

COLE
of SPYGLASS
MOUNTAIN

ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

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Cole of Spyglass Mountain

BY
ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

AUTHOR OF
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THE JUBILEE GIRL, Etc.

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TO MY FRIEND

MAYNARD SHIPLEY

TO WHOM I AM INDEBTED FOR THE
SCIENTIFIC MATERIAL IN THIS BOOK

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Cole of Spyglass Mountain

CHAPTER I THE SLUG

Four boys, ranging from eleven to fifteen years of age, squatted close to earth in a wet, weed-rank city lot. It was spring, and the new warmth of the season's birth was in the air. The lot was a vacant one, and perhaps would remain so for many years to come, because it was low, and the spring rains had made of it a veritable swamp.

One boy was master of ceremonies, and the eager eyes of his companions were fixed on a chip of wood that he held in his hand, four inches above the ground. The chip was perhaps five inches square, and over it crawled a slug, a slimy, repulsive, helpless creature of the earth. *Limax Campestris* was the slug's rather important-sounding name, but of this the boys knew nothing.

"Aw, bet ye an agut he can't get down!" volunteered one boy.

"Which one o' yere agates?" asked the one who held the chip.

"My ole moony one," was the reply. "Bet ye my moony agut against yer black-'n'-white one!"

"Aw, his black-an'-white one's half glass," put in a would-be spoilsport.

To show that he accepted the wager, the black-haired boy who had imprisoned the slug on the chip reached his right hand into his trousers pocket and laid a white-and-black-striped agate marble on the ground beside him. The tow-headed gambler who had offered the wager laid beside the black-and-white marble a milky-colored one, which was soft and showed tiny half-moons, the result of countless collisions with other "taws."

"Anybody else?" invited the boy who held the chip and its crawling inhabitant.

Several bets were offered, ranging from so many "chinies" or "commies" or "glassies" to collections of jack-stones and other treasures dear to the heart of a boy, all of which the master of ceremonies accepted to the extent of his pockets' contents. All eyes were again fixed on the slowly moving gastropod.

"Now, lissen, Cole," said one. "Ye're bettin' he c'n git down offen that chip

'thout jumpin', eh? Is that it?"

"Yes," replied the dark-haired boy.

"Er fallin'?" questioned another.

"Er fallin' either," was the reply.

"Aw, they's a ketch in it somewheres, fellas," was the warning of the third youthful sportsman. "He'll let the chip down er somethin'."

"They ain't any such thing," retorted the boy called Cole. "I'm bettin' just like what I said. This here slug'll let 'imself down on the ground an' go on about his business 'thout me helpin' 'im, er him jumpin' er fallin' er anything like that. An' I'll keep the chip four inches above the ground all the time, just like I got her now. Now you watch what I'm tellin' you! Watch 'im!"

"Aw, ye're crazy!" derided the tow-headed boy, "Ye're crazy, Cole!"

The boy called Cole made no reply to this, but kept his fine gray eyes on his captive.

A studious observer would have noted this boy's remarkable face. His hair was coal-black and of heavy growth. In sharp contrast, his large eyes were a deep gray, almost blue, and the lashes that covered them were long and black as soot. The face was decidedly ascetic, the nose thin and almost Grecian. One noticed the mouth. It was youthful still, but even now there were settling about it faint trceries that bespoke determination. His was the face, almost, of a youth of twenty. But he had barely turned fourteen.

Joshua Cole was the boy's name. His schoolmates called him Cole, not because of his precocious gravity, but after the manner of boys of the age of twelve or thereabout as they begin to assume the ways of men. When they called him Josh they were in a frivolous mood and set on teasing him. But teasing Joshua Cole was fruitless. He merely smiled and looked steadily at his would-be tormentors out of his tolerant, grave gray eyes—eyes at the same time so serious and so whimsical as to baffle them to silence. A strange boy was Joshua Cole, always deep in some original, boyish experiment, as in the present instance, but universally liked by his associates.

"We gotta be gettin' to school," Towhead announced, after the four had watched the circular progress of the slug in silence for a time.

"Gee whiz! There goes the second bell now!"

"C'm'on, Cole! Ole Madmallet won't do a thing to us!"

"Wait a minute," said Joshua Cole softly. "He's gone pretty near round the chip now. When he gets clean back to where he started from, you fellas might's well say good-by to yer ole marbles."

“But I ain’t gonta be tardy!” expostulated Towhead, and grabbed up the moony agate.

“All right. Go ahead. You’re a hot sport, you are!”

“Ne’mind, Cole. Wait’ll Ole Hothatchet grabs you by the neck!”

So saying, Towhead ran off toward the nearby brick schoolhouse, where already the scholars were filing in to the time of the principal’s tapping with a ruler on a window sill.

Two more of the boys grabbed up their marbles and strapped books, and followed Towhead, oblivious to the fate of the imprisoned slug.

But one doggedly remained with the experimenter. And this one, too, was a black-haired boy, Joshua’s younger brother Lester. Lester Cole had made his bet that the slug could not reach the ground after Joshua had lifted him from his earthly home on the chip; and the Coles were famous as stickers. He set his lips and watched the slug intently. But presently he said:

“Aw, le’s be gettin’ to school, Josh! Old Madmallet’ll raise the devil. We c’n watch an ole slug any ole time.”

“No, we can’t. Don’t know when we’ll find another slug,” replied his brother. “It’s gettin’ so hot we won’t see many more of ’em pretty soon. They can’t stand hot weather; it kills ’em. But you take yer ole marbles and go. I don’t care about any ole bet. I’m gonta stay an’ watch this ole slug, myself. Can’t tell when I’ll get another chance.”

“I won’t go ’less you do, Josh,” said Lester. “You can’t bluff me out on any ole bet. D’ye think I’m scared o’ Ole Madhouse? Not on yer life!”

“Look! Look!” Joshua almost shouted. “Now watch ’im, Les! Looky—he’s been all ’round the chip, reachin’ out his feelers and crawlin’ over the edge, ain’t he? And now he knows he can’t get off the chip just by crawlin’ er anything like that. Now watch what he’ll do!”

Lester glanced nervously at the brick schoolhouse, into which the tail end of the cue of scholars was now marching. Then an excited cry from his brother caused him to turn his eyes on the slug once more.

And, lo and behold, the brainless crawling thing had begun to prove that Nature had endowed it with powers unknown to ordinary, unobservant man. It had crawled almost entirely over the edge of the chip, and was holding by the tip end of its tail.

“He’s gonta fall!” cried Lester, forgetting austere old Silvanus Madmallet, the teacher.

“No, he ain’t! You watch, Les! Now! Look at ’im!”

And lo and behold again, a thin stream of slime came from a gland at the rear

end of the pitiful creature, and it descended slowly, head down, reeling out its rope of mucus as it went.

Lester Cole watched in boyish awe as the poor earthling drew nearer and nearer to the ground, the string of mucus ever lengthening above it.

“I wouldn’t think it ud hold ’im,” he marveled.

And then the slug reached the earth and began slowly assuming a horizontal position.

“Lift ’im up again, Josh,” suggested Lester.

“No,” said Joshua, dropping the chip. “That wouldn’t be fair. You lose, kid!”—and he scraped into his hand an assortment of “glassies” and “chinies.” “C’m’on—we gotta be gettin’ there!”

Side by side the brothers ran toward the schoolhouse.

“You oughtn’t to’ve stayed, Les,” puffed Joshua.

“An’ how ’bout you?” Lester retorted.

“It’s different with me,” stated Joshua.

“Like the dickens it is! What d’ye mean?”

“I gotta kinda look at things like that. You don’t care nothin’ about ’em, much. But don’t you let Ole Sorehammer get you. You been tardy a lot here lately. He’ll feel like bustin’ you wide open. But I’ll stick with you. Don’t let him bluff ye, kid.”

“How’d ye know that thing could do that, Josh?” asked Lester.

“Cause I’ve made ’em do it before now,” Joshua told him.

“You’re a devil of a kid—always doin’ somethin’ like that.”

“I like to,” was all that Joshua said in explanation.

