, read it aloud.

"Supposing you marry, yourself, Bob?"

"Nothing doing: trouble enough as it is. No, sir, this goes, whatever happens. It seems only fair too, being that Pirrie is more at home in a mine than any woman I ever saw. She was never scared. I've known her come down the ladders to the second level halfway through the night shift, and sit and talk and boil tea, and make us as comfortable as you like. She never squealed, or asked for anything, and has plenty of sand, and if the man who marries her isn't white too, he's going to be shown how. Eh, Hugh? You agree?"

"That's right," said Purdey dryly.

"Well," put in Stevens, "from all I hear she'll be Mrs. Hudson before long. I like that boy." He hesitated a moment, then laid his hand on Purdey's shoulder. "It's made me a lot happier to know that you've no hard feelings there. But Pirrie wasn't made to live in this wilderness. Hugh, will you do something?"

"What?"

"Tell her something else when you write."

"What else?" Purdey reddened under his tan.

"Wish her good luck in this coming marriage. I think it would help a lot. She's tender-hearted, y'know, never wanted to hurt anyone in her life, and to hear that you had no bitterness left would be welcome news. You cared—yes—I know that—but, all in all, she's the one to be considered. Can you manage it?"

"I'll let her know," said Purdey in an odd tone. Then, his voice rising unevenly, "Anything more to be done here?"

“Good—I’m glad. You and I might witness this thing for Danks.”

They signed, Danks watching them with a strange expression. He felt disturbed, and thirsty, and now that he had done what he could to make good, longed to get at the whiskey under his mattress. There was that which he wanted to forget as soon as possible, and the nearest road lay through the neck of a bottle. But there was one word he must say to Purdey first.

Stevens, rising, put out his hand. “The end of a partnership, eh? For many reasons I’m sorry. Shall we shake on it?”

This, for the two, was difficult. Each of them, particularly Danks, wanted to escape forthwith. They felt the grip of an honest hand, knew themselves to be crooks, and by an effort laughed the thing off. But it was a moment they would never forget. Then, pocketing their money, they left Stevens putting away what remained of his, and walked automatically toward the shaft-mouth.

In the engine-room and underground all was quiet that evening, for the Hope had shut down till the new development was determined, and heavier equipment brought in, so it was odd to sit there and catch no rhythmic clink of steel on steel, and the cushioned thud of dynamite deep in the rocky womb of earth. They could see the lamp just lit in Stevens’ shack, and sometimes his head and shoulders. And it must have been that the sight of him imposed the silence that lasted for some time.

“Well,” ruminated Danks, “I take it we won’t be seeing much of each other after this.”

Purdey nodded, with no intention of revealing his present plan.

“Awhile ago,” went on the other, “you told what you were going to do to persuade Pirrie to marry you. Does that stand now? I want to know.”

Purdey, completely startled, pulled himself together, cursing his own ill-placed confidence.

“You can forget that. I’ve changed my mind.”

“I don’t know whether you’re lying or not,” countered Danks, looking at him hard, “but as one skunk to another—we’re both of us of the skunk nature, and you can’t get away from it—I just want to say that you’d better leave her alone. She’s a damn sight safer without you. If you don’t, I’ll split, and then she wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“Supposing you were to mind your own damned business.”

Danks gave a dry laugh, got up, stretched his long powerful body, and stepped to the trap-door of the shaft. There being no one underground, this door was shut. With a heave, he opened it, and stood gazing dispassionately into the black abyss that yawned directly beneath. Presently he stooped, picked up a fragment of rock,

and dropped it in.

The shaft, which followed the inclination of the lode, was not quite vertical, and he heard a clink as the stone struck a pipe. Then a dull knocking as it rebounded against the wooden hoisting skids, and finally a smothered “plop” when it landed two hundred feet down in a fathom of slimy water. A faint smell of wet rock, exhausted explosives and dripping timber was perceptible, breathing reminiscently from the lungs of the earth, but for the rest of it there was to be seen only a square of velvet darkness where sweating men had hammered their indomitable way down—down, and torn asunder the solid ribs of the foothills in the pursuit of gold.

“Purdey,” said he thoughtfully, “we’ve seen some tough times here at Stevens’ Hope, but that’s finished now, and what’s ahead of us no one can tell. We’ve cleaned up in a way that neither of us expected, and we’ve got the stuff in our pockets this minute. The thing was easy as eating—a neat job, with no flies on it. At the same time I’m beginning to wonder if it hasn’t cost more than it’s worth. Anything like that in your mind?”

“Sounds like a bad attack of virtue on your part,” sneered the younger man. “Let’s have the rest of it.”

“Not virtue—more like horse sense,” replied Danks evenly. “When I’ve played this game before, it’s always been on someone more than ready to play it back. Now it’s different, and too much like taking money from the blind. I’d give what I’ve got, and more, for the chance to start over again. Well—I can’t. And what sticks in my crop is the thought of that girl. You’re not fit for her, and you know it, so let her alone.”

“Go to hell!” grunted Purdey.

Danks, stepping back with extraordinary swiftness, gripped him by the shoulders, jerking him forward with irresistible strength till he hung perilously balanced on the very lip of the pit. Another inch and the least slackening of that grip, and the blackness had swallowed him. Fingers of steel bit into his flesh, but he felt no pain, and lost all power to move. A cold breath issued from the shaft, and he saw himself hurtling into the gulf, a human projectile gathering speed as it descended, and battered to an unhuman pulp long ere it reached the bottom. In the transient light of dusk, Danks’ face now conveyed a suggestion of madness. His hard eyes glittered.

“I’ve a sort of hankering to do one decent thing before I quit,” said he in a ragged voice. “What about it?”

Purdey could not utter one word. Poised on the edge of destruction, his hair began to prickle. He broke into a cold sweat. Something seemed to rise up in the darkness, formless and terrible, and reach for him. Then, to his astonishment, he

heard himself laugh, a hollow unnatural sound, born of helplessness and terror.

“Murder on top of the rest of it—that wouldn’t do much good, would it?” he stammered.

At this the miracle happened. He felt himself lifted back by the same force, heard a groan, and, quite bewildered, saw that Danks was sitting, his head between his hands. The frenzy had passed, and he did not stir.

Purdey, after hesitating a moment, took the way of safety, and left him there. But one thing now remained to do, and he had no desire to spend another night in this camp. So, very quietly, he made for his shack, packed and labelled his trunk, and put a few necessaries in a gunny-sack. Shouldering this, he started out. There was thirteen thousand dollars in his pocket, and nothing to be gained by delay. Passing Stevens’ cabin, he saw a greying head bent over a sheet of paper. Stevens was writing a letter, and one could guess to whom it was. Purdey smiled at that. He could, he reckoned, be in London a week ahead.

A full moon, riding over the easterly peaks, dipped the log-walled dwellings of Stevens’ Hope in pallid glory, and struck coldly bright on the engine-house windows. Filtering through the tall, scattered, conical spruce trees, it bathed the whole valley in a sort of unearthly radiance. There was no sound save the infinitesimal voices that make up the silence of night, and one could not imagine this spot as a place of toil, hardship and effort.

Lower, he crossed the stream where once was Pirrie’s sanctuary, and that too had its memories. He would never see it again—he was sure of that—and did not want to. The world—and Pirrie—lay before him. And since it was not of the nature of the man to consider any but his own desires, this imbued him with renewed determination. He had the cards, and would play them. He licked his lips at thought of that game, and Pirrie’s unavoidable surrender. How lovely and desperate she would be!

With this seething in his brain, he reached the winding path to the outer world—the Fraser River trail.

Danks, alone in his cabin, sat struggling with his lower self. Years ago, to escape from accusing memories, he had had a grim battle with drink, and the lesson of it was not quite dead, for drink is a perilous thing to the man who goes underground and continually steps on the very edge of death.

He stared mutely at the familiar objects around him, at the crude furniture made with an axe, at the miner’s candlestick jabbed into the moss-chinked wall, and at a snapshot of Pirrie tacked up beside a fragment of mirror for which he had carved a

little wooden frame. Pirrie, it seemed, had something to say to him, but what it was he could not determine. He wished that he might, for it would have helped now.

He wanted to get away, yet felt oddly disinclined to go. Stevens, he knew, would be leaving at once for perhaps ten days to contract for new machinery in Vancouver, and during that time the camp would be a lonely place for a man at war with his own soul. But, and he rather clung to this idea, he needed a rest, needed to lie about in the sun, slacken his tired joints, do some fishing—anything to get away from his present thoughts.

In this crisis of his life, and Danks knew it to be such, he had nothing to turn to, nothing to depend on except himself. His mind was undeveloped. His experience took him no further than mining and prospecting. He had never read a really good book, or talked seriously to a man with higher aspirations than his own. He had lived adventurously, dared much, was physically quite fearless, and took his pleasures with the abandonment of those of his own kind. And now, when the conscience of the man, strangely awakened, refused to sleep, he was confronted with a multitude of harassing questions that he could not answer. He saw himself in a new light. To escape it, to drown it, would be only too easy. But for hours he fought with the provocative invitation of what lay under his mattress.

Next morning, Stevens, puzzled at his willingness to remain here with only a French-Canadian cook for company, said good-bye.

“Well, Bob, I hope you’ll stay on till I get back, say ten days or so.”

Danks didn’t know, but thought that perhaps he might.

“I’m meeting Bustard in Vancouver to work out development plans. If you go, you’ll leave some address that will find you?”

Danks only nodded, and, afraid that Stevens would want to shake hands again, busied himself with his pipe.

“So long! Good journey.”

“So long, Bob. Take care of yourself.”

Stevens struck off downhill, and, watching him out of sight, Danks in a wave of desperation turned back to his cabin. Here he lifted the mattress, shut his eyes, and put the bottle to his lips. The first fiery taste ran through his body like hot quicksilver. He drank, and drank again. Then he flung himself on his bunk.

Days dawned and ended in Stevens’ Hope; the mountains reddened, glowed, scintillated and paled again; the trout stream chuckled along its rocky bed; winds blew; the sun shone; the moon dwindled, and hour by hour Danks went deeper and deeper. He spent hours practising recklessly with the only revolver in camp, but could not escape the voice within. He staggered twenty miles to the shack of a

whiskey peddler, and reeled back to camp with a bulging packsack clinking between his shoulders. The sanity of the man began to yield. He had visions in which Pirrie appeared, a crushed and horrified Pirrie asking why he had played her false. What had she done to him?

By day he did not eat, at night he could not sleep, and lay, bottle within reach, fighting with the distorted phantasms that crowded his tortured brain. 'Twas a small thing, he constantly argued, to salt a few samples, so what was the matter with him. Was he going mad? The money seemed to burn in his pocket. Then, finally, he stopped thinking altogether, and just drank.

It was nearly two weeks before Stevens returned, ahead of the new crew, and the first man he saw was Danks, sitting in the sun, unwashed, unshaven, and talking in a strange cracked voice. Instantly he knew what had happened. It was a dangerous thing to do, but, pluckily, he went straight to him.

"Steady, Bob, steady! I guess you found it a bit lonely, didn't you? It's all right now."

Danks, regarding him with bloodshot eyes, saw in the familiar figure only an accuser. Having played false with Stevens, he now hated him just as one of lower nature will acquire a sharp antipathy for another superior to himself. And Stevens reminded him of too much.

"Getting too big for your hat since you've sold the mine?" he asked insultingly.

"No, Bob, I hope I'm not. Better turn in for awhile, hadn't you?"

At this Danks began to rave. It seemed in the back of his head that he knew he was raving, but could not help it. Stevens, who understood perfectly, was very patient, but to no purpose. Finally he gave it up. The new crew was on the way in, there was a great deal to be done in preparation, and Danks had made himself impossible as a foreman.

"I'm sorry, Bob, but you'd better move on."

"Don't want me any longer, eh?"

"I don't, and it wouldn't work."

"Now that you've got your money. Sort of turned your head, eh?"

"The money has nothing to do with it. I can't have a drinking foreman."

"Supposing"—here Danks gave a leer—"supposing I got it for you, would you kick me out?"

"That doesn't draw any water. Better move on, Bob."

"Don't be in such a damned hurry. Sure I got it. Purdey was in it too. He did the—the squirting when I got something in my eye. Neat, wasn't it. Just a little salt in the right place! Never heard of salt, did you?"

Stevens stood petrified. Drink had loosened many a tongue before now, and he grew cold with fear. Madness stirred in Danks' eyes, but this sounded terribly like the truth.

"What are you talking about!" he stammered.

"Just a little secret, and partners shouldn't have secrets. Don't be so high and mighty. I said salt, and I meant it. I've made a few thousand for you, so what are you kicking about?"

"By God!" stormed Stevens. "If this is true——!"

"Of course it's true! Twenty-one dollars a ton—not much—without our help. Purdey and I took care of that. You wondered why you'd been putting it at ten for the last year. Well, we got tired of ten—that's all."

"You—salted—those—samples!" croaked Stevens in a strange voice.

"Neatest job you ever saw," cackled the other man, full of demented pride. "Gold in sol—solution. Want to know how?"

At this Stevens saw red, jumped at him, and felt a revolver jammed against his breast. The madman's eyes were blazing, and murder hung on the touch of a trigger. Then, turning, he made for the tall timber at the edge of the clearing, firing wildly as he went. There came the diminishing sound of broken underbrush—and silence.

Stevens stood for a moment, his brain in a whirl, his heart sick. Salted samples! Twenty-one dollars a ton! His own uncertainty flooded back on him. Could a man of his experience have halved the average value of ore he had tested daily for more than a year? It was not possible. He admitted that now. Bustard had been duped by his own partners. Purdey, knowing what he knew, had sold out. Danks, his share of the loot safe in his pocket, was careless about his quarter interest. It all hung together! And Martin, the man who had trusted him, and paid as he promised to pay—what about Martin? And what about Pirrie—now?

There was no answer to anything. What was done could not be undone, and all that remained was to report the truth.

At this he gave a long hopeless sigh, and, his face grim as though carved out of stone, moved slowly on to his empty cabin.

Without weapons, one does not pursue an armed lunatic into the forest, and during the dragging hours before sunset, Danks gave no sign. Then came night, dark and moonless. The cook, piling benches against his door, wished himself elsewhere, while Stevens sat motionless in his cabin, a short steel bar within reach, the saddest man in all the Fraser River country.

How was he going to tell Martin?

It seemed, too, that the news must break Pirrie's heart. She was so dear to him. In her he had found outlet for all his natural affection. He admired her spirit, had valued her companionship beyond words, and the sight of her moving about the camp, a creature of grace and freedom, had pulled him through many a dark hour. He knew, too, what Bustard's report must have meant to her—for his sake, and he shrank from thought of the punishment that to-day's revelation must inflict. For himself he could see it through, but why should her young life be thus clouded? He put his face down on his hands, and struggled with despair.

This in Stevens' cabin.

Not far away, in darkness of the woods, Danks moved between cathedral trunks of great trees, a lost man, haunted by grinning shadows of his own creation. There was no whiskey left, and the lack of it maddened his unbalanced brain the more. Now, it seemed, there was something he must do to finish the day's job as it ought to be finished. But what was it?

Guided by he knew not what, he worked his way toward the edge of the clearing, stumbling, face whipped by stinging branches, colliding with trees that tried to block his passage, toiling through deep moss where his feet sank in cushioned silence, till at last he stood, a half-human thing, bleeding and fanatical staring down at Stevens' Hope. He could just make out the headgear, Stevens' lighted window, and the faint bulk of the engine-room. And it was then of a sudden he knew what he was meant to do.

There was a mine here. It was no good. In spite of this, he had unloaded it. The purchaser—whose name he couldn't remember—would soon be coming to investigate. That wouldn't do. Therefore, before he came, the evidence must be removed, and the mine destroyed. Who would care to re-sample a wrecked mine?

At this the lunatic chuckled hoarsely. How simple!

Two hundred yards away stood the magazine. He went to it without hesitation, his brain working with mechanical certainty, and with a revolver shot shattered the padlock fastening the heavily timbered door. Stevens heard that shot, and wondered if it was perhaps the end, but the night was too dark to take chances.

Inside the magazine, Danks, who knew the place like the palm of his hand, felt about till he encountered an open box of dynamite, twelve-inch sticks of greasy yellow paper, packed in sawdust. Pocketing two of these, he found the cupboard where caps and fuse were stored, for these were things that had been in his own special charge. He smiled vaguely, himself a part of the darkness, then made his way toward the shaft-mouth. How quiet everything was, except the queer singing in his ears. Beside the headgear he picked up half a candle.

At the trap-door he paused. The air was colder now, and his head clearer, and he experienced a passing throb of regret for what it was his duty to do. The Hope was a nice little mine, and he liked it, and had been quite happy here, but it really wasn't worth anything, could never be a moneymaker, and therefore wouldn't be missed. So if the shaft were wrecked, it might save some other fellow a good deal. All in all, the Hope was much better off the map.

Fingering the yellow sticks in his coat pocket, he took a look round. Not much to be seen. The sky's rim was filled with clustering mountain-tops where ragged snow-covered peaks gathered in gigantic conclave under the lofty stars. A familiar sight to Danks. There was no light in the cook-camp, but Stevens' lamp still burned. Decent fellow, Stevens, and much better off without this ten-dollar mine of his. So was everyone else. Thus reasoned the tottering brain as Danks put his foot on the first rung of the ladder.

It was cool and moist in the shaft, with a little drip of water, the old well-known feeling of isolation, and the old faint smell. The ladder rungs were gritty as his hands closed on them as they had a thousand times before. Fifty feet down there could be seen of the mouth only a slight blur, which presently disappeared, and thereafter he moved in velvet darkness. Knowing every inch of it, he had no need of the candle.

Half-way down, he came opposite the great leaf of rock that wedged itself perilously against the wall of the shaft, and with his miner's brain realized that here was something made to his purpose. Crashing to the bottom, it must destroy all in its path, ladders, pipes, platforms, all the carefully built structure of the Hope. At this he smiled contentedly.

On the second level was a loading stage, so, deciding to lay his charge here, he lit the candle, fingers shaking, and set it in a crevice. The tiny spear-pointed flame guttered and steadied, revealing his wild eyes and distorted mouth. It seemed that the darkness was populated with ghosts who held back, whispering, and watched every move he made. But he was going to stop all that nonsense.

Fingers a little stiff, he uncoiled a length of white fuse, split its end, and pushed it into a cap. In one of the yellow sticks he punched a hole, thrust the cap well in, then bound the fuse and both sticks firmly together, and laid them on the platform. Finally he split the free end of the fuse, revealing its fine core of black powder. All this was an old old game for Danks, and even drunkenness did not rob him of his skill. He could have done it in his sleep.

The fuse was five feet long, and, burning at a foot a minute, should give him ample time to reach the surface. Then with a sort of gravity he put the candle to the powder. Came the familiar little spurt. He nodded at this, shoved the candle

automatically into his pocket, and began to climb.

At the tenth rung—and there were two hundred of them—something happened. He found it hard to breathe. Suddenly trembling, he filled his lungs, gripped, and climbed again. At the fifteenth he felt done and dizzy, with no strength in legs or arms.