Silvanus Madmallet, called variously by the boys “Ole Hothatchet,” “Ole Sorehammer,” or “Ole Madhouse,” was a tall, long-beaked, austere pedagogue, who fairly exuded scholastic dignity. He was of the old school—not so old in that day, either—who dispensed learning under the well-known maxim, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

He was seated at his desk when Joshua and Lester Cole hurried on tiptoe into the cloak room, deposited their caps on hooks, and, grinning guiltily at each other, walked into the classroom and tried to appear unconcerned. Their classmates giggled and looked in Pharisaic triumph at one another as the two culprits found their desks and screwed themselves into the seats behind them. “Behold these publicans,” said their eyes, “for they are tardy, and we were not!”

Old Silvanus Madmallet maintained a severe and portentous silence until the brothers were established in their seats, casting sheepish glances at each other, not daring to face the despot on the platform or the hypocritically condemnatory eyes of

their classmates. Then suddenly Old Madmallet spoke.

“Joshua and Lester Cole, why are you tardy?”

Neither brother volunteered an explanation.

“This has been occurring altogether too frequently of late,” went on the stern voice of old Silvanus. “Speak out, Joshua!”

Joshua parted his lips.

“Stand up, sir!” came from the rostrum.

Grinning in embarrassment, the older brother took his stand.

“It was my fault, Mr. Madmallet,” he confessed. “Lester, he wasn’t to blame. I kep’ him.”

“Oh, *you* kept him!” The principal’s tones were sarcastic. “And did you find it hard to do?”

“No, sir. That is—yes, sir. He—he didn’t want to stay.”

“That’s a falsehood, Joshua Cole,” said Madmallet in calm, assured tones. “This is not the first time you have tried to shield your brother. He has been tardy repeatedly. Your brotherly love may perhaps be commendatory, but this time it will not prevent your brother from being punished.”

Silvanus Madmallet seemed to derive great pleasure from talking, in a measure, over his charges’ heads. He loved to roll big words over his tongue. Pedantic in the extreme was old Silvanus Madmallet, else he would have risen long ago to some form of public service above the teaching of adolescent girls and boys.

“Lester, stand up!”

Lester squirmed out of his seat and stood erect.

“Go into the hall.”

With slow steps and a white face, the younger brother took up his melancholy march to the torture room.

“Joshua, sit down!”

But Joshua Cole remained standing. “Looky here, Mr. Madmallet,” he said, his lips twitching and the jaw muscles shuttling under the taut skin of his cheeks, “don’t you whip my brother. It was me that made him late for school. You whip me, if ye gotta whip somebody.”

The room was silence itself. There came only the faint shuffle of Lester’s feet as he walked to his doom. Gray crags grew over the fiery eyes of old Silvanus Madmallet, and the eyes glared at Joshua Cole.

“Sit down!” he thundered.

“I know what you’re tryin’ to do!” cried Joshua. “You know it’ll hurt me more if you whip my brother than ’twould if you was to whip me. You’ve done that before.

I'm onto you. And I won't stand it!"

His voice had risen with every sentence, and on the last it broke. Joshua Cole was near to tears. He was at once angry and frightened at his own audacity. But he had long been at war with his teacher and knew the injustice of the man.

"I won't stand it!" he cried hotly again. "You just take it out on me by whippin' Lester. And—and I just won't stand it, that's all!"

"Sit down!" thundered from the platform a second time.

Lester's lagging steps had brought him to the hall door. Reluctantly he laid a hand on the knob.

"Go into the hall, I told you, Lester!" said the teacher, glancing toward him briefly.

Lester opened the door, all hope gone, and closed it behind him.

"Now, Joshua Cole, are you going to obey me? Once more—sit down!"

"I won't set down!" said Joshua, pale as death, but in his blue-gray eyes that light of unshakable resolve which was later to prove the determining factor in his career.

Just what might be gained by his refusal to sit down Joshua did not know. He was not reasoning at all; he was merely in revolt against a long-standing tyranny. And, boylike, he had resorted to unreasoning obstinacy to show his attitude.

For a silent moment Silvanus Madmallet glared at him, his own face white and rigid. Then he arose briskly, went to the closet, and returned with a leather strap.

"I will attend to you later, young man," he said with cold calmness, and passed through the door by which Lester Cole had entered the hall.

As the door closed behind him a low buzzing arose in the classroom. But it ceased abruptly as the scholars saw Joshua Cole trotting toward that door, his small fists doubled. And as he passed the big stove, which had not yet been taken down because of an occasional cold spring morning, he grasped up the iron poker that leaned so invitingly in a corner of the coal-box.

CHAPTER II

SPAWN OF THE DEVIL

Silvanus Madmallet had long considered Joshua Cole a child of the evil one. While the boy seemed intelligent enough, he was in the main behind in his school work. His brother, aged eleven, was in the same class, with Joshua fourteen. He was all sufficient as to “readin’ and writin’,” but when it came to the third grim specter in that detestable trio, “arithmatic,” Joshua simply was the dumbest of the dumb. Geography and history seemed to hold his attention to a mild degree, but he detested grammar and all its works. Madmallet’s futile endeavor to pound arithmetic into young Joshua’s head was perhaps the opening gun in the feud that existed between them. Why, what could anybody ever expect to amount to if he did not have a sound understanding of arithmetic? Once a week the class had composition; and, though Joshua’s efforts were always above the average and showed good sentence construction and thought, they brought no praise from Madmallet. What matter if the boy wrote well if he could not parse and diagram a sentence, and knew no rules of grammar?

One day Madmallet had unraveled a part of the mystery that shrouded the boy’s shortcomings. Slipping up behind young Joshua, he had surprised him in holding behind his large geography a smaller book, upon which his attention was riveted. Madmallet had snatched away the forbidden fruit, and his craggy brows had come down as he glared at the unfamiliar title. Joshua had been reading Proctor’s *Other Worlds Than Ours!*

Madmallet had no sympathy for Science. He was a firm believer that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and he carried his convictions to extremes. He sent the book home to Joshua’s father, who cared for neither Science nor its enemies, but believed that a pupil should not antagonize his teachers, and promptly punished Joshua by holding him with his head submerged in a tub of water until the boy was all but drowned.

One thing had led to another until Madmallet nursed a personal antipathy for young Joshua. Many times he had punished him, but the boy had proved so obstinate that never a cry could his persecutor wring from his twitching lips. Then Madmallet had learned of Joshua’s rare brotherly love for Lester, who was himself a prodigious sinner and committed more crimes against the canons of the school than did Joshua. So, unable to bend the older brother to his will, he tortured Lester, well

knowing in his cunning and cruel old heart that he thus punished Joshua more thoroughly than he could with cane or strap.

And so had the feud progressed until that morning when Joshua turned upon his tormentor and followed him into the hall, the blacksmith-made poker gripped in his trembling hands.

“Take off your coat,” Madmallet was saying, when the door opened softly behind him and Joshua came through.

“Keep yer coat on, Les,” ordered Joshua in shaky tones. Then he turned his grave gray-blue eyes on the teacher, and laid the poker over his right shoulder. “Du-don’t you hit my brother with that strap,” he said; and, though his tones showed nervousness, even fear, they contained a quality that gave Madmallet pause.

His face grew fiery red and his cheeks puffed out.

“You threaten me with that poker, you young scoundrell!” he bellowed. “Me! You threaten *me!*”

“Ye heard what I said!”—the tones grew stronger. “You hit my brother with that strap an’ I’ll bust your head with this poker.”

Silvanus Madmallet stood in a statuesque position and gazed in horrified amazement at the boy. Could this thing be? Had he heard aright? Would even the most incorrigible pupil in his room dare to go as far as this?

He clinched his teeth, drew back the strap, and took one step toward the cowering Lester. Then the iron poker left the shoulder of young Joshua, and the boy’s elbows traveled farther back to gain impetus for a deadly blow. Madmallet paled, dropped the uplifted arm, and stepped safely out of reach. In that moment Joshua knew that he faced an utter coward, and his soul cried out in triumph.

“Don’t hit ’im, I tell ye!” he said gloatingly. He knew that this repetition was unnecessary, but he had to crow over his victory and could think of nothing else to say.

Madmallet took one more step toward safety, then leveled a long, bony finger.

“You, Joshua Cole, are expelled,” he said. “Go home and tell your parents.”

“I don’t care,” retorted Joshua. “You c’n expel me if ye want to, but you ain’t gonta hit my brother with that strap.”

“Go home! Get your hat and your books and go!”

“Not unless Les goes with me. You ain’t gonta send me home, and keep Les here to beat ’im up soon’s I’m gone.”

“You’re the devil’s spawn!” raged Madmallet. “You’ll die on the gallows!—you’re a born criminal!—I’m expelling you for the good of the school!—to save the rest of my pupils from your evil influence! I hope your father—kills you. Will you

go?”

But Joshua stood firm. Then Madmallet threw up his hands and rolled his eyes toward heaven. He seemed to derive inspiration from the process, for he turned to Lester, and, cheeks vibrating with anger, ordered him:

“Go home—you, too! *You’re* suspended for a week. I’ll write a letter to your father about this unbelievable insolence. Go—both of you! Out of my sight!”

And with this he hurried toward the door, keeping a wide space between his precious self and the poker-bearer, and dodged into the classroom.

“N-now ye’ve done it!” blubbered Lester, casting a reproachful look at his champion.

“Shut up!” ordered his brother. “Go get our caps. We’ll let the confounded ole books go. Le’s hurry up an’ get outa this.”

“Father’ll drown us,” wailed Lester, but he obeyed his brother and came back presently from the cloak room, both caps in hand.

Joshua crowded his on his head, laid the poker against the stair rail, and descended almost noiselessly ahead of Lester. Downstairs and out in the bright spring sunshine he still took the lead, while Lester, sobbing brokenly, trudged along behind him. They left the school ground and made toward the vacant lot where the rank weeds grew.

“Wh-where ye goin’, Josh?” sniffled the younger one.

“What’s the diff where we go? We dassent go home. I’m gonta see if I c’n find that slug again. I’ll show ye somethin’ else he c’n do that ye never dreamed of.”

“I don’t wanta see no ole slug, Joshua! What’re we gonta do? You—you jest ruined everythin’! Father’ll drown us, I tell ye! An’ all on your account!”

“Won’t drown me,” replied Joshua doggedly. “Me, I’m through with that drowndin’ business. Father’ll never stick my head in a tub o’ water again.”

“But what’ll you do to keep ’im from doin’ it? Oh, I tell ye he’ll—”

“Shut up! You gi’me a pain, Les! I’m goin’ out West—that’s why he won’t drown me. You’re goin’ with me.”

“I ain’t! I won’t!”

“Then stay here and get drowned,” said Joshua heartlessly.

They had by this time entered the swampy vacant lot where, such a short time before, Joshua had paraded to the betterment of his pockets’ contents the marvelous endowment of *Limax Campestris*. Joshua’s eyes were dry, but his face was pallid, for he knew only too well the gravity of the situation. But he sought for and found the self-same slug, crawling over a broad leaf and feasting thereon. And at once his gray-blue eyes lighted up, and thoughts of his troubles vanished.

“Say, Les,” he said, “you stay here while I go home and sneak Father’s razor. I’ll be right back—honest, I will.”

“What d’ye want of a razor?” asked the brother petulantly.

“Ne’mind. I’ll tell Mother I forgot a book and hadta come home f’r it. But she won’t see me, maybe. I’ll sneak in the back door, an’ Zida’ll never tell on me. Mother was goin’ ridin’ this mornin’, anyway.”

“But what’re we gonta do, Josh?” wailed Lester again, as Joshua started away.

“Aw, ferget that, can’t ye! We’re goin’ West, I tell ye! You leave everything to me, Les.”

“You got me into this, an’—”

But Joshua was running and paid no further heed; and Lester threw himself upon the damp ground and gave his misery full swing.

Zida Hunt, the Coles’ negro cook and maid of all work, was a friend of the erring Joshua. As the boy entered the kitchen of the big brick house which the Coles called home she turned toward him and lifted high her hands. Zida was given to emotionalism on the slightest provocation.

“Lord, chile, what yo’-all doin’ home dis time o’ day?”

“I forgot one o’ my books, Zida, an’ Ole Madhouse sent me home to get it,” lied the boy. “Where’s Mother?”

“She done gone out ridin’ in de kerrige,” Zida told him.

“Well, don’t say nothin’, will ye, Zida? About me bein’ sent home, you know. They ain’t any use to, now, is there?”

“Suttingly not, chile. Go on up to yo’ room an’ git yo’ book. Ah ain’t gonta say nothin’ about hit.”

“Thanks, Zida”—and Joshua hurried through the dining room to the front hall, where he leaped upstairs three steps at a time.

Here he was safe, so he made at once for his father’s room, searched the dresser drawers, found the cased razor, and went downstairs once more. He left the house by the front door so that Zida might not see that he carried no book. He hurried along Grant Avenue to the corner, then followed a side street to the vacant lot where his heartsick brother awaited him.

“Where’s that ole slug now?” was Joshua’s beginning. “I got the ole razor, all right, all right.”

Lester sat up and continued to sniffle, uninterested in the razor and the slug and any combination that might be arranged between them.

The feasting slug had not moved from the broad leaf, and Joshua sat down on the ground beside it and removed the razor from its case.

“Gee, it’s sharp!” he announced. “Le’me spit on yer arm an’ shave the hair offen it, kid.”

“No, I don’t want ye to,” said Lester. “I don’t know how you c’n be that way, when you know as well as I do what’s gonta be done to us.”

“What way?”

“Thinkin’ about things like ye’re always doin’—that’s how! Ye better be thinkin’ about what’s gonta happen to us when the folks gets Ole Sorehammer’s letter.”

“They ain’t gonta get any letter from Ole Sorehammer, kid. Don’t you worry about that. C’m’on now an’ watch this ole slug do somethin’ funny. What ye got to bet that he can’t walk the tight rope along the edge o’ this razor ’thout cuttin’ ’imself?”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to bet, and I don’t care what he c’n do! Why won’t our folks get Madmallet’s letter, Josh?”

“Cause I won’t let ’em, that’s why. Don’t ye know who Madmallet’ll send home with that letter?”

“O’ course—ole Slinky Dawson, teacher’s pet.”

“Course it’ll be Slinky Dawson. An’ that’s just why I’m hangin’ out here in this ole lot. Won’t ole Slinky hafta cross this lot on the way to our house? An’ we’ll be hidin’ here, an’ when he comes along we’ll scare the stuffin’ outa him. I’ll tell ’im that if he takes that letter to our folks I’ll knock the waddin’ outa him. Say, he’ll be scared to death, Les. You leave that little mamma’s boy to your Uncle Josh—I’ll fix his ole clock! C’m’on, now—bet ye anythin’ ye wanta bet this here ole slug c’n walk from one end to the other o’ this ole razor blade an’ not cut ’imself a little bit. C’m’on, Les—be a sport! What’s the use actin’ like you are—that don’t get you nothin’!”

Lester rubbed the tears from his eyes with a dirty wrist and, encouraged by the positive tone in his brother’s promises, allowed his curiosity to arise over the possibilities of a razor-walking slug. He went close to Joshua and squatted beside him, but, remembering his loss of a short time before, refused to bet against another sure-thing nature game.

And in wonder he watched his brother take up the slug and place the open razor, edge up, on the ground. Then Joshua put the slug on the handle of the razor and prodded it along until it crawled to the keen edge. Here it tried to go sidewise and reach the ground, but with a small stick Joshua kept it to the course. And along the keen edge the slow creature made its way, adding to the thrills of its brief terrestrial day.

“Gosh, Joshua! Ain’t it cuttin’ ’im?”

“Don’t see any blood, do you?”

“Uh-uh!”