Looking down, he could see the fuse, a tiny red eye in the blackness, spitting like a snake. His impulse was to go back and stamp it out, but he could not stir, and clung desperately to the gritty rungs. His head was clear enough, but the drink-sodden body had mutinied, and would not obey.

“Oh God!” he prayed. “Oh God!”

Only the ghosts heard him, and they began to chuckle. His fingers tightened, strained, the grit cutting into his palms. A chip, tumbling from above, made a glancing gash on his wrist, and he heard it “plop” into the slimy water beneath. He caught the sharp, acrid smell of burning powder. Stevens began to talk to him, and he recognized Pirrie’s voice, saying that it was time for the night shift to come up, and what was he doing there alone. So these were the ghosts! At this he shut his eyes, and pressed a twitching cheek against the ladder.

“Oh God!” he prayed again. “Oh God, get me out of——!”

Those were almost his last words, his first prayer, and he knew nothing more. The pit beneath had blossomed into a volcano and the whole world dissolved in one vast bellowing roar. He didn’t feel anything. The booming caverns of Stevens’ Hope quivered with the shock of flaming gases expanding with inconceivable rapidity and in their concussion the fabric of the mine was reduced to a splintered tangle. The vibration, reaching the great leaf of rock, shook it free, and brought it crashing down—down, bringing all before it. Shattering, it plunged into the inky water and somewhere in that ruin lay what had once been Danks.

Then the muffled roaring died away, and a plume of choking vapour, uncoiling slowly at the shaft-mouth, rose sluggishly into the quiet air of night.

CHAPTER VIII
IN KENSINGTON GARDENS

PIRRIE in her room was sitting at a table, with Jule and Jennifer opposite. On the table was scattered an odd collection of objects at which the two Martins were gazing curiously. They had come from what Pirrie called her treasure-box, whose contents were vastly different from that of the ordinary girl.

“And this?” asked Jennifer, picking up a cube of what looked like onyx. “Is it precious or semi-precious?”

“Petrified wood from Arizona. It’s a bit of a tree that grew I don’t know how many million years ago. It can’t be worth much, as the man who gave it to me said he found acres of it. Some were big trunks, a foot through.”

“This?” Jule was fingering a small buckskin bag, tied at the mouth, round and very heavy for its size.

Pirrie, smiling at her, emptied the thing on a sheet of paper. There slid out a small pyramid of nuggets, quartz with wire gold running through it like yellow veins, gold like peas, gold in grains like sand. The girls stared, and Jennifer gave a whistle.

“That must be worth a lot.”

“Not as much as you’d think. This oblong one is from the Caribou Creek, and was given to my mother. The quartz is from a rich little streak in Stevens’ Hope and the rest of it picked up anywhere. Miners, when they came to our camp, often gave me a nugget for a keepsake. This one is for what? You’ll never guess.”

“Your wedding ring!”

Pirrie nodded. She was very happy, and infinitely grateful to these two who had been so completely thoughtful and generous. But Jennifer, she fancied, looked distrait. Nothing had been said so far about Matthew, because instinct warned that the time had not yet come. And for the last few days both he and Dolph had been rather mysterious.

“When is it to be?” asked Jennifer.

“In two months—perhaps.”

“Why perhaps?”

Pirrie, flushing a little, could not quite explain this.

“I suppose you know that now you’re called the Canadian heiress?” put in Jule. “How does it feel to own half a real goldmine, or to inherit it?”

“Too good to be true, even though it is true,” said Pirrie promptly. “It’s more like a waking dream than anything else.”

“Did you often picture what you would do if it did happen?”

“Thousands of times.”

“Was it anywhere near the truth?”

Pirrie fingered the nuggets thoughtfully. “It’s all too mixed to say. You see my name is a sort of contraction for ‘pyrites,’ a yellow mineral that’s often taken for real gold by those who don’t know, and it seemed quite a suitable name till the other day. Dad so often thought he’d struck it, then found he hadn’t. Now it’s too sudden to take in all at once. I’ve seen mines that were turning out gold in slabs like thin yellow bricks, but that didn’t seem possible for Stevens’ Hope.”

“If we hadn’t come along, would you have married that other man?” asked Jennifer quietly.

“I—I suppose so.”

“And you wouldn’t have been happy.”

Pirrie, shaking her head, glanced at the other girl, and, so wistful was Jennifer’s expression, that she longed to tell her the truth. But a bond of silence had been given to Matthew.

“No,” she admitted. “I see that now.”

“Well, I’ll do my best as chief bridesmaid.”

“With me for a close second,” put in Jule. “I’ll be doing that for the next few years, finally reappearing as a maiden aunt. But, Pirrie, can’t you find some upstanding man for Jennifer?”

This, said in the gayest possible manner, produced an unexpected effect. Jennifer sat very still for a moment, then with an odd little sound rushed out of the room. They heard her steps hurrying down the hall, and the sudden closing of her door. The two gazed at each other.

“What on earth is the matter?” asked Pirrie. “Is she hurt?”

“No—just upset. Of course it’s Dolph.”

“And my fault,” said Pirrie bitterly.

“No—not anyone’s. She did care for him a lot in her own rather cool way, but they never really understood each other. She admits that now. Also she knows that you and he are very happy. She wants to be married and won’t find any real outlet till she is, and—and there’s something else.”

“What?”

“Matthew! She’s got very fond of him since we came back, and thinks you’re seeing him rather too often—considering.”

“But Jule,” gasped Pirrie, “he’s head over heels in love with her, and afraid to say so.”

“Matthew in love with her!”

At this, Pirrie threw discretion to the winds, and came out with the story of the Green Cow—and afterwards.

“You see,” she continued, “he thinks he can do that for me, though I doubt it, since there’s nothing to go on, and he’s working on it now, just out of friendship. There’s nothing else, and couldn’t be. As to Jennifer, he made me promise to say nothing yet, but if that’s how she feels, I can’t help it. He’s not in love with me, and never was. We talked about her a lot. And if he hadn’t encouraged me about myself, and the mine hadn’t turned out as it has, I think I’d have gone back and married Hugh Purdey.”

“And been miserable for the rest of your life.”

“Probably. It sounds ridiculous to-day.”

Jule took a long breath. “Well, you can forget him now. I’m frightfully glad about Matthew, and——”

There came a knock at the door.

“Could Miss Stevens please see Mr. Martin in the study?”

“Sounds like a marriage settlement to me,” laughed Jule. “Better hurry.”

Pirrie got up, laughing. “So that’s the Matthew side of it, but don’t say anything yet. It’s going to come all right.”

Leaving Jule thinking very hard, she went downstairs. Martin, at his desk, gave her an affectionate nod, and motioned to a chair beside him. Then he put his hand on her arm.

“My dear,” he began, “I’m going to treat you like one would a sensible, strong-minded person.”

“I’m trying to be sensible,” she smiled, “but for the last few days it’s been rather difficult.”

“I know, and you’ve succeeded. Now tell me something.”

“I’d tell you anything,” she said impulsively.

“You believe that we really care for you, don’t you; that you are, in yourself, dear to all of us, and nothing could change that?”

“You’ve made me feel that,” said she, wondering not a little.

“Good! Now, remembering this, don’t be unduly upset by what I have to tell you. It makes not the slightest difference to your plans—or ours for you.”

“What has happened?” quavered Pirrie, greatly discomfited.

“A cable came in to-day from Stevens.”

“Is he hurt?” she burst out.

“No, my dear, it’s about the mine.”

“The mine!” A multitude of doubts closed in on her.

“It seems that he has made certain discoveries with regard to the engineer’s report that—well—no one expected.”

Pirrie, summoning all her courage, looked him straight in the eyes.

“Please show me that cable.”

He hesitated a moment. “Good for you—here! And remember that you and Stevens are not in the slightest degree involved. This is altogether outside you both.”

“Deeply sorry, but now believe that Bustard’s samples were tampered with, much increasing their value. Suspect Danks who is missing. Shaft wrecked by explosion. Please regard deal off till new samples taken and assays made. If unsatisfactory will do best to refund but this will take time. Now clearing blocked shaft. Writing fully.

“STEVENS.”

Pirrie read and re-read till her eyes became blinded, and the thing swam. Martin’s voice reached her from a distance, begging her not to be so distressed, but it meant nothing. A weight lay upon her heart, crushing it. She gave a low cry, and hid her face.

“Pirrie, dear child, don’t take it like that. You couldn’t help it—nor could he.”

The golden head gave a convulsive shake. Shame had overwhelmed her. She—the foundling of the Caribou Trail! The Hope a salted mine! Stevens a broken-hearted man! These kindly, large-souled people deceived! All in a moment the fabric of her world, so lately bright and shining, had toppled with a crash. And she was underneath.

“Oh!” she gasped in a strangled tone, “I felt it couldn’t be.”

“You felt that, Pirrie. Why?”

“I did,” she said, raising a stricken face. “Ever since that last cable I’ve been trying to persuade myself it was true. Something kept whispering it wasn’t. They had all worked so hard underground, Danks with the rest, that they couldn’t be mistaken about the value. That’s what I felt. We all knew the Hope so well, every weary foot of it, and so many tests had been made. That cable giving twenty-one dollars a ton sounded like a fairy-tale to me. It—it wasn’t natural.”

Martin, remembering very clearly how she had received that news, nodded understandingly.

“Well, my dear, if money can make a real mine out of the Hope, we’ll do it yet. I’m not beaten by any means.”

“No,” she begged, “don’t do that. Dad believes that rich ore is there

somewhere, but it might never be found. Then you'd only lose more. He'd sooner drop it now, and get away altogether. He'll have no heart left in it. I know how he'll take this, and call himself a crook too." She paused an instant, her eyes filling with resolution. "It was all a mistake from the first."

"Pirrie," said he firmly, "that is ridiculous."

"But it was," she persisted. "I should have stayed there; you shouldn't have tried to do so much for me; and Dolph should marry Jen——"

"That's not worthy of you," he broke in almost sternly. "Not being able to foresee things, all any of us can do is our best. Stevens has, you have, and I'm trying to. You love Dolph?"

"With all my whole heart."

"Then keep on loving him, child, and the sooner you're married the better. I suggest that, excepting my wife, the rest of the family need know nothing of this."

Pirrie shook her head. "I want them to know everything."

"As you like, but you'll find they'll take my view."

"What are you going to do now about this?" She touched the cablegram.

"Wire Stevens to cheer up, clean out the shaft at my expense, and have another examination made. Then we'll get another report. So far, I've put in say five thousand pounds, but that—well, that is all in the day's work. I won't feel it."

This was but slight comfort. "There's Dolph," she said. "He must know at once."

"Is that so necessary? I doubt it."

"I couldn't have it any other way. I'm not a Canadian heiress any longer."

"As if that would matter to Dolph," laughed Martin. "You weren't when he found you."

Pirrie did not answer. Her thoughts, leaping an ocean and a continent, were now in the cavernous galleries of the Hope. She could feel their velvet darkness, hear the slow, reiterant drip-drip from rocky walls, and taste the damp acrid air. She could picture the tangle of steel and timber in the wrecked shaft, and see Stevens at the mouth, staring hopelessly at the ruin below. All that was real, infinitely more real than the things around her here.

Danks was a rough customer, but, she had believed, decent and always gentle with her. What madness could have got into him? Purdey—now somewhere between Vancouver and London, and coming for her. Well, perhaps he would get her after all. And only Matthew, besides herself, knew he was coming. So Matthew would have to hear about the Hope. There was no mention of Purdey in the cablegram, so, evidently, he was not involved in this affair but, like Stevens, he would have to give up his share of Martin's payment. If he would do that, she might

as well marry him, and have done with all this English playmaking at love. The truth of it was that she had never been meant to come here.

“Pirrie,” said Martin, who had been watching her closely, “don’t take it so hard.”

At this she jumped up, kissed him without a word, and fled to her own room. There, with the familiar contents of her treasure-box still scattered on the table, she tried to fight the thing out. Her own nature being utterly frank and honest, this affair had given her a sickening sensation. For the first time in her life, she was linked, and she could not see it otherwise, with something disgraceful. She felt stained!

She was conscious of two forces that pulled in opposite directions. One part of her, the instinctive, feminine one, was somehow aware of traditions, tastes and promptings that must—so real and constant were they—have come from some definite source not far distant. They had enabled her to feel at home in this London mansion from the very first, and enter on this new life without an effort. She seemed to understand it, and knew in her heart that only in such a setting could she attain complete happiness.

But the other part of her swayed differently, and the cold fact remained that, lacking any contrary proof, she was a nobody, a child of the mountains reared in log-built camps, with no feminine circle to share, the playmate of prospectors and hard-fisted men who toiled underground, more versed in shafts and levels and quartz than anything else, unread save for the few dog-eared books and magazines that had come her way, untutored in a thousand things that were the natural heritage of girls like the Martins. All this was true, and, considering it, what was she doing here? The clothes she wore, the very food she ate, for these she was now dependent on others. Her swift and golden dream had vanished.

Grateful though she was to those who had done so much for her, these crowding reflections filled her with a gradually increasing revolt, and in troubled abstraction she turned her thoughts to Hugh Purdey. Was it, after all, after this fairy-like interlude, to be Hugh? Was he the predestined husband? She could never really love him—she was certain of that now—but did love really matter so much, and was she justified in reaching any higher? She doubted it. She did love Dolph, but he had begun to take the appearance of those other desirable things that had seemed for a short while within her reach, but really weren’t.

This brought her to the conviction that to marry him would be unfair, so she must give him up, with all the rest of it. Stevens, more than ever before would want her now, but here, again, she must not become a burden. Stevens had enough to carry, and she pictured him as he doubtless was now, exploring that wrecked shaft, the grave of so many gilded hopes. At this her heart nearly broke. And why should she

marry anyone?

“Pirrie?” There sounded a gentle rap at her door. “May I come in for a minute?” It was Jule’s voice, soft and very affectionate.

“I’m—I’m going to bed, Jule.”

“I won’t stay long. Father has told us, and we’d hate to have——”

“Jule, dear, would you mind not, to-night? I’d rather be alone—really. I’m quite all right.”

“Sure, Pirrie? Jennifer wants to change with you, and you come to our room. Please do that.”

“It’s sweet of you both, but, honestly, I couldn’t talk about anything. I’d rather stay where I am.”

A little pause, then, in a whisper, “Good night, dear, and bless you.”

“Good night, Jule, and—and bless you both.”

Very slowly she repacked her treasure-box, lingering with misty eyes over one special nugget. Then she got into bed, and lay for hours staring—staring at nothing.

Next morning, immediately after breakfast, which, in spite of Martin’s efforts, was a silent affair, Dolph burst in. The moment they were alone, he put his arms round her, and spoke his mind.

“Look here, darling, Jule has told me all about it, and you’ve got the whole thing twisted. Why make yourself responsible for a man like Danks? It’s too absurd.”

She shook her head, loving him more than ever.

“I can’t help what I feel, Dolph.”

“But your feelings are all wrong.”

“Wouldn’t you have the same?”

“I’d be a bit shaken up,” he admitted, “but if I really loved anyone, that wouldn’t make me stop doing it.”

“I haven’t stopped, Dolph.”

At this he kissed her very tenderly. “Thank Heaven for that. Then why all this hocus-pocus?”

“But I can’t marry you—now.”

“What a lovely mass of contradictions you are,” said he with a great laugh. “And why did Jule put the wind up me? You certainly will marry me; it’s all settled except the date. We’ll fix that now.”

“When a girl gives herself, she wants to give all,” answered Pirrie slowly. “Herself, her thoughts, her dreams, everything. She doesn’t want anything else to intrude. It must be the greatest, most complete time of all her life, quite apart, and

quite unclouded. And, Dolph, she mustn't give herself as a sort of escape."

"Escape!"

"That's it. You see she expects—at least I did—as much as she's giving, so it wouldn't be fair. I couldn't ask anyone to share what I can't help feeling. That isn't straight. Dolph, it would help so much if you could see it that way for just now."

This, checking his ardour, gave him a new idea of the form that sympathy might best take. He wanted her very much, but, obviously, she wasn't ready for him yet. She was tired and over-wrought. Was it kind to press the matter?

"Pirrie," said he, "what would help you most at this very minute?"

"You won't misunderstand if I tell you?" Her voice was very low.

"I'll try not to."

"Then don't come here for a day or two. It's not because I don't love you—you know I do—but sometimes we have to see things through by ourselves. It's like that now. I'm lost, and have to find myself for myself."

"Right!" He looked at her steadfastly, straightening his shoulders. "But on one consideration."

"What's that, Dolph?" she asked, longing with all her soul that he wouldn't go.

"Just that you get fixed, rooted, anchored and nailed down in that dear and troubled head of yours the unalterable fact that within one month from to-day you're going to be Mrs. Dolph Hudson, no matter if all the mines in the Rockies are salted and blown sky high."

With this he kissed her again, and went off, worried but not despondent, and reminded of the fact that already he was overdue for an appointment he had with The Infant at a certain Bond Street photographer's. It had been hard not to let this out, but both of them wanted to be sure before a word was said.

Ten minutes later, Pirrie also went out, and alone. She had no idea of where she was going. That didn't matter, provided she was by herself, and could think, so, reaching Hyde Park Corner, she struck off across the grass at an angle that would ultimately bring her to Kensington Gardens. She liked the Gardens, the stone-lined pools, and the brightly coloured water-birds. And the sound of falling water had a message of its own.

Halfway there, she saw, coming toward her, the immaculate figure of John Berwick. He took off his hat, and looked pleased.

"What luck—and whither bound?"

Deciding at first to get rid of him, it suddenly occurred that it might be a relief to talk to someone who knew nothing about Stevens' Hope. And he seemed exceedingly amiable—considering their last interview.

"I was going to The Gardens."

"Unaccompanied by a jealous swain?"

"I don't see one about."

"Object to a substitute swain?"

"Not at all."

"Well, I feel very swain-like, and it's a perfect morning. What has the girl of the Golden West been doing with herself?"

"Just a little of everything."

"H'm! I've been scanning the social columns, but without result."

"What for?" she parried.

"The passing of Dolph into the Benedict stage of life. When is that to be?"

"I—I don't know."

He glanced at her sharply. She was very cool, not at all self-conscious, and, he thought, lovelier than ever. The way she walked, the carriage of her small head, and the suggestion of ease and freedom in every movement attracted him greatly. Presently he ventured a little.

"No fly in the mutual ointment?" he asked casually.

Pirrie, giving way to a gust of recklessness, laughed at him.

"You wouldn't care if there were."

"Ah," said he promptly, "that's just where you miss it. If you should happen to reconsider your plans, and if Dolph were—well—so unfortunate as not to be included, I would care a great deal."

"How much, Toots? It would be interesting to know," said she, astonished at herself. What had got into her?

"About all a man could care. I thought you knew that."

Her eyes opened a little wider at this, and she gave a laugh.

"Suppose I were to tell you, and without giving any reason whatever, that I've changed my mind about marrying—anyone?"

Berwick blinked at her. "Wha—at!"

"Go on—suppose it."