“Ye wouldn’t either, I guess. Ain’t no blood in ’em, I’m thinkin’. But he ain’t drippin’ *anything*, is he? He’s got insides, ain’t he? There’d be somethin’ to drip if he was gettin’ cut, wouldn’t they?”

“Uh-huh. But ain’t it hurtin’ ’im at all, Josh?”

“Course not, rummy! There he goes off on the ground. Now watch while I turn ’im over, kid. You won’t see a ole cut or anything.”

And when Joshua’s gently prodding stick had laid the long-suffering mollusk on its back its belly showed none the worse for the experience.

“Josh, how’d he stay on?”

“I can’t tell ye that. But I’ll know some day. Then come ’round and ast me.”

“And why’n’t it cut ’im?”

“Can’t tell that either—but sometime I will.”

“How ye gonta ever tell, Josh?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lotta things I gotta find out, kid. There’s books an’ things that’ll tell ye all about things like that. I’m gonta get the names of ’em sometime. Now what’ll we do till ole Slinky Dawson comes along with Madmallet’s letter to the folks?”

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL AT THE CRESCENT

An even greater ogre to the Cole boys than Silvanus Madmallet was their father, John Cole, traveling salesman for a wholesale hardware firm. Their mother, who had been Blanche Florence before her marriage, came of an old and respected family that had come over with Lord Calvert when Maryland was settled. She had married Cole against the family's wish, and had been paying dearly ever since.

For John Cole was a self-centered brute, a hard master, a spendthrift. The boys did not know—though the mother did—that Cole fancied fast horses and fast women. He was a heavy drinker, but never a sot, for he carried his liquor well. In fact, but for the gloomy, suppressed rage in which it kept him almost constantly, few would have known that he was a steady drinking man.

While he tolerated his son Lester as a necessary nuisance, it seemed at times that he all but hated his older boy. He could not understand Joshua, with his constant, fearless, gray-blue eyes, and the boy's gravity jarred upon him. And, as in the case of Madmallet, the fact that he could not break the lad's spirit with the brutal punishment that he inflicted piqued his pride and made him merciless.

He labored under the delusion that Joshua was a "bad boy." Silvanus Madmallet had told him so, for one thing. Joshua did not progress in the studies prescribed for him, and persisted in reading books which no child should be allowed to read. John Cole did not understand these books himself; they aroused no interest in his unimaginative mind. They were heretic, and while John Cole himself was anything but a firm believer in the Word of God, it was proper that his sons should be. He had taken from Joshua Steele's *Chemistry*, Darwin's *Origin of Man* and his *Descent of Man*, and Huxley's *Man's Place In Nature*. He himself had tried to read these books to find out, if possible, what it was all about. And it had proved not possible for him to find out what it was all about. When questioned closely, after Joshua's head had been submerged in a bathtub full of water until he fell gasping on the floor when released, the boy confessed that he understood but little of what he was reading, but that it interested him nevertheless.

Thrusting his sons' heads under water until they were all but drowned was John Cole's own diabolical invention as a form of punishment, and though Lester escaped the terrible ordeal except for what were considered serious offenses, it was meted out to Joshua upon the slightest provocation. For Joshua was "bad," and it was

suspected that what sinfulness was Lester's was the result of the influence exerted over him by his older brother. The boys' mother was helpless to prevent these outrages, for he was unshaken by her tears; and threatening to leave her husband only brought forth the lofty invitation: "Go any time you feel like it, Blanche." And she knew that John Cole meant it. He cared nothing for her. He had squandered her fortune, and continued to live with her, perhaps, only in the vague hope that some wealthy relative of hers might die and leave her more money, which would be easy loot for him again. Despite his constant drinking and his shady affairs with women, Cole was well thought of by his employers. For he was a different man when dealing with them and when calling upon the trade, and, above all, he was a marvelous "money-getter." But the mother and her boys thanked heaven more than once that his business activities necessarily kept him away from home the greater portion of the time.

No small wonder, then, that Joshua and Lester, as they lazed in the vacant lot and awaited the coming of Slinky Dawson with the note to their parents, planned to stop that note midway in its journey. Slinky Dawson's route home carried him directly past the Cole house, and the boys had every reason to believe that he would bear the note that day at noon. Their father was away selling goods, but that fact offered no consolation. Joshua had been expelled and Lester suspended for a week, and there was no possibility of their keeping the dread news from their father when he returned.

Lester continued his whining as the hours dragged on, but Joshua lay on his back on the moist earth, to the vast delight of the Cold-and-Croup Demon, and looked up at the blue spring sky. Joshua was forever looking up at the sky when not engaged in disturbing the daily routine of slugs or tumblebugs or spiders.

"Josh, what *are* we gonta do?" came the oft-repeated wail from Lester.

"Goin' West," said Joshua, linking his fingers behind his head and continuing his gazing into the heavens.

"Aw, ye're jest talkin'!" accused the younger brother. "How c'n ye go West? Where's yer money to go with? Ye're always sayin' ye're goin' West, but I notice ye've never done it."

"A fella could go on the tramp," said Joshua. "Folks'll give a fella somethin' to eat when they see he's hungry an' honest. I've talked to tramps—kids no older'n me. They have a swell time, Les. Then maybe I c'n get some money down at the ole skatin' rink. You leave it to me."

"What'll we do when we get West, Josh?"

"Well—now—they's lots o' things a fella c'n do," answered Joshua. "There's

kids no older'n us that are cowboys. I've read lots an' lots o' stories about 'em."

Which proved that young Joshua, though consecrated to science, had not altogether put away boyish things.

"We'll go down to the rink to-night and see what's doin'," he continued. "I c'n pick up a dime or a quarter, maybe, and we c'n get somethin' to eat before we start. Then when we get away from the city, eatin'll be easy."

"Josh, you know you won't go. You been talkin' about it for years and years."

"I will too go!" protested Joshua. "You just watch and see, boy! I'm goin' this time. No more drownin' for me—I got enough o' that ole duckin' business, myself."

To tell the truth, though Joshua now told himself that he would take this long-threatened step, he was worried in his heart of hearts. But, boylike, he bolstered up his courage and dreamed of the adventure, while all the time something at the back of his mind laughed at him and told him that he was talking folly. One thing certain, though, he would not go home and face his father, that father knowing that he had been expelled from school. He felt that he could not stand one more submersion in that terrible water, with his pulse throbbing at his temples and the horrible pangs of strangulation clutching at his throat and contracting his heart, and everything growing black. No, no more of that! He might not go West, but he never would return home with that awaiting him.

The hours dragged on, and when the warm sun was high in the heavens the entrance of the brick schoolhouse vomited a stream of yelling, shoving, elbowing young humanity that at once disintegrated and spread in all directions. Then it was that Joshua and Lester left their places and hid behind a high-board fence close by. Here they watched friends and acquaintances pass hurriedly till at length came Slinky Dawson, walking with importance.

His importance soon forsook him, for presently upon him pounced two young highwaymen demanding the cause of his importance. Joshua stood in his path, fists on hips, and Lester threatened him on his right.

"What ye got, Dawson?" demanded Joshua.

Slinky Dawson's freckled face grew paler than it was ordinarily, for Slinky was an unhealthy, boot-licking, soft-spoken bigot, one of those beings doomed for life to be the scorn of less gentle but more red-blooded males.

"I haven't anything, Joshua," he replied, a look of fear and guilt in his milk-blue eyes. Slinky Dawson never would have said, "I ain't got anything," and he invariably called his schoolmates by their first names. Which proved that he was no man.

"You're a liar," Joshua told him smoothly. "Dare ye to take it up!"

Slinky squirmed and his thin lips fluttered. Slinky never took up anything.

“Aw, gi’me that note to our folks, kid,” said Joshua, stepping closer, disgust written on his face. “Don’t monkey with me, boy, er I’ll bust ye wide open! You know me. Gi’me Ole Madmallet’s letter before I smash yeh!”

“I—I— Honest, Joshua—”

Joshua drew back a threatening fist, then slowly brought it forward until it was rubbing Slinky’s nose. “Gonta gi’me it, boy?”

“Ye—yes, sir!” And Slinky reached trembling fingers into his blouse and produced an unsealed envelope. “Honest, Joshua, I couldn’t help it. Mr. Madmallet —”

“Dry up!”

Joshua had snatched the envelope from Slinky’s hand, and as he read aloud the superscription on the back his sarcastic tones were an attempt to imitate Madmallet’s:

“Mrs. John H. Cole, Three fifty-five Grant Avenue. Kindness of Albert Dawson.”

“Well, you ain’t gonta be so kind, after all, Mr. Albert Dawson,” jeered the leader of the outlaws. “And now lissen to me, kid: If you don’t go back this afternoon an’ tell Ole Sorehatchet that you give this note to our mother, me’n’ Les’ll lay fer you an’ knock the stuffin’ outa you. Don’t you ferget it, kid! Now go on home an’ keep yer face closed.”

“But—”

“Gwan, I’m tellin’ ye!”

And Slinky Dawson, glad that the ordeal was over but with a sinking heart for the consequences of his remissness, faded away.

Joshua read the contents of the envelope, a brief statement of what had occurred, then tore the paper to shreds.

“Now, c’m’on, kid,” said he. “Le’s get down to the Crescent an’ see what’s doin’.”

Most boys who possess such a studious turn of mind as did Joshua are of the Slinky Dawson type. Slinky was inefficient in everything except his studies. He could not play ball; any boy in school could outrun him; any boy could whip him. Joshua, on the other hand, was one of the foremost athletes in Hathaway’s Boyland. But, then, it was not dreamed that Joshua was a student. Had he not failed repeatedly in arithmetic and grammar? Then how could he be a studious boy? That he was the best pitcher on the Third-room Nine was an established fact. That he could run and jump and wrestle went undisputed. And that no one in the city—man, woman, girl or boy—could equal him on roller-skates was supposed to be the height of his

accomplishments.

For more than a year he had visited the Crescent Skating Rink in the heart of the city whenever opportunity offered. There during the past winter he had come in contact with an operatic star, who, seeing his grace and expertness, and herself being an enthusiastic novice at the sport, had asked him to teach her. It seemed that roller-skating had become a fad with a certain opera company that was playing in Hathaway, and the boy's marvelous performances had aroused the interest of all of them, after the first lady of the troupe had smiled upon him. One thing led to another, and, though the troupe had long since left the city, Joshua's services were still in demand by novices who wished to learn to skate. Being only a boy, and in school a greater part of the time at that, the owners of the rink had not offered him a position as instructor. But they encouraged him and allowed him to take tips from those who asked for his help.

To the Crescent Rink the boys now betook themselves, and the ticket-taker passed them in free, for Lester had often accompanied his brother. Lester sat in the spectators' gallery brooding over his trouble, while Joshua put on a pair of skates and glided out on the floor, the envy of the awkward skaters already assembled. Before long Joshua had a pupil, and after half an hour he had a tip of twenty-five cents. Then his charge left the rink, and he sought new fields.

He glided gracefully about the floor, on the alert for some one who wished to be taught, and as he made the second round his eyes alighted upon a girl with reddish-golden hair, who, unaided by an escort, was putting on her skates. Joshua executed a long curve and swept up beside her.

"Le'me help you," he offered, and bent on one knee before her.

He heard a girlish giggle of bashfulness and looked up into reddish-brown eyes that matched the hair.

And then, for love strikes quick and sure to the heart of a red-blooded boy, Joshua Cole knew that his eyes beheld the most glorious creature in all the world, and something came up in his throat and nearly choked him. It was as sudden and unexpected as a blow between the eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE GYPO QUEEN

Joshua's fingers fumbled with the straps of the roller-skates, and his ears felt hot. Girls had meant little to him. There had been a couple or more mild affairs, but the flame had died down within a day or two. This was different. In the winking of an eyelash Joshua Cole was head over heels in love. And how it hurt!

At last there remained no further excuse for him to keep on bended knee before her. The skates were adjusted; he must needs stand up and face those deadly eyes again. Like unto an Oriental topaz was their color, and her hair was bronze and hung down her back in a long, thick rope. He struggled to his feet at last, and, miserable beyond measure, lifted his eyes. He found that the long, reddish lashes were hiding hers and that the pink of May blossoms was in her cheeks. They were brown, too, those cheeks, and the pink blended with the brown to form a color combination utterly bewildering. He thought that the skin of Pocahontas must have looked like that—just why he could not have said.

"Ye're all fixed now, I guess," he mumbled in crackling tones. "C'n you skate?"

"A little," she replied, without lifting her glance to his. "I'm just learning."

And now Joshua Cole did the boldest thing in his life when he asked:

"Du-d'ye want me to teach you?"

A moment's hesitation, then, with a laugh: "Uh-huh—I don't care."

Awkwardly he helped her up on her skates and took her hands. And then they glided out onto the floor. Round and round he guided her, searching desperately for words. Their silence was long and embarrassing, but at last the girl broke it.

"You can skate fine, can't you? I wish I could, but I've not been trying long."

"I'm pretty good at it, I guess," he said not proudly. "I never saw you here before. I come lots. Almost every afternoon when school's out."

"I've not been here often," she helped on the conversation. "And I don't go to school."

"Don't they make you?"

"No. My mother teaches me. We're here and there. I live in a camp down by the railroad tracks."

"A camp? What kind of a camp?"

"I guess you wouldn't know if I was to tell you," she laughed. She laughed almost every time she spoke, thought Joshua; and, while it was a merry little trill, it

bore as well a note of nervousness. She seemed to find conversation as much of an effort as Joshua was finding it.

“Tell me anyway,” he begged.

“It’s a gypo camp.”

“That’s a funny word. What’s gypo mean?”

“Oh, it would take too long to tell.”

“No ’twouldn’t. Go on! Won’tcha?”

“Well, a gypo camp is— Oh, I can’t tell you here! There’s so much to tell.”

“Le’s quit skatin’ and set down a while.”

“I don’t care.”

He guided her to a bench, and they sat down three feet apart.

“Go on tell me, now,” he pleaded.

“Well, it’s railroad work—building railroads, you know. A gypo man’s a little contractor—you know what I mean—not a little *man*, but a little contractor that don’t amount to much. He’s got a little outfit and he takes sub-contracts from the big fellows. My father’s a gypo man, and they call the camp of a man like him a gypo camp. I’m a gypo queen.”

“What’s that?”

“Well,” she amplified, “a gypo queen is a gypo man’s daughter. That’s easy. Sometimes they call a gypo man a shanty man, and then his camp is a shanty camp and his daughter is a shanty queen. It’s all the same. It’s hobo lingo.”

“What d’ye do down there?”

“Well, I work some—a little. And my mother teaches me. She’s well educated. You see, there isn’t much chance for me to go to regular school, as we hardly ever stay in one place longer than three months. Then sometimes my mother lets me come up here to skate. Sometimes I drive horses on a slip, too. Do you know what that is?”

Joshua shook his head.

“Well, it’s just a dirt scraper. When you load it they call it sticking pigs. It’s lots of fun. And sometimes it’ll flip up and jerk out o’ your hands, and you lose your load and all. I can drive pretty well. We’re almost through on the job we’re on now, and then Pa says we’re going West. We’ve been on the double-track job, you know—working just out o’ town.”

“I’m on my way West, too,” Joshua informed her importantly.

“Don’t you go to school?”

“Did till to-day. Then they fired me.”

“Expelled you! What for?”

Joshua began the story of Madmallet's tyranny and his own disgrace, and the Oriental-topaz eyes glowed warmly as she listened to every word. It was thrilling to have her watching him so, and Joshua may be excused if he made himself appear something of a bold, bad outlaw.

"Would you 'a' smashed him?" she wanted to know.

"You bet yer neck I would," said Joshua. "Can't come nothin' like that on me. I wonder if I—if I—now—Could I get a job, d'ye s'pose, and go West with your father's gypo thing? Me and Les?"

"Is Les your brother's name?"

"Lester. Us kids call 'im Les. My name's Joshua. I don't like that name, do you? Nobody wants an ole Bible name like that, do they?"