"I'm trying to, but don't quite swallow it. Got a chip on your shoulder about matrimony in general—is that it?"

"More or less. Anyway, I've no desire to be married. Is that clear enough?"

"Whew!" He shook his head dubiously. "Your sort doesn't escape: it isn't—well—it isn't done, not in this country. You're booked from the start."

"Thanks, but I'll do my own booking."

"Have you taken what the Scotch call 'a scunner' against men in general simply

because they are men?”

“I didn’t say anything of the sort. If I had, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“One moment, please, till my pulse steadies. What changed your attitude?”

“My affair, Toots, my affair.”

“Undoubtedly, but——” He broke off, trying not to look at her too hard, and wondering greatly how far he might venture. He was more than ready to venture, but there was something of which, first, he must be very, very sure. His heart began to beat rapidly.

“Pirrie?”

“Sir Toots?”

“Are you pulling my leg, or serious. I’m serious.”

There was a tone in his voice that no woman can mistake, but she gave no sign of it.

“I don’t care for that kind of exercise. Yes, I’m perfectly serious.”

“No love in your life?” he asked in a strained manner.

That shook her, and she could not answer. They reached the water-garden. A few children played by the pools. But for that they were alone.

“Why won’t you marry me, Pirrie?”

In a whirl of emotion, she shook her head. Being what she thought herself, she didn’t want marriage. It wasn’t fair—to any man. But she did want love, and was hungry for it, wanted to be swept off her feet by something new, strange and intoxicating that for awhile at any rate would make her oblivious to all else. And she had no money of her own.

“Toots,” she said desperately, “I’m not going to marry. There’s a man coming for me from the West now, and he’ll learn the same thing. Dolph and the Martins won’t believe it, but they’ll have to. You needn’t ask me why, because I won’t tell you.”

“You do care for me—a little?” He was on the edge of the thing now, all his senses stingingly alive.

At this she nodded, knowing perfectly well what was coming. Perhaps—yes, it must be so—this was the only solution for her. Purdey’s letter hung before her in characters of fire—“the sort of woman you’d expect to find in a mining-camp.” Her mother. And she had her mother’s blood. Love without marriage. Could so common a thing be as outrageous as once she thought? And if it wasn’t real love, did it so greatly matter? And the man who wanted to give his card in the Green Cow—had he perceived something about her? He must have. So, after all, would she now be doing anything that was really foreign to her? At this self-put question she grew pale.

“Yes, I care—a little. But I don’t love you. Can you understand that?”

“Then,” said he gravely, “what are you going to do for the next month or two? Stay with the Martins?”

“No—no—I can’t do that.”

“But you’re free?”

“As air,” she answered.

“Will you come abroad with me at any time and to any place you like?”

The last fence was down now, and they gazed at each other, these two, with the fixed intensity of youth, while for Pirrie destiny hung in the balance. She had a dumb but perfectly clear consciousness of what the moment meant, but her very spirit was weary with fighting what she could not conquer, that intolerable sense of personal shame. Berwick—she knew him well enough to be sure of it—would ask no questions, and for a little while there would be sun and travel and new sights and what he called love, though it might be for herself only a substitute. Perhaps she was not meant to have anything else.

Then, too, she would get away from a kindness and solicitude that was beginning to choke her. The Martins would be hurt beyond words, Dolph would go half-mad, just for a little while, then marry someone more of his own sort, Matthew would marry Jennifer and be happy, and all of them would speak now and again of the foundling of the Caribou Trail, and decide that nothing else was to have been expected. Hugh Purdey didn’t matter. But Stevens—it stabbed her to think of him.

Suddenly, with a courage no less real, because it was misdirected, she looked Berwick full in the face.

“You mean that, Toots?”

“Very much I mean it,” said he, marvelling at her composure. “We could spend that time together, then, if we hit it off, be——”

“And if we didn’t?”

“Is there any real harm done by a companionate affair? People will talk, naturally, but what of it? To my mind it’s better than being mismated for life.”

“Much better,” she admitted.

“Well, Pirrie?”

The moment had come, and she caught her breath. They had said, quite calmly, the most intimate things to each other, and neither had misunderstood. She was in a position that a week ago would have horrified her, yet she was not afraid. What had happened? Was the real, the inner Pirrie coming out at last, the one that all these years had lain there unsuspected. It must be that.

“You know that I don’t love you—yet, Toots?”

“I know,” said he steadily.

“Then I’ll tell you by the end of the week.”

Berwick, being wise in his generation, pressed the matter no further. Nor did he attempt any caress, and in the manner of old friends they walked slowly back, each with this thing rioting in the heart. There were few words, for a definite seriousness had compassed them both, and their thoughts were not ready for speech.

At Hyde Park Corner, his fingers closed tightly over hers.

“By the end of the week?”

“Not later.”

“You’ll never be sorry, darling. I can promise you that.”

Pirrie, not daring to glance at him, wrenched away her hand.

Dolph, in a depression he could not shake off, met The Infant at the lower end of Bond Street, nor was there any consolation in the fact that his friend was looking particularly cheerful.

“Well,” said the latter, “I’ve got myopia, whatever that is, a touch of cataract, strabismus and undoubted astigmatism, but I think I’ve got something else too. Come along. Know how many photographers there are in London?”

“Haven’t an earthly.”

“Three thousand, five hundred and twenty-seven—and then some more. I’ve discounted those outside a certain area. At the same time I’m going blind. Let’s try this shop.”

They turned into Brook Street, up one flight, and into a studio where the man in charge produced a print.

“This is the one you picked, sir.”

“It’s for my friend, really.”

Dolph gave the thing a glance, then, with an exclamation, stared incredulously. Pirrie, it seemed, was gazing back at him.

He blinked, and felt foolish. It was some other Pirrie, an oddly old-fashioned girl in long frilled skirts that just showed the ankle, a high-necked blouse with a soft collar and knotted tie, a wasp-like waist in a narrow constricted belt, sleeves that suggested flattened mutton legs, and a mass of fair hair piled on top of a small and very graceful head. For the dress, it might have been the photo of a thousand girls of the period, but it had Pirrie’s face, the same strong but delicate line from ear to chin, the same steady, wide-set eyes, the same lovely, provocative curve of the lips.

“Good Lord! Matt, when was this taken?”

“Twenty-two years ago on the ninth of April. The girl’s name was Dalton. A dozen prints were sent, and paid for on the twenty-second of the month. The

address was Bankside, Charing Kent, and that's all anyone knows. The man who took it is gathered to his fathers, and this business, since then, has changed hands twice. Got anything to say?"

Dolph, still staring, shook his head.

"Then I have. I'm done with studios and photographs for the rest of my life. I'm dizzy. I dream photographs. I've inspected millions, most of them of human caricatures who had no excuse for facing a camera. And the next misguided person who produces the family album dies on the spot."

"How did you find this?"

"By ruining my eyesight. It was a very long chance, but the only one. I went at it this way. Pirrie's mother was English, and gently born. We know that much. Also the type of face is uncommon. Also her mother used to talk about London—she remembers that much, and told me the other day. With this to go on, the betting was that the mother had been photographed by some fairly well-known firm. Did you know that there are forty-two photographers within a shout of where we are now?"

Dolph shook his head.

"Quite, and I'm trying to forget it. Now, my son, it's up to you."

"Does Pirrie know anything of this?"

"Nothing—didn't feel safe enough."

"Can you come to Charing—now?"

"Good egg. I thought you'd say that. The car is at the Bath Club."

They took the Old Kent Road, and a great many chances. At New Cross The Infant's licence was demanded, and notes taken by a person in blue clothes and an unfriendly manner. At Sidcup the accelerator went down and stayed there. They soared through Swanley, took the long hill that leads down toward Wrotham at a shade over seventy, slid silkily through Maidstone, and sped eastward with a roar. The machicolated walls of Leeds Castle, rising from their grass-bordered lake, dropped behind them, and presently from the top of a rise they saw the squat Norman tower of Charing Church.

Here the arterial highway divides, left to Canterbury, and right to Dover. The Infant held left, soared up the long hill from the summit of which one gets the fairest view of rich and sleepy Kent, then pulled up at a driveway.

"This," said he, "is where you take over. Don't be too groom-like."

Dolph led the way, his heart beating fast. It was an old house, Queen Anne, he thought, with steep, tiled roof, exposed oak beams, white stucco, and small leaded windows. The drive ended on its south side.

Here, from the edge of the lawn, the ground fell away into a terraced garden

where fruit-trees clung flatly to brick walls, old and mellow, and beyond this was a gulf of misty blue haze, floored with fields, polygonal coverts of soft, green, winding lanes, thatched farmhouses, pygmy cottages. A railway line was a tiny thing with a tiny Dover train steaming over it. Farther were the ridges that lie on the edge of the Romney marsh, and the long, whalebacked hill that marks the approach to Rye. All very peaceful, and giving the impression that it had been just like this—all of it—since time began.

“Seconds out of the ring. Go to it,” said The Infant briskly.

Dolph, who had been watching an old man working in the garden, knocked at the front door.

“Is—er—a Mr. Dalton in?”

The maid, puzzled, told him that the house was occupied by Colonel and Mrs. Stoner. She had never heard of the Daltons, and no such people lived in the neighbourhood.

“Could I—ah—see the Colonel?”

Shown to a library, they were at once joined by an elderly, clean-shaven, narrow-faced man who seemed to breathe authority and little else. He had lived there, he informed them, for the past seven years, and knew nothing whatever of anyone called Dalton. This, given in a curt and slightly irritated manner, was rather deadening, and Dolph, twisting his hat, looked uncertainly at his friend.

“Perhaps—that is—er—someone else might——”

“Possibly. I can’t say.”

At this, The Infant brought the interview to a close, the Colonel brightening, led them to the door, and at the back of the house they halted. Dolph gave a shrug.

“Cheery old soul, that!”

“And so welcoming! Sings in his bath, eh? Is that what the army does to one?”

“Or living in Kent. Well, what now?”

“Dunno. We might dig up the oldest inhabitant, and pump him.”

“We might—or the Post Office. I say—look!”

They were just getting into the car when an elderly lady passed, very erect, and with an air that was unmistakable.

“It’s the Bentley woman. Does she habitat in Kent?”

“Evidently. I’m going to tackle her.”

They went across and stood, feeling rather foolish. She nodded, her heavy brows lifting a little.

“Ah!” said she, “what mischief are you two up to here?”

Dolph produced his most courtly smile.

“We were looking for the oldest inhabitant, and saw you.”

“Good morning!” she bristled, and marched on.

“I say!” The Infant hastened after her, “please don’t—we didn’t mean that at all. Fact is we’ve come down on spec to try and dig something up. I’m frightfully sorry, and Hudson never had any manners. Always was the complete boor.”

The dominant eyes gave a twinkle. “Well, don’t let it happen again. What were you going to dig up?”

“Family called Dalton—if we could,” put in Dolph. “Do you——?”

“Why?” She glanced at him sharply.

Dolph turned a reddish colour. “Fact is—er——”

“Fact is,” interrupted The Infant brutally, “that we believe—that is we have reason to think that—er——”

“It’s for a friend of ours,” struck in Dolph hastily. “Her name is Stevens, that is, she says it is, but knows it isn’t. And, naturally, she’s interested in knowing who she is—more comfortable, you know—so we said we’d look the bally thing up the first fine day, and——”

“Added to which this chap is about to marry her,” nodded The Infant amiably.

“Oh!” Lady Bentley’s mouth was a little open. “Marry her?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“And what makes you think the real name is Dalton? And have you had any lunch?”

“We’ve got this.” He produced the photograph. “And we’d love some lunch. I rather hoped the Colonel in there would ask us, but it didn’t seem to occur to him. Frightfully kind of you.”

Hers was a rather wonderful old house, the lower part of it with linenfold panelling, and a great hall, running the full height. The floors were of wide oak planking in which one could still see faint scimitar-like axe-marks. At the end of the hall a great window looking on to a garden, with the same far-flung view of Kent beyond. All very quiet and cool, with antiquity wherever the eye rested.

“You want to wash, don’t you?”

They agreed at once, just as they would had they washed three minutes previously, and, later, found her in a big room filled with fresh flowers, old walnut and old prints. She sat in a high-backed chair, spine like a ramrod, her strong, rather leathery face with a touch of tan, and a manner that, like the room, had both dignity and reserve.

“Lunch will be ready in two minutes. Now please tell me about this girl. Is she a friend of your family?”

Dolph shook his head. "I haven't any family left. She met the Martins, or, rather, they found her when they were in Canada this spring. I was with them."

"Then I saw her, once, in Town. 'Twas at the Burnabys' dance. She was with a young man I don't approve of at all."

"That would be Toots," reflected The Infant severely. "A bad boy."

"Who?"

"You mean Jack Berwick?"

The old lady nodded. "I haven't any family, but if I had a girl I wouldn't allow it." She turned to Dolph. "You're going to marry her?"

He nodded with great satisfaction.

"Well, I hope she has dropped the man."

"Never picked him up," said he. "I don't believe they've met since. Lady Bentley, are you interested?"

"I am, and as the nearly oldest inhabitant," here she gave an undeniable wink, "I can tell you that some people called Dalton did live next door to me. That was before the war."

"Great Scott! Did you get that, Matt?"

"Did I get it! Please go on, Lady Bentley."

"It was in 1908, I think that a very sad affair——"

Interrupted by the brazen summons of a gong, she got up with a nod. "If you're not in a hurry to get back, we'll talk about it after lunch."

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN FROM B.C.

“**A** MR. PURDEY to see you, please, miss.”

It came from the door of Pirrie's room, and produced a numbing effect. Both the girls being out, she had lunched alone with Mrs. Martin, a trying ordeal, during which she felt a hypocrite. Then, escaping as soon as possible, she had fled upstairs to wrestle with the new Pirrie so lately uncovered within herself.

The fight was bitter. In it, Berwick figured as a means of disappearing from an intolerable situation, and little more. He was nice to look at, had charming manners, was amusing, and what people called a gentleman, and she knew that she would not have taken him seriously were not all this the case. But beyond it her thoughts seemed loath to go. A means of escape—he was just that—and ready to marry her, when she was ready. At least so he vowed.

But was he? Pitching her mind ahead, Pirrie asked herself if it would be as true later on. Her intelligence doubted it. Men—she had learned something of them since coming to London—did not usually marry the thing they had played with in this fashion, and there was bound to come a day when position, and the future, and common sense, and the regard of others all counted much more heavily than when one was caught up in a breathless and passionate experience that by the very nature of it could not last long. Such experiences, it seemed to her now, were, or at least should be, the result of love, not its forerunner. So there was that—the aftermath—to be reckoned with.

As to the Martins, this house would certainly be closed to her. Were she to go back to Canada after living with Berwick, and Stevens should discover it, the fact would break his heart. And could she, after eliminating Berwick like a bad dream, go back now, as she was, and pick up the old, deadening, lonely life, this time with her shattered dreams? She doubted that.

Strive as she would, there came no answer to all this, and her mind turned to the man waiting downstairs. He, at any rate, loved her; and was he, after all, the way out? Now it began to seem possible. His letter with the story of the Caribou Trail had been a cruel thing, but, she forced herself to admit it, it was the not unnatural protest of one who feared he had lost what he wanted most.

If she considered him at all, he must first agree to return Martin's money. That was absolute. Nor should he object, because, as she believed, he knew nothing of what had happened at the Hope. But he knew all about her, and still wanted to

marry her, foundling or not, and marriage with him would impose no sense of shame or unfairness, for was he not, in the last word, one of her own sort?

There were, then, two means of escape. Berwick, with his money, and the price she must pay: Purdey with little or no money, but, nevertheless, decency. Luxury—or probable hardship. The crooked path—or the straight one. Something that would go hard with Stevens—or that of which, considering all the circumstances, he could only approve.

It was too hard to answer now. Purdey, like Berwick, must wait till the end of the week.

Her eyes were quite unclouded, her pulse steady, and her head high when she went downstairs with Stevens' cable in her pocket. She found him standing in the middle of the drawing-room, too nervous to sit, wearing a blue ready-made suit that, fitting loosely, did not disguise his muscular activity. His face was brown, his eyes bright, and, she decided, he looked very much a man.

Nodding, he looked at her with unconcealed surprise. The same Pirrie, but different. Older, he thought, and very finished and Londonish. The same slim, strong body that used to bend over the gold-pan beside the creek, but one that now asserted itself more boldly. He had been looking hard at women since he arrived, and somehow thought that she would be a little different, but so far as that part of it went, she wasn't. She was lovelier than ever, and a little pale, with something about her that made it odd to take her hands, which, presently, he did.

Holding them for a little time, and smiling at her, he said nothing at all, as instinct was telegraphing that she must know much more and have done a great deal more than in all her past life put together. So it behoved him to move very carefully. Then, as the new desirous sensations made him want her dreadfully, his courage returned.

"You look wonderful, Pirrie."

"I don't feel it, Hugh. When did you leave the mine?"

"Two weeks ago to-morrow. I went to New York, and got a fast steamer. It was a great trip."

"You've been very quick about it."

"I meant to be."

"How did you leave Dad?"

"Well and happy: he'll be up to the eyes in work now."

"Hugh," she asked a little shakily, "was Danks at the mine when you left?"

"Yes."

"Then of course you haven't heard?" She said this very slowly, forcing it out, hating him, in a way, for the letter he wrote, yet oddly sorry to hurt him with bad

news. He had worked hard. She admitted that.

“Heard what, Pirrie?”

He asked it with a sickening fear that the truth might be known to her, and that she was hiding it in order to test him. But, he reflected swiftly, if it were, all of it, she could not have received him as she did. Pirrie was never a bluffer. Now there was no anger, no secret in her eyes. Only a great sadness.

“It’s all gone wrong at the Hope,” she said dully. “Everything—and that report. You were there when the engineer came, weren’t you?”

“Yes.” His nerves were steady now.

“And saw how the samples were taken?”

“At a little distance. I had nothing to do with them.”

“And you didn’t notice anything queer?”

“No: Bustard was very businesslike, and knew exactly what he wanted, and where to take it.”

“Where did he make the assays, Hugh?”

“In his own office in Vancouver.”

“Well, this cable came yesterday.” She held out the yellow sheet. “Read it!”

Not daring to look at her, he took the thing. There was a silence. Pirrie, knitting her fingers together, sat very still, her blue eyes fixed on him with unwavering scrutiny, while he, absorbing Stevens’ grim message, and all it implied, underwent an extraordinary translation of feeling. The truth was out, but only part of it! Danks had talked, yet for some unimaginable reason shielded his partner in this affair. The fact was beyond understanding, but unmistakable. And now it was for him, Purdey, to step very warily. Was Danks dead? It would be worth anything to have known that.

“God! Who’d have dreamed it!”

Pirrie shook her head. “It came out of the blue—like a bomb. First there was the cable from the engineer, and I was so utterly happy about you all. Mr. Martin made me repeat it to Dad at once, and I pictured your faces when you read it, and how you’d all shake on it. You were there then?”

He nodded. “It was a great day for us, and at first the figures sounded too good to be true.”

“You felt that too?” she asked curiously. “I did myself.”