"Uh-uh—I don't mind it," she told him.

Then a silence fell between them. It grew more tense as time went on, with the eyes of both abased. Then said she of the bronze-gold hair:

"You haven't asked me my name, have you?"

Helpful little flirt! Long before Joshua would have asked it had he dared.

"I will now," he said. "What is it?"

"It's Madge."

"Madge what?"

"You didn't tell me *your* last name. You tell first."

"Cole, then."

"And mine's Mundy. And you'll think my father has a funny nickname. The hobos call a nickname a monaker. Pa's is Bloodmop."

"That's a corker!" Joshua enthused. "Why they call 'im that?"

"Well, he's got a very heavy head of fiery red hair. The stiff's say it looks like a mop that's been used to clean up blood after a murder. They're awfully funny, some of them. My hair's a little red, too. Ma's is black, and they say that's how comes mine to be like it is, with Pa's so red and Ma's so black. Your hair's black, isn't it? And your eyes are almost blue. That's kinda funny, don't you think?"

"Uh-huh—it's awfully funny," Joshua agreed. "Where'd you learn so many funny words?"

"In camp."

"But you didn't say whether your father'd take me and Les out West with 'im."

"What could you do?"

"We could do anything," he told her with assurance. "We'd oughta be able to drive a team if you can."

"But I just do it for fun. And you'd have to do it all day long. I guess you're both

too young”—she looked at him speculatively—“to work all day on a job like that. But one of you might be water boy. That’s about all there is for a kid to do in a construction camp that’s workin’ in dirt. If we were rockmen, you might get a job as powder monkey, and carry powder to the dynos and drills to the blacksmith shop to be sharpened. You didn’t say how old you are.”

“I’m pretty near fifteen,” said Joshua. (He lacked nine months of being fifteen.) “How old are you?”

“Eleven, but I’m large for my age. How old’s your brother?”

“Who, Les? Why, le’s see. I guess he’s about thirteen. I ferget. Say, I’ll go get him. And don’t you think there’d be a chance for us?”

“I could speak to Pa about it. It’s lots o’ fun—traveling with a construction outfit. You take all the stock with you, you know—the horses and mules. I mean you ride on the same train with them. We always go in a converted boxcar, and—”

“What’s that? Where’d the boxcar get converted—at a revival meetin’?”

“Aw, you’re just trying to be funny! A converted boxcar is one made over so that people can live in it. There’s a place for a stove, and bunks with curtains along each side. And next to it a flatcar is hooked on, and that’s your wood-yard—or if you burn coal, it’s your coal-yard. Just like a back yard at home, you know. And while the freight train is traveling you go over the tops of the cars and feed and water the mules and horses every day. It’s just like a farm on wheels. I’ve walked over the top of a freight train lots of times—when it was going pretty fast, too. And once when we moved from Ohio to a new job in Louisiana we had chickens on the flatcar, and a cow that gave milk in one of the boxcars. Pa milked her every day—morning and night. Don’t you think you’d like to travel that way?”

“I *guess* I *would*! Will yeh ask yer father about what I told you—Les an’ me goin’ along? We’ll work like the dickens—honest!”

“Uh-huh—sure I will. I don’t mind.”

“Then I’ll go get Les and tell ’im”—and Joshua stooped to remove his skates.

But a search of the spectators’ seats revealed no Lester humped up with his misery.

Joshua grew apprehensive. Had his brother taken this opportunity to sneak home and face punishment? In his heart he felt that this was what had happened. He hurried back to Madge.

“He—he’s gone,” he announced, in sepulchral tones. “And I—I guess I’ll have to be goin’, too. I gotta see what he’s done. I’m afraid he’s got scared out and gone home and spoiled it all. When’ll I see ye again, Ma-Madge?”

“Why, I’ll be here to-morrow, I guess.”

“About this time?”

“I guess so—uh-huh.”

“Well, then I’ll see you again. And ask yer father what I told you to—you know—about goin’ West.”

“All right; I’ll ask him.”

“Well, then, gu-good-by.”

“Good-by,” she said demurely.

Joshua slowed his steps when he entered that part of Hathaway’s residential district in which the Cole home was situated. It was not yet four o’clock in the afternoon, and the spring sun was shining brightly overhead. Everything was quiet, and the stillness awed him a little, for now, more than ever, he realized the grave step that he had taken. But his spirits refused moroseness; it was such a day in spring as calls insistently to adventurers—a day for boys to dream of pirates and desert islands, and caravans forging slowly toward vague frontiers. So Joshua put behind him all thoughts of his predicament and let his mind dwell on Madge Mundy and a freight train traveling West, with a certain car that had for an auxiliary a flatcar with all the familiar appurtenances of one’s own back yard.

At the corner of his block he came to a halt. He did not wish to be seen by any of the neighbors. He stood there, irresolute, watching the front of his home, which was about all that he could see. If only he dared sneak around to the kitchen door and confide in Zida. But this comprised too great a risk.

For perhaps half an hour he loitered about the corner, hoping for sight of his deserting brother. He wanted to make sure that Lester had been unfaithful before wiping him forever out of his glowing plans for the future. But he saw nothing of Lester, and was without a scheme for finding out what he wished to know, when the pupils homeward bound from school came trooping toward him.

Across the street a cellar door stood open invitingly. Joshua hurried over, and, as no one was about, quickly hid himself in the dark passageway. He kept his head below the level of the street until he heard the familiar voices of his gang—the squeaky tones of “Did” Eustace, the boastful voice of “Spud” Mulligan, and others well known to him.

Then he raised his head and looked across the street, to see five of his particular friends loitering along, shoving one another off the sidewalk, pushing one against another, or jerking neckties until the knots became so tight that fingers could scarce undo them.

“Spud! Oh, Spud!” he called cannily; and as the group turned, he left the cellarway and ran across the street.

“Oh, lookut who got fired!” began the volley of greetings. “Gysh, kid! Whatcha been doin’? Whatja dad haveta say? I’ll betcha ye got yours, all right, all right! Say, boy, you sure stood up to Ole Hothatchet! Gysh!”

“Listen, Spud!” said Joshua, grasping his friend’s shirt and interrupting the general clatter of admiration. “Do somethin’ f’r me?”

“Sure,” said Spud readily. “Whatcha want, Cole?”

“Les, he backed out, I think—he quit me down at the rink. We was goin’ West—had everythin’ fixed. And then he turned me down. That’s what I think, anyway. But I wanta know f’r sure. You go to the house an’ ring the bell and ast if he’s there. Just pretend like you don’t know nothin’—see? Don’t let on or anythin’. Just say: ‘Mrs. Cole, I’d like to see Les a minute, if he’s home.’ And if he’s there she’ll tell ye. Go on—do that f’r me, Spud! Won’tcha? Aw, gwan an’ do it. I’ll do somethin’ f’r you sometime.”

Spud hesitated a little, assailed by a boy’s natural dislike for approaching the parent of one of his friends on a delicate matter. But in the end he gave in; and the rest went around the corner and peeked out while he importantly retraced his steps down the street and crossed to the Cole house.

The watchers saw him reach out his hand to press the bell button beside the front door. They saw him standing there in a waiting attitude, and knew by his uneasiness as displayed by leg movements the moment that the door was opened. They were unable to see Mrs. Cole, and did not know whether she or Zida had answered the bell until Spud scraped off his disreputable cap and came clattering down the stairs. He ran up the street and rounded the corner, where the eager gang awaited him.

“He’s home, all right, all right,” he announced. “All’t yer mother’d say was: ‘Yes, he’s home, but he can’t come out.’ You fellas know what that means. He’s locked up. Say, he’ll get his!”

CHAPTER V

THE GYPO CAMP

Half an hour after learning that Lester preferred a ducking to life in the boundless West, Joshua, a David bereft of his Jonathan, entered the Crescent Rink and put on his skates again. He had earned twenty-five cents that afternoon, and there was the possibility of earning more when the evening crowd came in. He looked all about for Madge Mundy, but caught no sight of her. His heart was bitter against Lester, but finally he decided that, after all, his brother had acted wisely. It was barely possible that, when news reached home of his own expulsion, the upheaval would be so great that Lester's minor infraction would be forgotten. Anyway, Lester was not old enough to go West with him—he lacked nerve. But Joshua missed his companionship, and, now all alone on his great adventure, felt lonely and downcast beyond all words.