“Same with us. Then we decided we’d been too modest, at least Stevens and I did. I don’t remember Danks saying anything at all, except that Bustard ought to know his own business. Looking back at it now, I suppose that might have made us suspect something. But we didn’t.”

“Hugh,” said she, “apart from that one remark of his, had anything happened of

any kind to make you think Danks wasn't straight? You'd known each other for a year. Had you no secret thoughts about him?"

At this the gulf of deceit deepened still further, and Purdey was left no alternative. He plunged, hoping with all his soul that Danks, the only other man who knew it all, was dead. He must be dead.

"Yes, a little more than a year. He didn't talk much, but I heard he was a good miner with a poor reputation. Now and then he dropped a few things about his past life that—when I think of this business—make it more understandable. He was alongside Bustard when the samples were taken, about twenty of them. I went underground with them in case any help was needed, but it wasn't, so I stayed away. Now I'm glad I did."

"I'm glad too. Is there anything more?"

"He wanted money badly, I know that. How he did the salting is past me, and I know that he threw water on the quartz so Bustard could get clean samples. Anyway, he evidently knew the ropes. Now he's got his money, and cleared out."

"It's Mr. Martin's money, Hugh, all of it. None of us have a right to one cent."

Purdey felt a shock, having at that moment ten thousand dollars of it in his pocket. He could feel it against his breast, ten carefully wrapped notes, potent things that, he had reckoned, would bring him the girl he wanted. He frowned, compressing his lips, his brain darting hither and thither, seeking a way out. In this affair the half-truth was as difficult as the whole.

"Didn't you realize that?" she asked in a tone rather shocked. "I did, the minute the news came. And Danks, I think he must have said something of some kind that Dad didn't put in the cable, and is writing about."

"I wonder," said he—as indeed he did wonder.

"Hugh, you were going to sell Dad your interest, weren't you?"

"Yes, I gave him an option."

"Did you sell?"

Purdey gave her a nod, feeling excessively uncomfortable.

"For how much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Then you've got that as well as your share of the twenty-five thousand?"

"Yes," said he. How much longer would this inquisition last?

"What are you going to do about it?"

Looking at her cautiously, he knew that now they had come to grips on something for which a few moments ago he was totally unprepared. The money burned in his pocket. His tongue felt frozen, and she, reading into his silence a reason

that was not there, went on very bravely, and with a gentleness that made the situation all the more confusing.

“Why did you come here, Hugh?”

“You know,” he blurted, glad of the opportunity to speak the truth, if only once.

“Yes, perhaps I do, and what this cable must mean to you too. I’ve thought about that a great deal.”

Purdey, still floundering, waited for more.

“And can you see what it means to me—can you imagine that?”

“A good deal,” he admitted.

“I’ve been like their own child to the Martins. He believed in the Hope, and in Dad. Now this horrible thing has happened. I’m not part of the fraud, just as you aren’t, but I’m mixed up in it, and for me everything is changed. They want me to stay here, but I can’t, nor can I accept anything more from them; but the very first thing to be done now, and it’s all anyone can do, is to give back to Mr. Martin what is his. Danks’ part of it is probably gone for ever, but Dad will repay. What about you?”

“What do you expect me to do?” he asked stiffly.

“Send back that five thousand to Dad, and give Mr. Martin what you’ve had from him. There’s nothing else for it, Hugh.”

Something began to hum in Purdey’s ears. Without the money, what chance had he of Pirrie? With it, apparently none. He looked at her covertly, and the hunger for possession stole through his body like a creeping flame. He played for time.

“There’s this,” he said. “Stevens thinks the samples have been salted, but he doesn’t actually know. There’s no real proof, and I don’t see how there can be. What is Martin’s attitude? Has he asked for the money back?”

“He hasn’t even mentioned it. All he’s done is to cable Dad to clear the shaft, and get another independent report. And, Hugh, we both know what that is bound to be. The Hope ore was never worth twenty dollars a ton; we couldn’t have been so far astray. The whole thing has been a mistake from the very first—and I’m part of it.”

“Oh!” He noted a subtle change in her tone. “What have you done?”

“I should never have left the mine. It—it wasn’t natural.”

“I didn’t want you to go, Pirrie.”

She sent him a sad little smile. “I know that.”

“Are you going to marry Hudson?” He got this out, and held his breath for the answer.

“No,” she whispered.

“On account of this?”

“Partly—and the other thing. That letter you sent me—it’s all true—all of it—and about my—my——?”

“Yes,” he lied. “I hated to put the thing on paper, yet thought you ought to know. But, Pirrie, it doesn’t make the least difference to me. You’re sure of that, aren’t you?”

It was damnably smooth and well done, and to Pirrie it brought a sort of dull comfort. Here was a man to whom it didn’t matter who or what she was, and he had hurried to her the moment he was free. At this point she almost made up her mind in his favour.

“You were quite right to tell me,” she said very gently.

“Did the Martins, or Hudson, know I was coming?” he asked with a quick glance.

“No, I didn’t say anything.”

“Or about my letter?”

“Nor that either.” He would never see Matthew now, so that side of it didn’t matter.

“Well, Pirrie, here I am.”

He got this out in a strained, hungry tone. Finding it necessary to make a decision, his brain was ferreting about for some means by which he might secure both this girl and Martin’s money, while Pirrie watched him closely, weighing him as a future husband. If he proved straight enough to make restitution, she might, she doubtless would marry him. If he didn’t, the only thing left to her was Berwick. And in either case there would be but little love in it for her.

“You told me that your coming here was all a mistake from the first?” he said cautiously.

She nodded.

“Well, I loved you then, and I love you now. Nothing has changed with me. I hated to see you ride off as you did.”

“It might have been better if I hadn’t, Hugh.”

At this he went to her quickly, putting his arms round her.

“Will you marry me, Pirrie? I’ve wanted you since the minute I saw you.”

For an instant she remained quite still, her eyes lowered, captive where there was no joy in being captured. How strange it all was! Dolph—Berwick—now Hugh, each wanting her. And how hard to yield to any one of them.

“I’ll think about it, but you must wait till the end of the week. Then it could only be on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You return to Mr. Martin what he paid you on the understanding that he keeps it unless the next report on the Hope is all right. Also to Dad what you had from him.”

“It’s about all I have in the world, Pirrie.”

“I could never marry a man who kept that kind of money, and I’m not afraid of being poor. You see what’s at stake?”

He saw it only too clearly, also the terrific irony of his present case. With one purpose in mind, he had made himself a criminal to get that money. Now he was told to get rid of it. How infinitely better had he never had it! And that letter about the Caribou Trail—really the product of his thwarted desire—written in order to drive a desperate girl from another man’s arms into his own. She was in them now, but not yet his, and there was hardly a word he could say.

“You can’t have other people’s money—and me,” she went on valiantly. “It must be one or the other. Think it over, and come back on Saturday about this time. I make no promise, but I’ll think too. No—don’t kiss me now. I’m not going to tell the Martins you’re here before it’s decided.”

“It would make hard going without that money,” said he, thrilled with the nearness and touch of her. It was the first time she had ever been in his arms.

“I wouldn’t care. We’d have saved something more worth while. And I’m sorry our meeting had to be like this; but what Dad is going through must be even worse.”

Every word seemed to cut like a knife, and he could stand it no longer. He took her hand, holding it for a voiceless moment, abashed by the high courage in the brave blue eyes, while she, looking straight into his, never dreamed that they were those of a man writhing in a self-dugged hell.

“Till Saturday at this time, Pirrie?”

“Yes, Hugh: and if there’s something I should have said, and haven’t, will you forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” he muttered, more shaken than ever.

“About your travelling six thousand miles to me the minute you were free. A girl doesn’t forget that, and I’m sorry that such bad news was waiting for you. But you’ve taken it wonderfully, because you’re straight.”

It was too much, even for Purdey. He gave her hand a quick, convulsive squeeze, and hurried out.

CHAPTER X

WHO WAS PIRRIE?

PIRRIE DEAREST,

You haven't been out of my mind for a second, and I'm terribly anxious that you shouldn't misunderstand a word I said the day before yesterday. You asked me not to see you till Saturday, so I must write what follows.

You say you don't want to marry anyone. Well, as I told you, that's quite beyond me, nor can I imagine any reason for it, but let it be quite clear that I do want to marry you, and if I didn't, I wouldn't have proposed what I have. That must go on record over my name. So here it is.

Now about the trip. I think that North Africa would be the most interesting. We'd go straight to Algiers, then get a car, and south to the Sahara, across the desert to Biskra, and north to the coast again. Then Tunis. After that we might try Sicily. Do look all this up on the map, and let me know what you think.

There's one other matter, and please forgive me for mentioning it. About money. You will need an outfit, and musn't be at all embarrassed in that way. I've had to force myself to speak of this, but can't bear to think of you in any difficulty on that score. I'm fortunate enough not to have to worry about money, so you musn't either. Do, please, let me know just how matters stand in that respect. I don't take the liberty of sending you any without permission.

One point more. You know that I love you. In fact you must have known it very very soon after we met, and I tried to find out what sort of a future you would like. I feel just the same now, and please believe it was because of that I summoned up courage to propose what I did. And if we go away together, I can teach you to love me enough to marry me.

Pirrie darling, only two days more. Then you are going to make me the happiest man in the world.

Devotedly,

JOHN BERWICK.

This letter, brought to the morning-room where she was with the two girls,

awakened in Pirrie an infinity of feelings. It was an honest letter, one had to admit that, and she read it with fascinated abstraction, unaware of the curious glances she attracted. Then, suddenly looking up, she pushed it into her pocket, and turned rather pink.

Neither of the Martins spoke. Jennifer was reading, and Jule busy over yards of narrow lace and a length of filmy silk. Pirrie, watching them silently, longed as she often had before to tell them all, and lean on their advice. She knew that they would understand.

She could not make herself do it. A capacity for voiceless endurance was part of her nature, and the unwritten code of her life forbade her to register complaints or make appeal for help. Knocks, bruises, hurts, hardships, disappointments, loneliness and a dumb feeling that she didn't amount to much—all these had been so common to her in the past, that now she had come to regard them as quite ordinary and inevitable. One hadn't said anything about them formerly, so what reason was there for complaint to-day. She would continue to carry her own load.

For all their silence, the two Martins were intensely interested. During some days past, instinct told them that matters had gone wrong with Pirrie. She had been distraught, looked unhappy and anxious, and seemed to be losing her natural buoyancy. There was something almost apprehensive in her manner. But, respecting her pride, they had asked no questions. All they knew was that she was different from her former self, and had not spoken of Dolph. And they were absolutely unaware of Purdey's visit.

"Anything on to-day, Pirrie?" asked Jule presently.

"Nothing special."

"Nice about Saturday, isn't it. You'll like that."

"What?" Pirrie was dreading Saturday.

"I thought Mother had told you. We're going off for the week-end on the river at Sonning. It's a gem of a place. We're going by car after breakfast. Three days on the water. You're booked for an exhibition in a Canadian canoe."

"I didn't know anything about it," said Pirrie, her heart sinking.

"Don't you want to go?" asked Jennifer curiously.

"It—it sounds wonderful."

Jennifer, whose perceptions were very keen, was greatly puzzled.

"It's quite different from any of your own rivers," she went on. "Big white houseboats with flower-boxes in the windows, gardens running down to the water, punts and cushions and music, and the river itself—well, you'd call it perfectly manicured. Probably you'll think it tame, but it's the best we can do on this side."

“And excessively romantic by moonlight,” put in Jule. “We’ll get Dolph and Matthew.”

“What about Jack Berwick—for you?” suggested her sister.

“Thanks, I’m not interested.”

“Who’s taking my name in vain?” laughed Dolph at the door.

“And, what is more important, mine?” added The Infant. “We’ve not been listening, but got that much.”

They came in, smiling, and Jennifer’s heart gave a flutter. Pirrie, looking at Dolph, and loving him more than ever, shivered a little. Why should it fall to her lot to hurt him so soon and so terribly. And she had been trying to avoid him till Saturday. Meeting her look, he signalled something that nearly made her cry out in protest.

“In the good old days, I believe that gentlemen used to send up their cards,” said Jule. “How did you get in?”

“We ain’t gents, and we ain’t got no cards,” grinned The Infant. “Dolph wants to see the girl of the Golden West strictly on business, and I brought him along. We can always go if you don’t like us.”

With this he lit a cigarette, and made himself comfortable near Jennifer.

“What are you doing this week-end?” she asked.

“It’s a dreary blank, so far.”

“Can you paddle a Canadian canoe?”

“No, but I can swim well enough for two.”

“Then would you and Dolph care to come down to the White Hart till Monday. It might be rather nice. We’re going.”

“And I’m privately informed that the moon will be full, which may be of more interest to others than myself,” said Jule wickedly.

“Will we come, do you ask? Dolph, did you get that?”

“I did, and we’re coming with bells on. Whose is this brilliant idea?”

“Mother’s.”

“Blessings on all mothers, especially yours. All right—that’s fixed.” He hesitated a moment, then glanced at The Infant, who nodded.

“Do you mind if we’re frightfully rude, and cart Pirrie off for a few hours?”

“Are you talking to us or to her?”

“To the assembled company, and her in particular. It’s my new way of being polite.”

“Are you thinking of eloping?”

“Some other day, perhaps, but not this morning.”

“Well, Pirrie, do you want to be carted off?”

“Where to?” she asked doubtfully.

“We—that is Matt and I—want to show you something.”

Jennifer’s brows went up a shade. “How very intriguing!”

“Will you come, Pirrie? Sorry to be so abrupt, but we’re very much on the job to-day. It’s your job too.”

“Being obviously a trifle superfluous, may I be excused,” said Jule, gathering up her work. “Come along, Jen.”

The Infant rose regretfully. “I say, Jen?”

“Yes?”

“You’re quite in earnest about Saturday.”

“Of course we are.”

“Thank Heaven for that much, anyway. May I run you down to Sonning?”

“I’d love it.”

Five minutes later, Pirrie, seated between the two men in Matthew’s coupé, looked curiously at Dolph.

“Where are you taking me? And why?”

He reflected for a moment before answering.

“I’d better explain. We didn’t want to say anything about it before the others, but we think we’ve struck something in Kent. Matt, do you mind if my manner becomes a trifle affectionate.”

“I will probably nauseate me a little—but go on.”

“There’s a place we want you to see, Pirrie, and in a certain way. We found it two days ago.”

“Whose place is it?”

“Years ago it belonged to some people called Dalton,” said he, watching her closely. “Do you remember that name?”

“Dalton? No, I don’t think so.”

“Quite sure—I mean at any time. Does it suggest anything?”

“It seems in one way familiar,” said she, wrinkling her brows. “Dolph, do you think it was my name?”

He took her hand, pressing it hard. “That’s what we’re trying to find out. Tell her the rest of it, Matt. You started it.”

She listened tensely, blue eyes fixed on him, knowing in her heart that to solve this hitherto unanswered mystery would mean more than she could possibly express. It seemed, too, that this was their unconscious way of showing her that she was wrong, all wrong, in feeling as she did. And it was wonderful to know that these two had been working for her without saying a word. It gave her a dawning feeling of

safety.

“So that’s that,” he concluded. “Now please put everything else out of your mind, don’t puzzle your brain, don’t tax your memory, and above all, don’t ask questions. Lie fallow till we get there, and then do exactly what you’re told.”

He relapsed into a genial silence, and, clearing the outskirts of London, they sped down the broad highway that bisects Kent. The photograph was in his pocket, but after consultation with Lady Bentley it had been decided not to use it. She argued that if recognition could come from without rather than from within, it would be infinitely more conclusive.

Pirrie settled back and shut her eyes. She had no premonitions and no real expectations from this affair. But it was good to be in the country, even though harassed by circumstances of which these two knew nothing. In two days she must make her decision, and how could anything that might happen now alter that?

They reached Charing in an hour and a half. At the foot of the long hill that turns northeast toward Canterbury, the car halted.

“Pirrie,” said Dolph, “we’re taking you to see Lady Bentley.”

“Oh!”

“You remember her?”

“I saw her once, and thought her rather forbidding. Wasn’t it at the Burnabys’ dance?”

“Yes, and she was interested in you. She never had any daughters of her own. Now we’re going to turn you over to her.”

“But why, Dolph?”

“For an experiment, and she’ll explain everything at the right time. It may fall flat, but we don’t think so. Just do whatever she asks. Later, you may meet some people called Stoner, but they don’t count. Don’t fight your impressions, if you get any, and, equally, don’t manufacture any. Is that quite clear? The place will be new to you, so can’t recognize it or anyone. You weren’t expecting to, were you?”

It was all too puzzling, and she shook her head. How could anyone there identify a girl they had never seen before.

“All right then, and don’t worry. Step on it, Matt.”

The Infant put his foot down, and the car raced uphill, halting at a driveway. A moment later, Pirrie was greeted in the great panelled hall by Lady Bentley, who gave her a frank stare of exceeding interest. The men disappeared, and the old lady took her hand.

“It’s so strange to have you here, my dear. Your face has been in my thoughts for weeks, and I wasn’t a bit surprised when your friends turned up the day before

yesterday. If they hadn't, I think I would have gone to see you. Have they told you what you're to do?"

"Just whatever you tell me," said Pirrie. "And I don't understand at all."

"You will very soon, so don't worry about that. Please come this way."

The girl followed upstairs to a big bedroom in which an east window overlooked the adjoining garden, and on a big fourposter bed were laid out some clothes at the sight of which she could not repress a smile. She saw a long skirt of pale blue linen, a white blouse with mutton-leg sleeves, a dark blue tie, a black belt, and a large flopping Mother Hubbard bonnet.

"Where on earth did you get those?" she asked.

"I've just had them made in Canterbury, and they got here one hour before you did."

"It's like something out of a family album."

"Yes, and it's rather meant to be. Will you please put them on."

"I—put them on—here!" gasped Pirrie. "You're joking."

"No, my dear, I'm not. You'll understand later. It sounds ridiculous, but it's quite serious."

"I'm to wear them now and here?"

Lady Bentley nodded, and Pirrie, thinking it a sort of masquerade, began to change. The blouse fitted her perfectly, the skirt she found stiff after her own filmy frock, and the belt was just the right length for her slim waist.

"Now I'd like to arrange your hair," said the old lady with a strange expression.

Her fingers worked nimbly in the golden locks, the bonnet went on, ribbons were tied, and after one final touch she stepped back with an exclamation. Then she moved to the window, and waved her hand. Pirrie wondered if she were not a little mad.

"That should do nicely. Now please follow me."

She went downstairs, Pirrie at her heels, and out through the hall. Next across the lawn to a door in the brick wall that ran along the east side of the property. Passing this, they found themselves in the neighbouring garden. No one was visible save one old man, his back toward them, bending over his rose-trees on one of the lower terraces. Pirrie looked at her guide with a question in her eyes. It all began to seem rather foolish.

"Please what am I to do here?"

"Just this—walk as quietly as you can down those centre steps till you reach that gardener. He musn't see you till you're close by. Then, when you are quite close, say, 'Good morning, Richard. How's the rheumatism.' That's all you have to do."

Pirrie's heart began to flutter. "Was he—did he——?"

"My dear, all your questions will be answered afterwards, I hope, and you mustn't get excited now. That's why the thing was kept from you till the last moment. Just do that: I'll wait here."

The girl took a long tremulous breath, and started downhill. She might have been alone in the world save for that one bent figure. Was this where her mother used to come, dressed like this, and were the roses just as sweet then? The scent of them caressed her from their lovely beds. And this soft expanse of gentle countryside—was this the view that had greeted those dear eyes every morning, eyes that had closed in winter darkness on the Caribou Trail? If it was, what had driven her forth? Pirrie, overcome with thoughts such as these, could hardly breathe, and before she knew it had almost touched the man's old bent back.

"Good morning, Richard," she heard herself say. "How's the rheumatism?"

For one instant he remained quite motionless as though transfixed, then began to tremble, till slowly, very slowly, his head came up, and he glanced, half paralysed, over his shoulder, but not enough to see her. She heard a queer hoarse sound, not altogether human, and with this he straightened a little, and turned. For a fraction of time everything stopped, and he stood rooted, mouth open, dim old eyes wide and staring. The wrinkled face had an aspect of utter terror, and the shears dropped from the nerveless fingers.

"Miss Barbara!" he cried out. "In God's name, Miss Barbara, how came you here?" Then, dropping suddenly to his knees, he covered his eyes with earth-stained hands.

"Be it time for me too, Miss Barbara?"

That was all. Pirrie, herself trembling, heard running feet on the steps, felt Dolph's arm round her, heard his voice in her ear. She did not know what he said. Matthew had arrived from nowhere, and was stooping over the old man. Lady Bentley was waving from the upper lawn.

"Pirrie, darling, it worked—it worked. It's all right. You're Pirrie Dalton. Don't you see?"

She thought she did, but wasn't sure. All she felt sure of was that something extraordinary had happened, and would make a tremendous difference to her. Her eyes filled with tears, and for the first time in her life she grew dizzy.

"Hold me, Dolph—quick! Don't say anything now—presently."

He helped her back to the lawn. Here she found two new people with Lady Bentley, a tall military-looking man and his wife. They were all smiling. The strangers shook her hand and disappeared. Lady Bentley kissed her with extreme tenderness.

“That’s all, my dear, and it’s quite enough. You’ll have a talk with old Richard before you go.”

For the rest of her life the memory of that sunlit hour on a Kentish hillside remained bright in Pirrie’s mind. It was exactly as though some crushing weight about her neck were cut away, and she had been born again. The foundling of the Caribou Trail was a foundling no longer.

Back in the Priory again, in her own clothes, and with her mother’s picture in her lap, she listened with fascination to what the old lady had to say.

“The last time I saw you, my dear,” she began, “something made me think very hard. I thought I remembered you, but not knowing that there was any question as to your identity, I naturally said nothing. So there was a blank till these two young men turned up with your mother’s photograph the day before yesterday. And that I did recognize at once.

“Now we’ll go back. The Daltons, your grandparents, leased the house next door about twenty-three years ago. He was a distinguished-looking man, and had retired from the Indian Civil Service. She was a Wiltshire woman: Salisbury, I think. They were not well off, and lived, I believe, entirely on his pension. Your grandmother was a most exquisite and gentle creature, and to my mind gave way to her husband far too much. The one daughter was the image of her, and about nineteen. I didn’t see very much of them because I was living abroad most of the time, and only came here to make sure that the place was being properly looked after.

“On my last visit—that is before I returned for good—I heard about your mother. Old Richard gave it to me. He looked after both these gardens, and had been especially devoted to the Dalton girl, whose name was Barbara. You must remember that name, my dear.”

Pirrie nodded, her eyes filling with tears.

“Well, it seems—and this happened during my absence—that she had fallen in love with a young man called Philip Ridley, and——”

“My father?” whispered the girl.

“Yes, your father: but your mother’s people did not approve. Old Richard, who saw a good deal of what went on, told me that he was very gay and amusing, and always restless. Soon after that, and I assume they were desperately in love—they eloped, and were married in London, and after a few weeks returned to Bankside to confess. The mother was more than ready, but old Dalton wouldn’t have it unless Barbara was prepared to leave her husband.

“Well, my dear, she wasn’t, and they went off, and were never seen again in this part of the world. Her mother pined and pined, and when she heard that there was a child—that was you, my dear—and old Dalton still remained obdurate on any terms except his own—it simply broke her heart, and she died very soon. Then he went to pieces. On his death-bed, Richard tells me, he was bitterly repentant, but could not leave Barbara anything because his pension ended with him. And after that, Bankside was let to various people, till, finally, it was taken by the Stoners, who are there now. It was with their permission that the tableau was arranged to-day.”

“I wonder what got into the Colonel?” mused Matthew. “He certainly gave us a chilly welcome.”

“That’s only his manner, and he didn’t mean to. Well, child, we had a consultation here, we three, on Tuesday after lunch as to how the test should be made, and all felt it very important that you should know nothing of what was going on. I saw the Stoners, and they were most sympathetic. We knew that you could not identify anything yourself, and though your coming here might arouse certain instincts, that couldn’t be taken as real proof. It needed something from outside of you, and that’s where old Richard came in.

“Then we thought of the blouse and skirt, and I drove over to Canterbury, and had them made in a hurry. We knew it would be hard on Richard, and he would probably take you for a ghost, but it worked beautifully. And, my dear, none of this would have happened at all, if Mr. Lynch hadn’t found that photograph.”

“Delighted, I’m sure,” murmured The Infant. “Only a pleasure.”

Pirrie, infinitely touched and unspeakably grateful, had little to say, there being no words for what she was feeling. Pirrie Ridley! She was Pirrie Ridley. Twenty-one years she had been in the world, and to-day for the first time knew who she was. She had an extraordinary desire to take this girl Pirrie Ridley aside, and ask her a thousand questions. And what about the other Ridleys—her father’s people? But that must wait.

“Could I see Richard now?” she asked almost timidly.

“He’s waiting for you in the garden. You’ll have it to yourselves.”

She slipped away, and found him on a bench in the paradise of his own making. At sight of her, he stood, and touched his cap with unsteady fingers. His eyes held a sort of awe, and his lips were trembling. She sat beside him, and took his toil-worn hand in hers.

“Tell me, Richard! Tell me everything you can remember of her.”

He began in an old-time Kentish speech that at first she found hard to follow, and with that look of startled wonder still on his kindly face. As he talked, it seemed

to Pirrie that time ceased to exist, and there was created for her the vision of Barbara Ridley in this ageless garden, herself the loveliest of all its flowers. Pirrie could see her here with her lover. Here she must have come with the mother who understood. Here she escaped from a father who didn't.

What were the thoughts, wondered the girl, that pursued her? Had she any conception that she was to cross an ocean, a continent, and join a desperate company that struggled west, ever west, in the search for gold, was to lose the man for whom she had put away all the gentleness of life, was to bear him a child, the fruit of love and suffering, and at the end was to die in loneliness where the austere heights of whitecapped mountains looked down on an epitome of human tragedy and suffering. Did she dream anything like this? Was she, who had dared so greatly, ever sorry that she had loved?

Pirrie thought not. She must have loved too much, and nothing counted but her love, so that all fear and hesitation were cast aside. And this was the woman of whom Purdey had written so vile a slander!

The old man's voice went on, but Pirrie's thoughts were growing chaotic. She must come here again soon, when the place was more familiar, and Berwick and Purdey had had their answer. How strangely, and with what sweeping conviction, that answer had been provided. An hour ago she had been dreading the moment. Now she welcomed it with a heart full of gratitude.

She went back to the Priory in a sort of exaltation, her eyes shining, charged with a thankfulness it was impossible to express, and met Matthew on the doorstep.

"Well, Pirrie, one only has to look at you to——"

"How can I ever say what I want to say, Matt?"

"Wouldn't try—just forget it. Nice to have been of use. I'll turn up on Saturday."

"Saturday!"

"When I come for Jennifer. Dolph is driving you down to Sonning. Well, I'm off."

"Aren't you taking me back to Town?"

"Nope—not this time. Dolph will, in my bus. I'm going by train. Under present circumstances, a twosome is preferable."

He walked away quickly, and she, infinitely touched, found the others waiting for her. It was difficult to know what to say, because there seemed to be so much. Lady Bentley, aware of this, came to the rescue at once.

"Now, my dear, I think what's been done is quite enough for one morning, so we won't talk about it any more just now. The Stoners want you two for lunch next week whenever it suits, and they'll show you the house. That will be easier than

seeing it now, and I'm so glad everything has turned out happily. Is Richard himself again?"

Pirrie, hardly able to speak, gave a nod: then, after an impulsive kiss from the old lady, Dolph herded her into the car, and they set out for Town. They were nearing Maidstone when she put her hand on his.

"Dolph, I want to tell you something."

"What, darling? Aren't you happy now?"

"Happier in one way than ever before."

"In one way?" he asked anxiously.

"Hugh Purdey is in town," she said in a strained voice.

"Purdey!"

"Yes—from Stevens' Hope."

Jamming on the brakes, he stopped the car midway on the curve from which one sees Leeds Castle, an island of mediæval masonry, rising from its circular lake.

"What is Purdey doing here?"

"Dolph, promise me something."

"Anything."

"Then let me tell it all in my own way. I wonder if you'll understand."

"I'll try to," he said patiently.

It came in a flood, all the heartache that had been oppressing her, Purdey's letter with its cruel fabrications, the evening with Matthew, and what happened at the Green Cow, her own intensified sense of shame, her struggle to say nothing, the disaster at the Hope, the salted samples, the arrival of Purdey, her demand that the money be returned, the half promise of herself as a reward, out it came in a low-voiced confession, and through it all, though she did not know it, shone her own clear, brave honesty of spirit.

"It's been so hard to know what to do," she concluded. "One part of me kept saying that I didn't belong here, and the other hated to go. I felt torn in two." Here she paused, while the vision of Berwick came to her. That she must wipe out, for he, at least, had been straightforward. "Then, finally, it seemed that whatever happened, I musn't let anyone else down. There had been enough of that. I felt stained, Dolph, and it hurt so horribly. I used to look at you all, and wonder what it would be like to have nothing hanging over one."

"You blessed, blessed creature!" said he. "My God, why didn't you tell me before. That letter was a lie from start to finish. Couldn't you see it?"

"I couldn't—then."

"Purdey is coming back on Saturday?"

“Yes, Dolph.”

“You certainly won’t see him. That’s flat.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Leave that to us. He’ll be met and taken care of. May I tell Matt what you’ve told me—all of it?”

“He does know about the letter, and said nothing because he wanted to spare you. The rest he doesn’t know.”

“You told him, and not me!”

“Matt wasn’t in love with me, and I had to tell someone. It was killing me.”

“Pirrie!” said he with a great oath, “supposing that letter had been true, every word of it, do you really think I’m the sort to whom it would have made any difference?”

“No, Dolph, not really.”

“Then why didn’t you trust me?”

“It was that sense of being soiled,” she whispered, wondering now why she hadn’t. “I can’t explain it, and the kinder everyone was, the more wretched I got. I kept saying to myself—‘if they only knew—if they only knew!’ and I couldn’t bear to tell them. And Saturday would have finished everything.”

“Saturday will,” he announced grimly. “This fellow is drifting about London, waiting to see you, and without a notion that we’ve got him just where we want him?”

Pirrie nodded.

“Then I rather look forward to Saturday.” He got the car into motion. “But there’s one thing to be done instantly.”

“What, Dolph?”

“Cable the news to Stevens. We can attend to that at Maidstone.”

They did: and was it not a curious thing that just about the time at which it flashed under leagues of green sea-water, there should be speeding towards them another message, coming the other way, with Stevens’ name at the end of it, and no less calculated to quicken the pulse of those who deciphered it.

CHAPTER XI

GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

IT is observable in the course of human events that occurrences which are entirely independent of each other, do, when they happen simultaneously, exercise a combined influence. That is to say, the effect of one intensifies the other. And when both are completely unexpected, the result is the more striking. Thus we say that news, whether good or bad, never comes singly.

Just about the time when Purdey, with Martin's money stowed comfortably in his pocket, was staring hungrily at Pirrie, and wondering how he could get the one without surrendering the other, Stevens, surrounded by a little group of men, was looking down into the wrecked shaft of the Hope.

"Well," said he, "she's pretty clear, so we'll try it."

As a preliminary, and to test the air, he lit a candle, and stuck it into a metal holder. This he lowered very carefully by a length of line, and watched the tiny point of flame dwindle in the darkness. Burning steadily, down it went, foot by foot, till at last there could be seen but a yellow pinhead. But still it burned.

Stevens gave a nod, put his foot in the great steel hook at the end of the hoisting cable, and took a glance at the temporary tripod he had erected to replace the shattered headgear. Then he stuck a lighted candle in the brim of his sou'wester, and gave a signal.

Slowly he disappeared. A substitute signal wire to the engine-room had been rigged, and with this slipping through his hand, he began, foot by foot, to explore his underground ruin. When he desired to stop, he jerked the wire, and the engine ceased to revolve.

One arm crooked round the cable, he held his candle against the rocky walls, noting the damage done, and found it not so serious till he reached the spot where once had hung the great leaf of rock, long recognized as a potent danger. The leaf was gone now, and below this fracture the destruction was far more extensive. The twelve-inch skids used as bucket guides had been torn loose, the pump discharge pipe smashed flat, and the landing at the first level. But the air was still good.

Swinging perilously in this darkness, and listening to the drip of invisible water, Stevens felt the weight of a great despair. What labour had gone into the hewing of these caverns! What hopes they had aroused, and what desperate faith encouraged! And all for this! He felt thankful that Pirrie was not here.

As to Danks, and he wondered where Danks might be now, he was convinced

that the drink-sodden brain of this man had revealed the truth. It explained everything. And he did not believe that if the shaft were cleared out, and fresh samples taken, the results could differ much from the value he had always put upon the ore. But Martin wanted it done, and Martin was paying for it. Some men, he reflected, would have entered action for fraud.

That was an ugly word. He gave a jerk at the signal wire, and was lowered still farther.

The first level landing had vanished, and below this was a tangle of timber, though not quite impassable. He worked through it toward the second level, two hundred feet from the surface. Air still good. The great leaf of rock had so nearly fitted the shaft—something like a huge bullet in a gigantic barrel—that it had sheared everything it met, tearing through the timber sets as though they were matches.

It was intensely quiet down here. Sometimes there came a slight creaking as the mass readjusted itself to its own weight, but except for that, and the eternal drip-drip—like subterranean tears of the earth herself—there was absolutely nothing to be heard. And Stevens was making mental calculations of how long it would take to get the shaft in order, when there came to him a new sound, faint and barely audible, from some twenty feet below.

Gripping the cable, he listened tensely. Nothing—and again nothing. Now he had nearly reached the second level, and decided to descend that far if possible. He gave the wire another jerk, and moved downward.

In twenty seconds he reached it. No landing was left here either, but by pushing against the walls, he set up a swinging motion, himself the human pendulum, by which he managed to reach the solid rock at the mouth of the level. Catching the hook on a projecting rail, he stepped forward. And in that instant the sound came again—almost at his feet.

He gave an exclamation, stooped, and found himself touching the motionless body of Danks. The body was inert, but not cold, and the man still lived. Marvelling, he set his candle on the floor.

“Bob!” he said, “Bob!”

At first there was no response. Then, very slowly, Danks opened his eyes. His face was bloody, and of respiration there seemed to be none. He was alive, but nothing more.

“Stevie! Is—that—you?” It was the ghost of a voice.

“Yes, Bob. Lie still—we’ll get you out.”

The man began to whisper something, and Stevens made out that his back was broken, and he did not know how long he had been here. He couldn’t move. Nor

did he want to. For three days he had lain there, banished from light and sun, a helpless hulk, fighting with death. At the end only the brain of him was alive.

“I’m going west, Stevie,” the whisper went on. “I asked for it. Come—come closer.”

Stevens put his head nearer to the blue lips. Here was a criminal and thief. He had wrecked not only this mine, but the reputations of others. But he was beaten—and dying. That alone could be considered now.

“Stevie,” he murmured, “I was drunk, but I told you straight. I salted those samples with Purdey. He did the squirting—the old trick—with a solution. Tell Pirrie—tell her——” The voice, weakening still further, trailed out.

“I know, Bob, I know. We’re going to take a new lot. What shall I tell Pirrie?”

“Always white to me—sorry—sorry as hell. Look out for Hugh—he’s after her. Don’t let—don’t let——”

“All right, Bob, I’ll take care of that. Don’t worry.”

Then came a silence, and fluttering breathing while the dying man collected his last fraction of strength. He could not move, but his eyes, fixed unwinkingly on Stevens, had an unearthly light.

“Going west now, Stevie. I guess that’s right. I blew up the Hope—was blown in here myself. Air pressure did it.”

“Anything I can do, Bob?” There was no more talk of getting him to the surface. Impossible. They both knew it.

The eyes opened and closed, their lids fluttering, and a greyness crept into the stained cheeks.

“Stick to—stick to the Hope, Stevie. The stuff is here—close here—I know—I know——”

That was all, for the sands had run out, and what Danks thought he knew remained with him. He gave a little shiver—and Stevens was alone.

Death, with its cold arresting finger, has in all places and at all times its own inescapable significance, and to Stevens it was nothing new, for men like himself lived boldly on the very edge of death, their business being a sort of controlled violence which, if ever it got out of hand, spelled danger and menace.

But here, in the sombre depths of the Hope, it seemed that death was a sentient power, that it had a definite existence of its own, and worked swiftly in its own mysterious fashion. Danks had tried to destroy the Hope, whereupon death, intervening, had signified its disapproval by destroying him. How the man lived for the two days since the explosion, Stevens could not imagine. But that didn’t matter now.

It had been part of his punishment, perhaps the greater part, to lie there through the dragging hours, unable to stir, listening to laboured beating of his own heart, and the drip-drip from the rocky walls, and realize that not far off was the sunlight he would never see again. So probably Danks had paid in full.

Stevens, still kneeling, turned his thoughts to Purdey, and his jaw tightened. So Purdey was after Pirrie! Well, that must be stopped, which meant another cable, for none but himself now knew that Purdey had been in league with the motionless thing so lately a man. Poor Pirrie! It would go hard with her. So far as he could see, the wise thing was to bring her back, and instinct told him what she must be feeling in this affair.

He leaned over, closed the dead man's eyes, crossed the limp hands on the inert breast, then picked up his candle, and made a close survey of the mouth of the level. It was quite clear that the tremendous rush of air had flung Danks where he now lay, and except in the shaft itself no real damage was done. But so difficult was the way to the surface between shattered ladders and displaced skids, that till the shaft was cleared it would not be possible to send the body up. That settled, and with a lingering glance at this demonstration of the workings of fate, he put his foot once more into the great steel hook, swung out into the darkness, and signalled.

It was a tricky job, and he ascended very slowly, stopping here and there to make mental notes of what he saw, till opposite the spot where the hanging leaf had been ripped away, he halted to see that no loose fragments remained. While he was suspended here, running his candle up and down, across and across the newly exposed face of rock, he perceived something whereat his heart nearly ceased to beat.