He was unfortunate that evening, for no one asked for his services as skating instructor. And about eight o'clock, as he was beginning to be ravenously hungry by reason of having missed his lunch, he left the rink and sought a restaurant.

Sandwiches at five cents each and a hungry boy of fourteen with a lone twenty-five-cent piece in his sweaty palm do not make a very satisfactory combination. One sandwich after another he felt obliged to eat, until four had been consumed. Then, still hungry but painfully aware that only five cents remained of his precious quarter, he paid up and went out into the lighted street.

Back at the rink he skated for an hour with no more luck than earlier in the evening. Only then did the problem of quarters for the night present itself to him as a grim reality. So he skated on until closing time, and then went out no richer than he had entered.

Well, he had become an outlaw, and outlaws must make the best of things. He sauntered along the street, marveling that a March night could be so cold at twelve o'clock. The crowds had long since thinned, and only here and there he encountered a lone pedestrian hurrying—somewhere. He avoided three policemen, and took to a side street, wandering toward the railroad yards.

He wondered if he could find Madge's camp. Surely, in a camp, there would be some place for him to sleep. This was a trifle different than he had planned—different from his imaginings over there in the sunny, swampy lot where he and his brother had awaited the coming of Slinky Dawson.

He found the freight yards eventually, avoided the depot and other railroad buildings, and made his way to the farther end of the property. He crossed a system of tracks, and then the open door of an empty boxcar invited him to enter and make himself at home. He crawled inside, closed the creaky door, and lay down in a corner on the floor. It was warmer here, and he made a pillow of his arm. He began to revise his plans, but in the midst of this he fell asleep.

Several times that night he awoke with the cold, but was so worn out and sleepy that he at once dozed off again. A severe shock brought him fully awake at last, and he felt the car moving gently. He ran to the door and slid it open. Sitting down with his feet dangling, he jumped unexpertly to the ground, and was at once confronted by a grimy switchman.

“Well, kid, where’d you come from?” he asked in a not unkindly tone.

“From in there,” was Joshua’s unnecessary answer to an equally unnecessary question.

“On the bum?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh! You don’t look it. Ain’t been on it long, have you?”

Joshua grinned, not daring to make reply.

“Well, you better keep your eye peeled for the railroad cop,” said the switchman, as he marched on about his own affairs beside the slowly moving train, to which Joshua’s car had been coupled on.

“Say, Mister!” Joshua called after him.

“Well, get it outa ye!”

“I want to know if there’s a railroad camp about here somewhere—where they’re double-trackin’ the road?”

“Lookin’ for a job?”

“Yeah—sure.”

“Husky stiff you’ll make! Right down the tracks, son. You can’t miss it.”

It was very early in the morning; the sun had not yet risen. The air was cool and the strips of steel that would sprawl eventually to all corners of the continent were wet with dew. Birds were singing in the treetops. The blood of the earth throbbed with the tonic of spring.

Joshua trudged along, whistling. His doubts had vanished with the birth of a new day, and he thrilled at thought of his grand adventure. He came to a pool of rain water in which he washed his hands and face, allowing the soft morning breeze to dry them. Then he walked on and on, and at times he felt like running from the sheer joy of living, but was reminded that he was now a man and must carry himself

sedately.

He came to where the buildings were few and far between, and smaller and more disreputable and smoke-stained they became as he forged on. And now far ahead, in a flat open space, he saw the near-white tents of a camp.

This quickened his steps despite his new religion of decorum, and before long he was approaching his destination, and saw men washing in tin basins that were set on a bench beside one of the larger tents. From a listing chimney that topped this tent blue smoke arose and was whipped away on the breeze. And as the adventurer drew closer the odors of cooking that floated to his nostrils reminded him that he was hungry.

There were several tents. One of them—a large one—had no walls, and under the canopy top Joshua saw horses and mules eating hay and grain and switching their tails in anticipation of the onslaught of flies which would begin when the morning was a little older. The clanking of the metal parts of their harness Joshua somehow liked to hear. It suggested all that he hoped might lie before him in the West.

The men were now going into the dining tent, one by one, or in pairs. All were within before the boy entered the camp. He saw nobody now, but from the tent came rough voices and an occasional burst of coarse laughter, mingling with the metallic sounds of knives and forks.

Though the exterior of the camp was deserted, Joshua was seized by a sudden backwardness. For worlds he would not have gone to the door of that dining tent, and he feared to move about lest some one challenge him. So he walked away to a respectful distance and sat down on the ground, watching the horses and mules in the stable tent and speculating over the uses of the various implements that he saw about.

For some little time he sat there, then the men began to come from the tent singly and in small groups. Two or three of them glanced his way, and this made him rise and move farther off. He decided that he was foolish to have come. He dreaded ridicule, and these tramplike workmen looked capable of any form of rude word-torture. He would go back to the city and wait until Madge came to the skating rink that afternoon.

And then as he cast a last look toward the camp he saw her coming from a small tent in the rear of the dining tent. Next instant he heard her calling.

She came to meet him as he turned and made slow steps in her direction. The men had for the most part gone to the stable tent, and before the girl reached Joshua somebody began pounding a ringing tattoo on a large triangle. Then all of the men trooped to the tent, and were leading forth the teams as Madge began surprised

remarks over his coming.

“Why, what on earth brought you here this time o’ day? How’d you find us? Did you stay away from home all night?”

Joshua grinned in confusion, but he felt better immediately. This girl was like no other girl that he had met. While she seemed modest enough and not lacking in that intangible feminine instinct to make no open approaches toward the male of the species, she was free and easy-spoken and friendly to a high degree.

“I just thought I’d—now—sneak down this way,” he told her. “A switchman told me the way. Ole Les quit me, all right. He’s gone home. I had to sleep in a boxcar last night.”

“Did you really?” she laughed. “That’s nothing for a stiff. They’re all tramps—all these railroaders. You’d get used to things like that if you went on the railroad grade. But ain’t you really ever going home again?”

He shook his head. “No more o’ that duckin’ in mine,” he said.

“I think that’s a perfectly awful way for a father to treat his boy,” she sympathized. “I told Pa and Ma about you last night.”

“Didja?”—eagerly. “What’d they say?”

“Well, Pa didn’t just know. He said he didn’t like to interfere in anything like that—you know, come between a boy and his father. But he said putting your head under water that way was mighty mean, and he’d bet a dollar he could whip the man that he saw doing it. You see, Pa isn’t like most folks. He’s lived out in camps so much that he—well, I don’t just know how to say it—but he’s—well, I guess you’d call it liberal. But he said you oughta go home, and maybe they’d forgive you.”

“He don’t know my father,” said Joshua, shaking his head. “No, I won’t go home, Madge, no matter what happens.”

“I don’t blame you, I guess. But say—I’ll bet you haven’t had a bite of breakfast! Of course you haven’t! Well, neither have I. Don’t you want to come and eat with us? Ma’ll be glad to have you.”

“It wouldn’t be any bother, would it?”

“Of course not, silly! Come on. Ma and I always eat after the stiff’s’ve gone out to work. Pa eats with them. We’ve got a dandy cook. Come on—Joshua.”

The morning sun accentuated the Pocahontas coloring in her cheeks. She wore a red-checked gingham dress. Her bronze hair hung loose down her back, and was gathered with a ribbon at the nape of her neck. Joshua noticed now that it was “frizzly” instead of straight or wavy or curly, and he thought that if he were to squeeze it in his hand it would immediately spring free again, like the stuffing of a curled-hair mattress.

At the door of the dining tent Madge introduced him to her mother:

“Ma, this is the boy I was telling you about. He slept in a boxcar all night. And—and he hasn’t had any breakfast. So I invited him.”