In later and happier days he often recalled that moment because it demonstrated so clearly the doctrine of chance that is rooted so firmly in those who roam this earth in search of her hidden treasures. The thing was without any reason whatever. Chance, the fickle goddess, unsoftened by the toil and effort of years, had of a sudden changed her mind. That was all.

Stevens' fingers trembled a little. The rocky face revealed a differently surfaced formation. It was some three feet thick. To a layman, it would have looked like dark green glass. To Stevens it didn't. It was quite solid. At each edge, or wall, was a skin of whitish material, so soft that he could pick it out with the point of his miner's candlestick.

"Calcite!" he whispered to himself. "It's calcite," and looked closer.

The body of the thing itself was shot through with little wires or veinlets of metal, and scattered between these, as though thrown in a careless handful, were specks

and irregularly shaped grains. All of them, veinlets, wires and grains, caught the yellow candlelight, and shot it back with a kind of dull, lustreless gleam. This three-foot lode ran, it seemed, parallel to and only inches distant from the vein so arduously followed in the workings of the Hope, and was the richest thing Stevens had ever seen.

He swung there, suspended, this human pendulum, long enough to make perfectly sure, staring, his lips dry, his heart now in a tumult. There must be no mistake this time. He wedged off a flake, clapped it against the shaft wall, and broke it. But the fragments were held together by those hairlike veins of metal. And that settled it. Finally with a nervous jerk he moved upward.

When he reached the surface, two men, grabbing the cable, swung him clear of the shaft and into safety. He stood, his face pale and bewildered, breath coming in gusts, and blinking in the strong rays of the sun.

“Pretty bad down there, I guess,” said one of the men. “What did you find?”

“Death!” creaked Stevens in a strained, unnatural voice. “Death and gold!”

CHAPTER XII

THE RECKONING

IT had been on a Tuesday when Pirrie had that reckless talk with John Berwick in Kensington Gardens, and it left him in a condition both physical and mental that he found very hard to deal with. He anticipated the coming Saturday in a sort of breathlessness, but entertained no doubt as to the outcome. Pirrie was going abroad with him, and before long would marry him. That, in all sincerity, was what he wanted. He was deeply in love with her.

Thus, when on the Friday she telephoned asking him to meet her again at the same place and time, he did so with an excitement he took no pains to disguise, though there had been that in her voice that rather puzzled him. She, reaching the water-garden first, waved a hand as he approached. And in the next instant he was aware of a difference.

This was another Pirrie. She looked pale, he thought, but not over happy—not as he expected her to look. The blue eyes were as clear as ever, yet they held an odd light. She had an assurance that was lacking before, and at the same time seemed hesitant. As adorable as on that memorable day, yet in a curious sense a little out of reach. He had intended to kiss her, but he didn't. Why was that? he wondered. His heart sank a little.

“Jack,” said she, “you didn't think I was going to send for you, did you?”

“Not till to-morrow, darling.”

That “darling” seemed unwelcome, and she gave her head a little shake. At this he grew the more disturbed, but waited for her to go on.

“I didn't expect to send either, but—but something has happened.”

“Something good?” he asked, fearing greatly that it was not good—for him.

“I hope you'll think so for both of us. Jack, can you trust me?”

“Anywhere—with anything.”

“Trust me enough to do two very difficult things?” she said, looking at him very straight.

“Sounds serious, but I'll try,” said he, realizing that she was slipping away from him. This new manner of hers could signify nothing else.

“Don't protest at what I'm going to tell you—that's one: the other is not to ask a single question.”

“Is this your way of telling me that it's all off?” he demanded shakily.

She nodded, with a look in her eyes that he would have given worlds to fathom.

“You’ve guessed it, Jack. I’m not coming. We were both mad, and myself the most mad. I wonder what you think of me, really.”

He made a gesture that no woman could misinterpret. “Shall I tell you?”

“That’s dear of you. Could you tell me that it was all a silly joke, and you weren’t serious?”

He shook his head at that. “I was never more serious in my life about anything.”

“Jack!”

“Yes?”

“Do you hate me now?”

“I haven’t stopped loving you yet.”

“And I’ve been a beast,” she went on, lips trembling.

“No you haven’t, and you were just as much in earnest as I was. It made me love you all the more, so why deny it? If you hadn’t been, I wouldn’t have carried on. Something has happened since then—that’s all.”

“Would you believe me if I said that I was fonder of you this minute than ever before? It’s true, Jack.”

This puzzled him, but the look in her eyes compelled him to accept it. He racked his brains to determine what had happened.

“It seems to me now,” he went on thoughtfully, “that on Tuesday you saw in me a possible means of escape from something you didn’t want to face, and to-day escape is unnecessary. In other words, I was just the lesser risk. Is that it?”

At this the colour rushed into her cheeks, and she avoided his gaze.

“N-no!” she protested under her breath, “and—and yes. It’s a harsh way to put it, but it’s your right, though no girl considers what I considered—yes, I admit I did—without an awfully good reason for it. But I hated myself on Tuesday, Jack. That’s another thing I’ll have to ask you to believe.”

“You’re doing all the hating, Pirrie,” said he very gently.

“Jack, say what you think of me—don’t mind if it hurts. It does hurt when you talk like that.”

“I haven’t anything else to say. I want you now, as I did then. I’ll always want you.”

Pirrie fought with herself, but to no purpose. It was quite clear that were she to tell him why she had changed, it could only make matters infinitely worse. She had been willing to go because she believed herself to have inherited a taint. That fact, ugly as it was, now stared her in the face. But what would this man think if he knew it?

She shrank from this contemplation. At the same time, if he insisted, he had a

right to know. It was she who had withdrawn. He still stood unchanged. An escape! Yes, she had looked on him in this light. Yet he loved her. It was apparent in every look, in every word he said. He loved her so much that he did not protest when she hurt him. And now his generosity left her defenceless.

“Jack,” she quavered, “if you ask to know why I’ve changed, I’ll tell you. Do you ask?”

“But you’d sooner I didn’t?”

“Much sooner.”

“Then suppose——” here he hesitated a moment, so vividly was he aware of her nearness and bright young beauty, “suppose we were to say nothing at all about that, and just regard the last three days as—er—a sort of interlude when we talked to each other quite honestly and without any shame and with all the bars down. I don’t think it can hurt anyone to talk like that, provided they are honest about it. I’ll put it this way. If you did really contemplate going with me, then I won’t ask why you’ve changed. If you didn’t, really, then I’ve a right to know.”

“I—I did,” she whispered, not daring to look at him.

“That’s right; I know you did, and you weren’t mad, and neither was I. It was just—well—an interlude. No doubt we’ll think of it sometimes. One of the might-have-beens in our lives.”

He said this, surprised at the sound of his own voice, and not understanding himself at all. Why wasn’t he furious? He had every right to be. And in this present moment, while she moved further and further out of reach, he found her more and more attractive.

Then, slowly, he began to realize what it was she had wakened in him. It was a new sort of gallantry, at which, formerly, he might have smiled, an instinct of protection and selflessness in which his own desires were put aside. She had been so straight in this affair, so fine and fearless, that it roused the same promptings in himself, and he admitted that what he had wanted wasn’t fair. Of the two, he knew far more of the world. Therefore the responsibility was his. Presently out of all this came a feeling of thankfulness that she had saved herself—from him.

“Jack,” said she, her whole soul in her eyes, “no man has ever treated any girl more generously than you have me. I couldn’t have complained if you hadn’t. And you’ve done something else, even bigger.”

He smiled at her gravely. “This seems to be one of my good mornings. What is it?”

“You’ve made me feel better about the whole world, helped me to believe in it more. Up till yesterday two things were nearly killing me. One of them doesn’t exist

any longer, though you'll never hear of it, but you may about the other. Together they made me reckless, and I didn't care what happened. Now it's different, and I'm not afraid of the future. I came here dreading what you'd say, because I'd practically offered myself to you on any terms."

"You didn't!" he broke in. "Not a bit of it, and I took a fearful liberty. I ought to be kicked. Anyway, there are no bones broken where I'm concerned. Pirrie, can I be of any real use, it doesn't matter in what way? Yours to command."

She had an impulse to tell him about Purdey, and what she had yet to face in that affair, but it seemed wiser to say nothing. One cloud having passed so swiftly, she had now a vague hope that the other might also be lifted. It was scarcely imaginable how this could be, and facts, especially the grim ones, were facts, yet she clung to the possibility, and because bad news never came singly, perhaps it might also work the other way. At any rate, and for some reason she could not determine, the morrow appeared to have lost some of its threat, so she would let it take care of itself.

"You've done enough for one day, Jack, but——"

"But what?"

She glanced at him, flushing. "I'm going to say something rather foolish."

"Splendid! We need it."

"Should a girl tell her husband everything?"

"What girl, and what husband?" said he with a shrewd forecast of what was coming.

"If—if I marry someone before long, need I tell him anything about this?" Her tone had become a little desperate.

"Meaning that Dolph is in luck after all?"

"I hope so, Jack. I don't know yet."

Berwick had a pang of envy at this, but only laughed. "The conundrum is, 'Should a wife tell?'"

She nodded.

"The answer is in the decided negative, and our little interlude has nothing whatever to do with Dolph. Would he know the reason for it—the one I don't?"

"Yes, Jack."

"Even so, I don't see that that makes any difference. It isn't a case of honesty. If you love a man, you try to avoid anything that might hurt him, and in this case there's no obligation at all. I fancy the best of wives have secrets from the best of husbands, and happiness depends a good deal on things that are left unsaid. This affair," here he gave her the friendliest possible nod, "is and always will be between you and me,

and no one else. Does that settle it, Pirrie?"

She made a choky little sound, and the look of gratitude in her eyes was to him the exquisite expression of a beautiful spirit. She did not know, she never would know, what this last half-hour had cost him. Now he wanted to get away. There were limits, and he had reached his. What he had looked forward to as a fascinating and romantic experience had been changed into a sudden test, a test of his better self. Having passed that triumphantly, the thing was over.

"I'm off now," said he with an abruptness she could not misunderstand. "Best of luck, always, to you both. You've given me a lot to think of. Bless you, my dear. You'll always be that."

He gave her hand a quick, hard squeeze, and walked away swiftly, not looking back.

Pirrie, her mind very full, walked slowly back to Belgrave Square. Here, much to her surprise, she was told that Mr. Martin had returned unexpectedly from the City, and desired to see her as soon as she came in. Wondering greatly at this, she went at once to his study.

He was at his desk, and, as she came in, got up, met her halfway, and put his hands on her shoulders. He looked earnestly into the blue eyes, and his own seemed unusually tender. Then he kissed her.

"Now, Miss Ridley," said he in an odd tone, "sit down and devote yourself entirely to me for awhile."

"There's nothing I'd like better," she smiled.

"Are you getting used to your new name?"

"It sounds a little queer yet," said she.

"Well, you won't be using it very long, I imagine. Pirrie, will you tell me something quite frankly?"

"Anything," she assured him, with a fugitive fear that perhaps he knew a good deal more than appeared on the surface.

"Did you always shut yourself up within yourself, or is it a recent development? When you were younger, did you never complain about anything—to anybody?"

"But what a queer question."

"I've a reason for asking."

"I don't think I ever said much. It didn't help matters to talk about them, and I didn't like to worry others."

"Then what is the use of friends, real ones?"

Pirrie wasn't quite sure about that.

"Is young Purdey in London now?" he asked very quietly.

She blinked at the suddenness of it. What and how did he know about Purdey.

"Yes, he is," she murmured.

"Ah—excellent! And is it possible that you have seen him? Don't hesitate to tell me, child." Here his eyes began to twinkle. "I have nothing unwelcome to tell you."

"I saw him on Tuesday," she admitted, now greatly puzzled.

"But not since then?"

Pirrie shook her head.

"I'd rather like to see him myself," said Martin smoothly.

"Oh—please—no—not about me."

"What's the matter, child?" It was his turn to be puzzled. "I've nothing to say to him about you: why should I? It's a matter of business. Do you think you could get hold of him?"

"Now—at once!"

"If possible—and in your presence. Just ask him if he can come, without mentioning me. Nothing to be nervous about: quite the contrary."

By this time Pirrie was quite lost, but, mechanically, she reached for the telephone, and in a moment was speaking to Purdey in his hotel in Norfolk Street.

"Hugh, could you come here, now. I'd like to see you. No, I can't say anything till then, but please come at once. I'll be here."

She hung up the receiver, her eyes very round, and looked questioningly at Martin. He gave her an approving nod.

"That's just right. You had a talk with him on Tuesday, I assume?"

"Ye—es."

"Would you care to tell me what it was about. I've very good reasons for asking you: you'll hear them a little later."

"I gave him the news from the Hope," said she, her heart beating fast. "Of course he'd heard nothing of it, and——"

Martin's brows went up a shade. "A total surprise to him, eh?"

"It must have been, because he'd left before the shaft was wrecked. He didn't know what to make of that. Also I told him about Danks salting the engineer's samples."

"He'd no suspicions there either?" said Martin in an odd tone.

"None! How could he?"

"Perhaps not. Anything else, Pirrie? I'd like it all."

"I said that since the sale was proved to be crooked, he'd have to return his share of what you paid."

“You’ve been very active on my behalf, my dear. What did he say to that?”

“He didn’t want to.”

“Probably not. Was there anything else—I mean was the matter left like that, with nothing settled?”

Pirrie took a long breath, tried to speak, and failed utterly.

“If I haven’t deserved your complete confidence, or if you don’t feel safe with me, don’t say anything more, child.” Martin spoke with extreme gentleness. “But it seems to me that this may be one of those occasions on which you might very well use your friends.”

This, and the kindness in his eyes and voice, was too much for her, and in the next moment she burst out with the whole story, chaotic, gallant, impetuous, all she had felt and said, her sense of an obligation that could never be discharged, and her sense of shame when there arrived the letter about the Caribou Trail. When she told him about this, Martin gave an exclamation.

“May I see that letter?”

She got it, gave it to him, and watched his face harden while he read. He looked at her compassionately.

“Pirrie—Pirrie! why didn’t you tell me at once?”

“I couldn’t,” she whispered. “It made me feel out of place here.”

“Out of place!”

She nodded, and gave him the rest of what had been in her heart, how she had considered marrying Purdey to pay what she felt was a debt of honour, and the fear with which she had anticipated Saturday, while Martin, listening with growing sympathy, told himself that this girl would be the prize of life to the man who could call her his.

“I wish you had told me about it before,” said he very gently.

“I thought it was something I had to go through with by myself.”

“And you would actually have married this man if he had repaid that money!”

“I didn’t know my own name then,” she answered in a low voice.

“Would that have been quite fair?”

“To him?”

“No—to us, who love you?”

Pirrie didn’t know. Perhaps not. She hadn’t looked at it in that way.

“It would have been most unfortunate all round, and quite unnecessary,” said Martin.

“Why not necessary? The money could not have been got any other way.”

“We’ll come to that part of it presently,” he said with a smile. “Meantime, please

accept this—that no move on your part of any kind whatever is needed now. There’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“But you, one of the two kindest men in the world, have bought a salted mine from the other kindest,” she replied stubbornly. “Mr. Martin, nothing can change that.”

“Ye—es,” he admitted cheerfully, “I’ve certainly bought something from a decent chap in the Rockies, but I’m not sorry.”

“Not sorry!” she stammered.

“Neither is he, Pirrie. You’ll probably——”

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. Mr. Hugh Purdey had arrived, and was waiting.

“Show him in here, please. Pirrie, I’ll ask you to sit just where you are, and leave the rest of it to me. Don’t say a word unless I suggest it. I’d much sooner you did not speak to this man at all. Can you manage that?”

She nodded, now completely bewildered. Purdey came in, fingering his hat. Seeing at first only her, he took a step toward her, when Martin cut in sharply.

“Will you take that chair, please.”

He wheeled, his eyes widening. Flushing a little, he felt extremely uncomfortable. This triangular meeting had not been anticipated, nor had he expected to deal with a man in the affair. He glanced at Pirrie, but her manner told him nothing. She was quite unmoved, and a little pale. Well, he could understand that. For a moment there was an unbroken silence, and it got on his nerves.

“I say, what’s the matter?” He addressed this to Martin, whose expression was rather puzzling. The man looked almost amused, yet very much in earnest about something. That would be the money end of it.

“I’ll explain everything shortly; but in the meantime I’d be glad of your strict attention to one or two points I’m going to raise,” rasped Martin.

“I came here to see Miss Stevens,” blurted the young man.

“There is no Miss Stevens in this house. The lady you refer to is Miss Ridley, and identified as such. The information you—ah—received from the Caribou Trail was misleading, to say the least of it.”

Purdey started perceptibly, and gave a sneer. He was not used to polite society, had never been confronted with a man just like Martin before, or talked to one on equal terms, and was quite ignorant that there is a form of expression the more to be feared on account of its very calm and courtesy. Quite at sea on this point, he was consequently blind to the fact that Martin’s poise concealed an anger that boded ill for the man he talked to. But Pirrie knew it, and held her breath.

“Ridley, eh! That’s a bit thick. Anyway, it can’t be proved.”

“Not as thick as certain other matters I propose to mention,” said Martin quietly. “And in any case the proof, though we have it, is not your affair. Now as to——”

He broke off. A maid at the door was saying that Mr. Hudson and Mr. Matthew Lynch desired to see Miss Ridley when she was free. Instantly Pirrie remembered something, and being by this time filled with a healthy hatred for Purdey, acted on the spot. She gave Martin an odd look.

“May Dolph come in here, and, please, I’d like to speak to Matthew for a minute.”

Martin nodded. She went out, returning with Hudson, smiling a little, and seemed ignorant of Purdey’s presence. Dolph, taking a chair beside her, also ignored him. At this Purdey glowered, his sense of discomfort increasing. Why, he wondered, were these people so infernally sure of themselves? And what had Martin up his sleeve?

“I suppose you’re going to ask for your money back,” said he bluntly. “If so, there’s nothing doing. Pirrie told me that Danks is supposed to have salted those samples. That sounds thin. I don’t know anything about it, and till it’s proved you have no claim.”

“Who said I wanted the money back?” Martin’s voice was almost bland.

“Pirrie told me that——”

“We will leave Miss Ridley out of it. You are dealing with me.”

“Then you don’t want it!”

“Certainly not.”

At this, Pirrie gave a gasp. Dolph sent her a wondering stare, but she signalled for silence, breathless, her brain in a whirl. Purdey was looking at her with a sort of sly triumph.

“Well,” said he, “you wouldn’t have got it anyway. But Pirrie——”

“With all deference to Miss Ridley, what I say stands,” continued Martin. “I am aware of her talk with you, and greatly respect the point she made. Don’t worry, Pirrie; everything is all right. Purdey, why did you come to London?”

“To get my girl.”

At this Dolph jumped to his feet, but Pirrie put out a detaining hand.

“Please!” she begged, “please don’t—wait—something is going to happen. Leave it to Mr. Martin!”

Martin, leaning stiffly forward, compressed his lips. “In a fairly large business experience,” said he, his voice hardening every minute, “I’ve come in contact with several contemptible scoundrels, but never before with anything just like you. No—sit down—it’s no use getting excited. In the first place you compounded a letter

which is, I think, the most damnable screed any man ever sent to any woman. Now, Purdey, show me the original communication from the Caribou Trail. You have it, of course?"

"No—not here." Purdey's eyes had become hot.

"Nor anywhere else. The whole thing is a fabrication made for a purpose, the most dastardly lie I ever heard of."

At this Purdey began to bluster and storm, but to the others it was only an additional proof of infamy. He made a step toward the door, but Dolph stood ready if wanted, and Martin was a big man and strong. Presently the bluster died out, and Purdey knew he was trapped. Why had he ever come here?

"That disposed of," went on Martin inexorably, "we will deal with the transaction over Stevens' Hope. You have, of course, no interest in that property now."

"I don't want one. I sold out to you and Stevens, and——"

"Did you say Stevens?"

"Yes: when you came along, I gave him an option on my interest. He bought me out after we knew the result of Bustard's examination. No, I'm clean out of it." He said this, very conscious of the packet of notes in his pocket. That, at any rate, was now safe.

"Then Stevens now owns a half-interest instead of one-quarter?" Saying this, Martin sent Pirrie an indescribable glance. Could it be that his eyes were twinkling.

"That's it. You, Stevens and Danks have it between you. Any more complaints?" he added insolently.

"I am not aware that I have made any." Martin seemed unmoved by the man's boorishness. "With regard to Danks, you believe that he was an honest man?"

"I know it. That talk of salting is all rubbish."

"I wonder. Did anything ever pass between you and him to lead you to think that such a thing was possible—or contemplated?"

Purdey asserted violently that this was out of the question. Danks was straight. They had worked together for a year, and he knew it.

"Then this may interest you."

Speaking thus, Martin took from a drawer two sheets of paper, one white, one yellow. He handed the former to Purdey, the other to Pirrie, gave an odd little laugh, closed the drawer with a bang, and looked very contented.

"This cable I found at my office this morning. It was sent from Vancouver yesterday, and may possibly explain something that evidently has puzzled you, why I do not want my money back. There is something else I have to say when you have read it."

Purdey, staring at the thing in his hand, gave no answer. Pirrie, too, was struck silent, her eyes very wide. At first she thought she was dreaming, but the widely spaced, type-written words pasted on the yellow sheet were sharp, definite characters that brought her back with a jerk. Her breathing became tumultuous, and she heard a smothered ejaculation from Dolph.

“Following my last, shaft now explored. Found Danks dying in second level. Now dead. Confessed that he had attempted to destroy shaft, and with Purdey had salted Bustard’s samples. Has left his interest to Pirrie. Owing to explosion have located very rich paystreak close to and parallel with lode we have been working. Much free gold visible. Should run at least eighty dollars a ton. Value of property now beyond question. Working double shift on repairs. Will complete in two weeks. Love to Pirrie. Congratulations. If Purdey in London, which I suspect, please deal with him. Writing fully.

“STEVENS.”

There was a complete silence in the study. Martin did not stir. He looked at Pirrie and Dolph, saw these two stare at each other incredulously, saw their wonder and mounting happiness, and felt fully rewarded. He looked at Purdey. That young man was sitting very stiffly, his dark brows in a deep corrugated frown, his face scowling, while an expression of something like fear crept into his eyes. He was trapped as few men have been trapped, and he knew it. There was none to curse but himself.

“Well,” he said truculently, “if that’s true, and maybe it is, some of it, what are you going to do about it?”

“I can’t have you arrested here for an offence committed in Canada,” answered Martin, “but I can and will take action in Canada for fraud. That will leave you liable to arrest if you go back. As to the sale of your interest to Stevens and myself, we do not complain. But, Purdey, you are liar, trickster and coward.”

“Anything else, Martin?” he growled. “You’ve said about enough.”

“Just this. You’ve overreached in two directions. You lied to get a girl you weren’t fit to touch, and you cheated yourself when you meant to cheat me. I’d think that over. Open the door, will you, Dolph.”

Purdey stood for an instant irresolute. Fighting for words, but wordless, he glared at them all. He was shamed, convicted, disgraced. Full of helpless anger, he wanted to strike out. None of them spoke. Pirrie had been snatched away from him, and Dolph stood between. At this he gave an oath, and stalked out.

On the front steps he bumped into a large, cheery-faced young man who regarded him with what Purdey thought was unusual interest, and nodded.

“Good morning. Nice day, isn’t it?”

Purdey, not a little surprised, said that he supposed it was—for England.

“You’re Mr. Purdey, if I’m not mistaken. Friend of Miss Ridley’s, aren’t you, from Canada?”

“Yes, but——”

“My name is Lynch,” continued the young man amiably. “She’s often talked about you and the mine. Ever been in London before?”

“No,” said Purdey, thinking this stranger more affable than most Britishers he had met. And, obviously, he must be ignorant of what had just taken place.

“Care to drop round to my club for a drink?”

Purdey nodded. A drink was exactly what he needed.

“Then hop into my bus.”

Purdey, still more surprised, got in. This youth looked a bit soft, but he drove well, and talked while he drove.

“Known Miss Ridley a good while, haven’t you?”

“About a year and a half.”

“Well, she’s a great success over here. Girl of the Golden West, we call her, and she took to London like a duck to water. I suppose you know she’s marrying a man called Hudson? Oh, yes, you must have met him out there.”

“So I understand,” said Purdey sulkily, wanting his drink more than ever.

“She says you’re quite an artist with the gloves,” went on The Infant with a manner of engaging innocence.

At this it occurred to Purdey that nothing would suit him better, all things considered, than to hit someone, and hit hard.

“Yes, I do box a bit,” said he, straightening his shoulders. “It’s useful where I come from.”

“I’ll bet it is,” agreed The Infant with unconcealed admiration. “Pretty rough crowd out there, eh?”

Purdey, nodding, looked as formidable as he could, and observed his companion’s sleek and well-groomed body, the clear skin with a touch of pink, and the smooth white hands. Man about town, he concluded. And surely this youth did not fancy himself!

“You might show me a dodge or two, if you cared. Frightfully kind if you would, and I’ve lots to learn. Do you mind? We could have the drink afterwards.”

This was almost too easy, and Purdey agreed at once. He had nothing against

this youth, but he was evidently one of the crowd that had taken over Pirrie, which was sufficient. Pirrie would learn of it before long. And when one was full of hot resentment against the world in general, and Britishers in particular, why hesitate?

Matthew's club was in Pall Mall, and he led the way to a large room lighted entirely from the ceiling, a very businesslike room, with fibre mats on the floor, and foils, singlesticks and gloves ranged neatly against the bare walls. At one end was a slightly raised platform. The man in charge, who wore slacks, rubber-soled shoes and a short-sleeved jersey, was a pugnacious-looking individual with a broken nose, but The Infant greeted him like a brother. It was far beyond Purdey's imagining that his companion had broken that nose.

"Tim," said he, "this is Mr. Purdey from British Columbia, and a holy terror in the wild, wild West. He's a bird with the gloves, and is kind enough to give me a bit of practice."

The man regarded him with an incredulous eye, then glanced at Purdey. He had a shrewd idea that something was afoot, but it being his place to obey orders, he said nothing, and got busy.

Purdey, not a little diverted, presently found himself attired in orthodox fashion. He felt contemptuous. So much trouble over a few minutes' boxing. He glanced at The Infant, now in similar garb, and smiled openly. This young man, and he assumed most other London amateurs, wanted to look like professionals. But he was a little surprised at his chest development. That would be mostly fat.

"Gloves quite comfortable?" queried The Infant.

"Yes—all right."

"Time, gentlemen!" barked the broken-nosed man in an expectant voice.

It seemed to Purdey that in the same moment something happened. He did not see, but felt it on the point of his chin, and reeled back. The Britisher's left, well out, was coming at him again, and he had a fleeting vision of heavily muscled shoulders, long, sinewy arms, tightly shut lips and eyes that were definitely hostile. He struck, overreached, and The Infant got home in the same place, but much harder. Then he drew off, and spoke his mind.

"Purdey," said he with enormous scorn, "you're a dirty dog, and I'm going to lick you. You've played, or tried to play, a foul trick on a girl you're not fit to touch. She has friends, Purdey, who don't like you, and I'm one of them. This with my compliments—and this—and this!"

With that he let loose, a sort of human piledriver, animated by profound contempt, and resolved to give this pestilent person something to remember. Purdey had strength, but no art. He tried to keep his hands up, but to no purpose. Few men

in England could have stopped Matthew that day, and it went on, this stinging rain of punishment, till the other man's knees weakened. Then, beaten, bruised and aching, he went down and out before a vicious right and left that sent him spinning into a corner. Here he lay very still, and The Infant regarded him with aversion.

"Tim," said he, "it wasn't pretty, but take my word for it, the thing had to be done. What I told him is perfectly true. He'll hardly attempt anything of the sort again, at least not in this country. I'm going to have a bath. When he comes round, give him a drink, my name if he wants it, and turn him loose. I think that's all."

A little later, and with a healthy feeling of having done the right thing at the right time to the right person, he drove back to Belgrave Square. The Martins had begun lunch, and were all talking fast, for there was much to talk about. Pirrie, on the other hand, found it difficult to say anything. She was sitting beside Dolph, her eyes very bright. She gave Matthew a meaning glance as he slid into a chair next to Jennifer.

"Yes," he nodded, "I did."

"Did what?" demanded Dolph.

"Small commission for Pirrie."

"Wedding present for me, I hope."

"It was an engagement, but not a present and not for you."

"You're very mysterious," said Jennifer.

"Shall I tell, Pirrie?"

"It closes that chapter, doesn't it?"

"I should say so—tight."

"Then I'd tell. I think everyone will be pleased."

"It's all very simple," murmured The Infant. "I merely had a chat with our friend—our late friend—from B.C."

"Where is the brute now?" grunted Dolph.

"He's not quite sure, yet. But it won't happen again. I know that much. What's been going on here?"

They all tried to tell him at once, all except Pirrie, so he got it in fractions, and very much aware of Jennifer's nearness. She seemed glad he was there.

"Then trying to fool other people, Purdey fooled himself?"

"Yes," said Martin. "Stevens' cable came at exactly the right time. Have you forgiven me, Pirrie?"

"For what?"

"Not telling you at once. If I had, it would have been difficult to talk to that young man as I did, and make him commit himself. You'd have given the thing away."

"I expect I would," she admitted. "Even now it's almost past believing, though I know exactly where that rich streak has been found. We were always afraid of that spot."

"There was never anything in the past to suggest it?"

"No—nothing. That big hanging leaf was dangerous, so we left it alone. I think—yes—I know, we all felt there was a paystreak close by. Was that just a blind hope?"

"I'd call it faith," said Mrs. Martin gently.

"Miner's faith, perhaps. And if you hadn't been trail-riding, nothing would have happened. That's what's so strange."

Martin shook his head. "I don't look at it that way. There's a reason, somewhere. Dolph finds you in tears over a pan of crushed quartz with a few yellow specks in it—he surrenders on the spot, and wants to stay there."

"It was Jule who suggested Pirrie should come over here," put in his wife.

"I'm always arranging love affairs for other people," remarked Jule plaintively. "Wish someone would do the same for me. But perhaps I'm not finished yet." This with a wicked glance at The Infant, whereat that young man blushed to the roots of his hair.

"What's the matter with you, Matt?"

"Nothing," he said hastily. "Pass the cheese, will you, Dolph?"

"Well," smiled Martin, "all sorts of things seem to go to the making of a mine in this case, and if we get forty tons a day at eighty dollars a ton, there'll be another trip to B.C. What are you young people doing to-night?"

"Pirrie's dining with me, sir," announced Dolph promptly. "All sorts of things to arrange."

"And Jennifer is coming to dance with me," asserted Matthew, amazed at his own temerity. "Aren't you, Jen?"

"I'd love to," said she.

"While Mother and I, matron and prospective old maid, are going to the Albert Hall to hear Kreisler. We're the only ones with a true sense of art."

"And to-morrow?"

"Sonning," said Mrs. Martin. "Can you be there for lunch?"

"Afraid not, but I'll join you in the afternoon. Dolph, if you'll relinquish your invisible but quite understandable grasp of that girl, I want her in my study. She's got to make up a cable to Stevens, and there's quite a lot to say—this time."

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE RIVER

THE Thames glides gently past Sonning, as though reluctant to desert so lovely a spot. After traversing the naked reach below Reading, it says good-bye for many a lazy mile to factories and smoky chimneys, and slides through a flower-bordered lock and over a long bubbling weir where the foaming waters laugh as they plunge to a lower level.

Here an ancient village dwells beside its banks. Great trees overhang its placid pools, inviting backwaters lead one away from the main flood, lordly swans move in statuesque dignity, dwindling down the peaceful vistas, an old grey bridge still marks the spot where once Roman legions swung by with a clanking of shields and swords, Tudor cottages with old-time English gardens of roses and sweet-william display their tiny leaded windows and steeply gabled roofs, and the world of to-day seems very distant.

Pirrie, so lately come from the log cabins of the Hope, set in a wild amphitheatre of towering mountains, had never imagined anything like this, and its serenity suited her mood exactly. She felt exhausted, as though she had undergone a sort of rebirth into something new and strange, and Sonning was like a harbour after a storm.

She was conscious of so much that she could not possibly express. In a week—in less than a week—she had discovered herself. In less than a week, she had plumbed the depths of despair, and known what it was to be lifted from that to complete happiness. She had offered herself to a man, then, covered with shame, withdrawn the offer, and been forgiven instead of blamed. With a heavy heart, she had committed herself to another man, almost immediately discovering him to be a scoundrel, and, by an amazing circumstance, escaped to freedom, and a future so bright that it seemed incredible. Could it be true that all this had happened in so brief a time?

The old life was inevitably at an end. Six thousand miles away, and how far it seemed from here, the man who had guarded her since childhood, was freed from care, happy as she was happy. The dripping caverns of Stevens' Hope were no longer the scene of fruitless toil, but had become, as at the waving of a magic wand, a treasure-house that year after year would yield its riches. Dynamite would boom, and gold lie there for the taking.

But Pirrie knew that she had said farewell to all that. She would see it, sometimes, so long as Stevens was there, but her heart no less than her body had

moved on.

What did all this mean?

She puzzled over it, knitting her smooth brows, and looking at Dolph with so lovely a seriousness that he could only look back, and smile, and reflect how lucky he was, and pretend to understand. They were in a punt, a shallow, shining affair of polished wood such as she had never seen before, just as never before had she seen so peaceful a river as this. She was lying back on a pile of cushions in front of a tea-table that fitted magically across the thwarts. Dolph, in white flannels, lounged at the stern, trailing a pole, and letting the stream carry them languidly down past willow-covered islands toward Shiplake. He, like herself, felt quiet. There was a soft chuckling of water along and under the low green banks, but no other sound than this.

Constantly the eyes of the two met, exchanging much that could not be put into words. Pirrie pictured herself this man's wife, the mother of his children, and her mind sped back to the day, not so many weeks ago, when she looked up through tears of loneliness, and saw him gazing at her across a mountain stream. He, watching her, felt something of the same wonder that this child of the wilderness should be with him—here—now—all his. How did such things happen?

Then, simultaneously, they smiled as their thoughts leaped across and mingled.

“Well, darling?”

“I know,” she said, “that’s what’s been in my mind. It’s like something inside advising one not to ask questions because it’s no use.”

“Perhaps it’s as well we don’t know any more than we do.”

“You always understood, Dolph.”

“Hope I always will. But there’s one thing we ought to settle.”

“Only one! How nice that sounds.”

“Who’s to be my best man? I was thinking of Jack Berwick.”

“Why him?” gazing abstractedly toward Shiplake.

“I like him, and he’s decorative. Any objections?”

“Isn’t there anyone else?” said she in an odd tone.

Dolph looked puzzled. “Yes—several. But what’s the matter with him? He knows all the ropes.”

“It might be a little hard on him,” she said gently.

“You don’t mean that——?”

“You trust me, Dolph?”

“Silly girl! Of course I do.”

“Then I’d suggest someone else.”

“Because you turned him down? You needn’t worry about that: he gets over things quickly. No damage done there, Pirrie.”

At first she said nothing. That affair, and she would remember it all her life, must never be breathed to anyone, least of all to the man who would soon be her husband. She would have given worlds if it might never have happened, but it had, and what she felt now was a sense of profound loyalty, quite as sincere a thing as her love. This loyalty was toward the other Berwick she had unearthed, a man quite unknown to those who regarded him as a luxurious, pleasure-loving mortal with no serious views about anything. And she was strangely assured that she was the only person in the world who had discovered this other self.

“Dolph,” said she presently, “he still cares. I think he always will, and we must consider that. Sometimes a girl stumbles over things she doesn’t expect, and I did with him. I know his reputation, and don’t think that he’s been quite fair to himself.”

“He’s been exceedingly good to himself,” put in Dolph, wondering what lay behind all this.

“And other people too. If you ask him to be your best man, he’ll do it. But it will hurt. What I hope most for him is that he’ll marry soon.”

At this, Hudson was both puzzled and amused, but there was in her manner that which did not encourage further questions. Queer, he thought, that a situation like this should arise so soon.

“All right, Pirrie. What you say goes.”

“Quite satisfied?” she insisted.

“I wouldn’t dream of questioning anything you say.”

This brought him the smile that a woman gives only to the man of her heart.

“Dolph,” she went on with a sigh of utter content, “it must always be like this—with each of us. We give ourselves to each other, but there’s something we must keep. I think about that often, and it has nothing to do with love. I’ve always felt that there’s a part of ourselves that we were never meant to surrender to anyone, and if we do, we sacrifice what we can’t very well explain. We’ve all got our secret loyalties, and it would never do for one of us to become the empty shadow of the other. Do you see that, or is it all too vague? I’m not very good at explaining things.”

He did see it, and thankfully. Strength! That was what he discerned in her, a sort of unquestioning readiness to obey those deep-rooted instincts that were so great a part of her nature. That strength would be his support in the future. Character! Underneath her loveliness was character. It would demand a good deal of him. So much the better for them both, he decided, then smiled a little because this afternoon had turned out so differently from what he had expected. So little of love-making.

Instead of Pirrie in his arms, there she was at the other end of the punt, saying things that made him think much harder than one usually does in company with an excessively pretty girl on the Thames. At this he gave a great laugh.

“I begin to see that I’m taking on a contract. Wonder where Purdey is, and how he’s feeling? Has Matt said anything more?”

Pirrie, feeling a shade nervous on that score, shook her head.

“Useful chap, that,” he murmured. “Just went and did it, whatever it was.”

Again she did not answer, it being much better that her lover should have only a vague idea of that matter. He knew that Purdey had arrived in London with the absurd intention of appropriating his own girl. Also he knew of the letter. But what Pirrie had contemplated to satisfy her interpretation of honour was quite beyond him, and, she decided, it must always remain so. Here then was something else, also concerning a man, that she would keep to herself. And that made her want Dolph all the more.

“Are these punts considered quite safe?” asked she, with a glance that made his head swim.

“Not nervous, are you?”

She laughed at him. “Do I look it? No, I’m lonely.”

“You—you adorable—you—edible creature! And I’m hungry.”

“Then why not have tea, and get this table out of the way? There’s lots of room for two at this end.”

Evening, a summer evening at Sonning in the grounds of the White Hart. A low murmur of voices in a garden that stretched to the water’s edge. Sonning Bridge a grey bulk in the half light. Ripples of musical laughter, and the sheen of women’s dresses, softened points of colour against a background of dark green. Glimpses of faces momentarily revealed in the spurt of a match. Small tables scattered here and there, each beneath its circular tinted canopy. Ranks of tall rose-trees, their tops bourgeoning into bloom, pink, white and yellow, transmitting their immortal fragrance to the motionless air. The wet lisp of a paddle as a canoe floated by, ghost-like, a phantom craft on the scarcely visible stream. Distant lights on the Oxford side.

The two senior Martins, she, placid, wise, motherly, with shadows in her gentle eyes, thinking that nights like these were so quickly sped, and how empty they would be without youth and love around one. Her husband, well content with the day’s work, contemplating development plans for Stevens’ Hope, and planning to visit the mine as soon as they were well under way. Jule, rather silent, and a little lonely, wondering when her man would turn up, and if there was such a man.

Pirrie and Dolph, aching to get away by themselves, sitting close, their arms pressed against each other, she the daintiest thing in all that dainty setting, and a wonderful light in her eyes. Jennifer, knowing perfectly well that she felt breathless, and not daring to look too often at Matthew, who had talked oddly on the way down from Town in jerky sentences that broke off unfinished. Matthew, with a certain dryness of throat, looking sideways at Jennifer, and hazarding whether one could propose in a punt without upsetting it. He wasn't sure, and the punt was waiting for them now. And why was everyone so quiet?

"Matthew!" said Pirrie suddenly.

The spell broke, and The Infant jumped.

"Eh—what—yes?"

"I hate to intrude on your reflections," she said wickedly, "but please come with me for a minute. I want to show you something."

"Positively I object to these shameless advances," grunted Dolph. "Am I in on this?"

"Positively you are not," she laughed, "and I warn you now that it will happen again and again. Come along, Matt."

They went off and found another table where they were quite screened. Here she opened her bag, and took out a very small but for its size a very heavy object.

"Will you please get an envelope?"

He did so, wondering. She untied the object, which was a diminutive buckskin sack, and tilted into the envelope a tiny river of yellow grains. They would have built a pyramid with a shilling for its base.

"There," said she, "that is more than enough. Jennifer has such little hands."

"What on earth is it?"

"Gold, Matt, gold. I've rifled my treasure-box for your sake. In the Middle Ages what were those soldiers called who took service on any side, anywhere?"

"Mercenaries?"

"Yes, that's it. Weren't they supposed to be paid in gold, and if they weren't, they went over and fought for the other man?"

"Ye—es, I fancy they did."

"Well, you're certainly no mercenary, but you were very active yesterday on my side, and I thought I'd like to pay you in gold."

"Bully for you," he grinned. "Where did you get it?"

That, thought Pirrie, would have taken a long time to tell, too long for this evening. It had been fingered by horny hands, washed from the gravel of shouting mountain torrents, picked out of fragments of broken quartz, passed as currency in

saloons where the oil lamps flamed smokily and life was cheap: it had been a prize, a lure, a punishment, a promise: men had died, fought, slaved and endured for it: and now, at the last, here it was, the gift of a girl with golden hair in a dusky English garden where the roses were sweet, and love lingered in the scented shadows.

“In all sorts of places you’ll never see. It’s a present from Canada, and used largely for wedding rings, if the lady doesn’t want platinum. I don’t.”

“That’s an idea,” he chuckled. “Does Jennifer know you’re giving me this?”

“No, but I’ve reason to think she’ll approve.”

“You’ve got a great head on you, Pirrie.”

“I doubt that, but I wouldn’t know my own name if it weren’t for you, and I’m going to see my new relations next week.”

“They’re in luck. Have you and Dolph settled anything?”

“I think it will be next month. Would that suit you?”

The Infant took a grip on himself. “Let you know in the morning: hanged if I don’t. You think that she—er—she——?”

“I don’t think—I know. Oh, Matt! I’d love to see it. My prayers go with you.”

It is curious to what an extent the gentle passion—if thus it is properly designated—undermines the confidence of the healthy male who otherwise displays presence of mind, self-control and kindred masculine qualities. And, noticeably, it is the male of the larger and more formidable proportions who is the most seriously disturbed by the advent of an emotional crisis. The puny man, the man with a thin face, small neck and narrow, sloping shoulders, comports himself with infinitely more assurance.

Also why is it that in these circumstances the other sex is so perfectly at home? What poise they evidence, what mastery of the man, the moment and the method. With what delicate show of yielding does the woman surrender, and how ignorant is the over-exalted male that he has but performed as he was meant to perform, said what he was meant to say, and in all things followed the lead of his real master.

Be this as it may, Mr. Matthew Lynch, some ten minutes after his conversation with Pirrie, embarked in a punt vastly more ill at ease than ever he had been when stepping into the ring. He looked askance at Jennifer. The programme, so carefully rehearsed, had gone clean out of his head, and he wished devoutly that the next half-hour was over. Jennifer, apparently quite self-possessed, lay back on the cushions and looked at nothing at all. But a close observer might have noted that her eyes were unusually soft.

Julie, with her father and mother, had taken a launch to Mapledurham. Pirrie and Dolph had paddled up to the backwater below the weir, and at the moment the river

seemed reserved for these two. The Infant lit a cigarette, and immediately dropped it. To smoke would be almost sacrilegious. And the thing had no taste.

Jennifer remained mischievously silent, and, oddly enough, found herself thinking a good deal about Dolph. How far all that side of it seemed in the past. She contrasted these two: Matthew big, deliberate, steady going, not, she thought, a man of great passions, but equable, infinitely kind, cooler than Dolph, less romantic, quietly humorous and very determined. Dolph was more mercurial, and perhaps, though she couldn't be sure of this, more sensitive, more easily cast down and elated. He was a greater lover, but could he be a better husband? She doubted that.

How strange, she reflected, and how abrupt had been the incursion of Pirrie into the life of the Martin family, and how she had changed it. During those first few weeks, Jennifer admitted that she had been very dubious—also a little jealous. Pirrie was so electric. Quite without effort, she caught men's admiration, and held it. She was not a flirt, and in many things a bit of a Puritan, which was strange after a life spent in mining-camps. She was unlike the average English girl. More reserved force, more fire, more freedom about her, a wild and lovely thing, part of whose charm was that she had not been tamed by the suavity of English life. Yes, Pirrie would always have her following, but that didn't matter now.

"A penny for your thoughts, Matt."

"Eh—er—nothing special. Comfortable?"

"Yes, very."

This didn't sound promising, and he gave his pole a dig that sent the punt surging forward. How infernally cool she was.

"You—ah—like the river?"

"Who wouldn't; but I don't get half enough of it. Just at this time it's lovely."

"Bit romantic—what."

Her lips began to tremble, but he could not see that.

"I never thought you were romantic, Matt."

The Infant shook his fair head in protest.

"Er—no—doesn't run in our family. Perhaps we've too many coal-pits. I don't know. Ever been up Durham way?"

"No."

"Then I wouldn't go. It's awful—that is you'd think so, especially in winter time. Black Country, y'know."

"But one gets used to it: and you don't have to live there."

Was that meant for an opening? The Infant doubted it, but took a chance.

"If—ah—you had to live somewhere, where would you live?" he demanded

chaotically.

“But I do have to live, don’t I?” she laughed.

“Quite! Of course! I mean if you had to move, where would you move to? Expense no object.”

“That depends. You mean just me, or the family too?”

“Wasn’t thinking of the family,” said he hastily.

“You mean I’m to pretend I can do what I like?”

“Yes—no—yes,” he assured her. “What would you do? I know a fellow, and his wife has asked him to plan a trip for her before they’re married.”

“But he hasn’t got a wife in that case. Or is it a companionate marriage?”

“Nothing doing, not in that line.”

“It depends so much on the fellow,” she answered chokily.

“He’s all right, decent average chap, I take it. Would be happy anywhere with her. He’s—er—up a tree, and called me in.”

“What did you suggest, Matt?”

“Didn’t know what to say, being a fool at such things. He’s well off, so that end of it is all right.”

“You want me to help him out?”

“Both of us,” said The Infant thickly. “Think it over, will you?”

“I will,” she promised in an odd tone.

“I say, Pirrie gave me a present that time she took me aside. Decent of her, eh?”

“What was it?”

“Gold, in coarse grains—said it was out of her treasure-box. About half an ounce of it. Useful sort of stuff to have about the house.”

“Whatever could one use it for, Matt?”

He thought her voice shaky, but what shook it he could not be sure. Probably she was laughing at him. At this he felt more desperate than ever.

“Oh—er—ornaments.”

“Wasn’t that nice of her. She’s awfully happy now.”

“Ye—es, I suppose she is. Ought to be, eh? Good chap, Dolph. I say, Jen?”

“Well?”

“Do you want to be—to be—ah—happy like her—I mean make me happy like Dolph. Hang it all, I think this punt leaks.”

Jennifer went into a peal of healing laughter.

“Matt, you’re priceless.”

“I was afraid you’d throw me down. Shall we go back?”

“Are you nervous about the punt?” She got this out in a strangled tone.

“Punt. No—it’s you I’m scared of.”

“Matt, can’t you see—don’t you know?”

“There’s just one thing I know to-night,” he said with a convulsive effort. “Why won’t you give a chap a leg up? I want you, Jen—want you to—to marry me. I’ve wanted that for years. I’ve no particular brains, and I’m nothing much to look at, but I’d take care of you. On my soul I would.”

“You dear man,” she whispered. “For years, Matt? Did you say that?”

“Four anyway,” he nodded. “It started when I was at Cambridge.”

“You never told me,” said she softly.

“I know—didn’t think I had a show, and my father said I was too young. Then Dolph barged along, and that dished it.”

“Were you in love with me while I was engaged to Dolph, or supposed to be?”

“All the time, Jen.”

“And Dolph your best friend.”

“Of course.”

Perhaps it was those two words that gave her the first real glimpse of the man, and she loved him for it.

“Dolph never knew?”

“Naturally not. It wasn’t the game. I’m not clever like him, Jen, but you could bank on me—if that’s worth anything.”

“Everything,” said she very gently.

How he did it, he never knew, but, without upsetting the punt, he dropped his pole, and was beside her. Then his arms went round her, their lips sought each other, and met.

There was a silence. The punt drifted close under the bank, and they were screened by overhanging branches. Jennifer shut her eyes. She could feel him trembling, but his arms were very strong.

“Matt,” she whispered, “you’ve told me more about yourself than I ever knew before. Couldn’t you see that I cared?”

“All I know is that I’ve made a perfect ass of myself. I meant to work in the wedding ring idea with that gold, and funkied it. Are you sure you love me? I don’t see a single reason, if you ask me.”

“I’m not asking. There are plenty of reasons.”

He stroked her cheek, lightly, as though it were that of a child.

“I will take care of you, darling. I got so used to thinking about you, that there never was any other girl.”

“All these years, Matt?”

“It seemed a long time. There were lots of others, but not the same. Why do you suppose one particular chap should want just one particular girl? Darned funny, I call it.”

“I don’t know why, and perhaps it’s just as well. And you wouldn’t have said a word if I’d married Dolph?”

“One couldn’t, could one?”

At that, her arms went round his big shoulders.

“I do love you, Matt.”

A further silence, in which they were very much alone. The current laid its liquid fingers on the punt, and moved it delicately into midstream. They neither knew nor cared. The water was like plate glass, and in its deeper channel flowed more swiftly. A light haze lay on the surface, the discarded veiling of a hot summer day, and the green banks were mysteriously shrouded. There was no moon, just starlight and the imperceptible urge of a river that slid ever toward the sea.

Presently Jennifer gave a start. “Where are we, and where’s your pole?”

“Dunno, I’m sure. Does it matter?”

“Matt, we’re drifting!”

“Splendid. I like drifting with you.”

“But how are we going to get back?”

“Don’t want to get back, old thing. Anyway, I can swim.”

“I object to your swimming. Where are the others?”

“Somewhere hereabout, I’m afraid.”

“Dolph!” she called. “Dolph!”

A soft halloo sounded upstream, and soon they caught the quick drip of a paddle. Out of the mist came a Canadian canoe, Pirrie sitting on the stern, very much at home, Dolph, a languid Sybarite, lying in the bows. He sat up as they drew near.

“Any trouble between you two? Did I hear a cry for help?”

“Matt has lost his pole.”

“Is that all he’s lost?”

“Not by a long chalk,” grinned The Infant. “I’m the happiest man in the world.”

“Except one, my friend. But you do look a bit dazed.”

“Jennifer!” burst out Pirrie, “is it true?”

“Absolutely,” announced Matt for them both. “Truest thing you ever heard.”

The canoe glided closer, and touched. Pirrie, leaning over, gave Jennifer’s arm a hard squeeze. Two male hands went out and gripped. Youth went floating down the magic river beside youth. Love beside love.

Midsummer in the Rockies a year later. Beside a mountain stream, where a pool had formed with a floor of silver sand, knelt a girl. She wore leggings, short skirt, and a khaki shirt, open at the neck, showing her delicate throat. Her lovely face was very intent.

In her hands was a shallow, circular pan of black sheet steel. She gave it a final swing, emptied it of water, and examined it with sharp interest.

“Oh, Dolph! Isn’t it good!”

He looked. From the curving streak of crushed quartz now trailed a line of yellow metal, some fine, some coarse, lying heavily in the rounded corner from which the quartz had been washed away. Any tyro could have seen that this was rich ore.

“Jove,” said he, “how different from the last time.”

The last time. That had been an epoch in more lives than one. And only a twelvemonth ago.

They gazed at each other with sudden seriousness, and for a while listened to the chuckle of the stream churning in its rocky bed, milky waters that by many a lake and cataract sought the Pacific. So diverse from another stream of which they knew.

From higher up the hill came a low rumble. For two months now, day and night it had continued as it would for years, the growl of great steel stamps as they dropped on ore from the levels of Stevens’ Hope. This mill, with its sturdy mechanical voice, was the symbol of success, for at the end of the first month the bullion shipment to the coast had surpassed Stevens’ highest expectations, four great solid bricks of dull yellow, worth over forty thousand dollars. The real drama of the mine was over, and the rest only a matter of work.

The camp had become a different place, with larger buildings and more of them, a telephone, wireless, and electricity from a nearby waterfall. But since romance still lived, Pirrie’s woodland sanctuary, at her special pleading, remained untouched. And to it they had come on a tour around the world. Now, as on that first day, they were quite alone.

Dolph examined the pan again, and with his fingers pushed the gold into a tiny heap.

“Reminds one of a lot, doesn’t it? I couldn’t do that before. Are you glad we came?”

“So glad. It’s a sort of answer to a lot of things I never expected to understand. I’m not sure that I do, even now.”

“If we understand each other, isn’t that about as far as we can go?”

She smiled at him. “I like you when you talk that way. Dolph, were you watching me long that time. You know.”

“As long as I could stand it. You were the loveliest vision I ever dreamed of.”

“That’s funny, because I was perfectly miserable, and lonely, and jealous of people I’d seen on the trail, and the clothes the women wore. The mountains were like a prison, and Stevens’ Hope a hole in the ground, and I’d no one to play with.”

“What a heartbreaking recital.”

“Well, it’s true. Then your horse came splashing across, and almost drowned me. That about finished it. Oh, Dolph.”

“Oh, Pirrie.”

“What if you hadn’t decided to ride on that day?”

“And what if you hadn’t burst into tears over a pan of quartz at that particular moment?”

They laughed at each other. A mink slid like a streak of brown lightning between the rocks, and, higher up, a great trout leaped in a shining crescent.

“There we go again. Not much use, is it?”

He put his arm round her. “Y’know,” said he, “I keep on expecting to see Purdey. It’s queer without him. Where do you suppose he is?”

“I wonder. Dad says he’s never been back. And Danks. I’m sorry about him. He was always kind to me.”

“And if he hadn’t——”

“You mustn’t, Dolph: it’s just right as it is. We’d better go up now. Dad will be waiting for us.”

They went on to the camp, and found Stevens, a year older, but looking years younger, with no strain in his kindly face.

“Well,” said he, “living it all over again?”

“Yes, some of it. Have you got that map for me?”

He spread out a large sheet with pencil markings.

“That’s as nearly as I can remember, and the tent was just there. Before you reach it from this side, you strike a ravine with steep walls, almost vertical, and the creek at the bottom. You can’t mistake it. The spot where I found her was about two hundred yards farther on. The north side of the creek. But, Pirrie, there won’t be anything left now except the trail.”

“We’ll find it,” she said, poring over the thing, committing it to memory. Then they talked till night fell, and stars glimmered above the mountain-tops. It was her idea to ride over the Caribou Trail. Something was calling her with a voice at once tender and memorial.

“It’ll be a hard trip, Pirrie. Rough country, that,” said Stevens as he bade them good night.

“But I made it with you—once,” she smiled. “Good night, Dad. You’ll be coming to England how soon?”

“In time for Christmas with you. I’m wondering about your relations.”

“Why wondering?”

“If they’ll object to your calling me ‘Dad.’”

She flung her arms round his neck. “I’ll do it always and always and always.”

They left at sunrise next morning, with Jim, the same guide who had piloted the Martins, and two pack-horses, and there followed such a week as they knew could hardly come again. Another life was waiting for them.

But here, day by day, they had the vast panorama of wilderness, with giant summits scaling the skies, the softened call of turbulent streams, hidden lakes, sapphires set in a ring of lofty peaks, and the silence of the woods. By night, the galaxy in the heavens, and the mystery of the unknown.

Then they came to the ravine with vertical sides, and the creek at the bottom. Here the guide, being an understanding man, checked his horse, and dropped behind. The two dismounted, and went on. Pirrie’s eyes were very soft.

They found the trail, but that was all. Nature had reclaimed her own, and trees, twenty years old, stood straight where once Barbara Ridley waited for the man who would never come back. Some part of this stream bed had once been hers. The cross carved by Stevens had vanished in the undergrowth.

Pirrie stood, motionless and gazing. Confused memories crowded back on her. She saw a face, thin, loving, and very beautiful. She heard voices, rough but kind, heard the whistle of wintry winds, and the flapping of a tent door. She thought she heard the barking of dogs, and the smell of a campfire drifted to her from somewhere. But that was all.

The tears ran down her cheeks. From the hillside garden in Kent to this had wandered her mother.

Suddenly she could bear no more, and turned to her husband with a cry wrung from her heart.

“Your arms, Dolph, your arms. Oh, love me, Dolph, love me as long as we both live, and never, never stop.”

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Golden Foundling* by Alan Sullivan (as Sinclair Murray)]