Madge’s mother proved to be a comely woman of over forty, and Joshua was not a little surprised at her apparent refinement. While a boy of fourteen makes few pretenses of being himself refined, he is quick to note it or the lack of it in his elders. She was dressed simply and neatly in an inexpensive house gown. Joshua wondered, too, how she could look so fresh and unsoiled in a camp by the railroad tracks, where men worked all day long at moving dirt.

She held out her hand and smiled. “We’d like to have you stay to breakfast with us,” she said. “Madge has told me quite a bit about you. I’d like to hear more. And it may be that I can help you.”

“No’m,” said Joshua. “I guess nobody can help me. I guess I only wanta go West. I can’t go home again—I guess that’s the way you want to help me.”

Mrs. Mundy only smiled and led the way into the dining tent.

The three sat at one end of a long oilcloth-covered table, and the camp cook, a dark man with a heavy mustache, in a dingy white apron and white cook’s coat and cap, waited on them, setting a wide assortment of food before them in deep granite pans.

“Tell me about yourself,” suggested Madge’s mother when the cook had left them to themselves.

Joshua told his story again, and Mrs. Mundy listened attentively to every word.

“It’s rather a strange case,” was her only comment as he finished.

Presently a man with heavy, fiery-red hair entered the tent. Immediately Joshua knew him for “Bloodmop” Mundy, the father of Madge, and he knew that he would like this man with the twinkling sky-blue eyes, at the corners of which queer little crow’s-feet came and went, giving his face that quizzical, whimsical look which boys interpret as belonging to a man who is friendly and sympathetic to them and interested in their boyish activities. Bloodmop Mundy wore dirty yellow overalls and a disreputable slouch hat, and needed a shave. The sleeves of his blue chambray shirt were rolled up to his elbows, displaying great, muscle-corded arms on which the red hairs looked redder still by reason of the deep tan which was their background.

“Well, who in the dickens is this?” was his method of recognizing Joshua’s unfamiliar presence, and his voice came in a deep, musical boom.

Joshua stood up from the table while Mrs. Mundy broke the news.

“Well, I’m a son-of-a-gun!”—and the crow’s-feet shuttled at the corners of his

twinkling blue eyes. "And was you really gonta soak th' ole devil with th' poker, kid?"

"George," cautioned his wife, "watch your tongue."

"Yes'm—excuse me, 'Lizabeth. Set down, kid—set down an' finish yer chow. What ye gonta do about it when all's said an' done?"

This, Joshua felt, was his great opportunity. "I—I was thinkin' maybe you could gi'me a job, Mr. Mundy. Madge, she said maybe you'd see about it. Anyway, she said she'd ask. Will you? I'm pretty stout. And I'd work. I wanta go West."

"Wanta go West, huh! Grow up with th' country—'sthat it?"

"Yes, sir."

The sky-blue eyes twinkled, and one of them bestowed a prodigious wink on Mrs. Mundy. "Well, now, what could ye do? Think ye could skin Jack an' Ned on roller skates?"—and Bloodmop laughed loudly at his own joke.

"He means drive a team of mules," Madge explained. "On the railroad grade a span of mules are always called Jack and Ned." Then to her father: "Don't try to tease him, Pa. He's had enough trouble, I'd think."

"Well, he's lookin' f'r more," laughed Bloodmop Mundy. "It's a sure thing there's plenty o' trouble on the railroad grade. Well, kid, you stick around to-day and I'll think it over. Yes, sir, I'll just do that. Ma, I bet ye don't know what I drifted in here for."

"I haven't the remotest idea," asserted Mrs. Mundy, in a tone and with a smile that proved her speech a mild prevarication.

Bloodmop Mundy stepped to her side. "I was goin' to drive the buckboard up town to see about some more hay," he said. "And I thought I might be killed er somethin' 'fore I got back."

"In that case—" And here she lifted her face.

He bent over her, and never had Joshua seen a man's face so tender as he kissed her softly on the lips. Joshua had seen his father peck at his mother's lips when he would be leaving for a trip, and the coldness of it had made him consider the kiss of man and wife a sort of ceremony that must be endured. He realized that men loved women and women men, but it had never occurred to him that fathers and mothers loved each other.

"Thank ye, ma'am," said Bloodmop Mundy. "And now I'll throw the leather on the ponies an' be gettin' on. Anythin' you want? Cook need anythin'?"

"Nothing, I think," said his wife.

"Well, keep an eye on these here Westerners. I guess they'll need watchin', when all's said an' done."

And with great, mannish strides he left the tent.

Mrs. Mundy asked many questions about Joshua's father and mother and his home life, and continued to ask long after they had finished eating. Joshua told her of a day when there had been ten negro servants in the house. The family had lived on Park Avenue then, which was in the heart of the most exclusive residential section of Hathaway. He told what little he knew of his mother's aristocratic family, and of how he had heard servants' gossip about their having ostracized her after her marriage to one of the insignificant Coles. But mostly he dwelt upon his father's seeming delight in holding him with his head submerged in water in the bathtub until he fell on the floor, sometimes unconscious.

What effect his disclosures had on Madge's mother he had no means of knowing, for she appeared to be a woman of few words, and now she made no comments. But her dark eyes were thoughtful as she rose from the table, and the boy knew that he had made a deep impression, although he was unable to interpret her mood.

She had risen at the sound of wheels before the door of the dining tent. Bloodmop had been delayed, it seemed, and was only then starting on his trip to Hathaway. His wife hurried out to him, leaving Madge and Joshua at the table, and the two heard them engaged in low-voiced conversation.

"They're talking about you, I think," Madge whispered. "Listen!"

But they were unable to distinguish words.

Then the conversation ceased, and they heard the buckboard drive away.

Mrs. Mundy reentered the tent.

"Well, Joshua," she said, "can you find something to do for a couple of hours?"

"Yes'm—I guess so."

"Madge must get at her lessons right away, and—"

"Oh, Ma! Couldn't I put 'em off just for to-day?" interposed her daughter.

"I think not," said her mother. "Joshua can find something to interest him about camp, I suspect. In two hours you'll be through."

This seemed final, for Madge raised no further protest. Nor did she pout or look downcast. It seemed to Joshua that Elizabeth Mundy possessed some gentle, secret control over the rough-necked Bloodmop and their pretty daughter which would always get her what she wished.

CHAPTER VI

THE WRECK OF THE GOOD SHIP "ARGO"

Shortly before Madge's two hours of study were over Bloodmop Mundy returned to camp in the buckboard. Joshua was out on the grade watching the tramp laborers as they handled the teams. Mrs. Mundy left her tent and followed the vehicle to the stable tent, where she entered into conversation with her husband as he unhitched the small bay ponies.

"Well, George, what did you find out about him?" she asked.

"They didn't know much about 'im at the skatin' rink," he replied. "But they told me where I might get onto somethin', and I follied it up. I saw the fella they sent me to, who don't figger at all. But he sent me to a nigger that used to work for the Coles, and he told me a lot.

"I guess the boy's tellin' the truth. This nigger—Ole Ambrose they call 'im—used to be stable man f'r the Coles. Say, there was a time when they had a pile o' money, 'Lizabeth. They lived on Park Avenue an'—"

"Yes, the boy has told me all that," she interrupted. "What about the father?"

"No good—absolutely no good, 'Lizabeth. Always chasin' 'round with fast women and playin' the ponies. He went through his wife's fortune in a few years, and now they got only his salary. It's a good one, I guess, f'r he's still playin' the races an' goin' th' pace generally. And what the kid said about his father's half-drownin' 'im in the bathtub every time he does somethin' a little funny, like every kid's doin' pretty near every day, is truth. Ole Ambrose says he's seen 'im beat the kid half to death, and then duck 'im on top o' that. Don't look like a bad kid to me, either. Does he to you?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, he seems to me an exceptionally kind and thoughtful boy. But he's queer, George—there's no denying that. He has an old head on his shoulders. I asked him: 'But you really were deliberately late for school, weren't you?' And he replied: 'Yes, ma'am.' 'Well,' said I, 'don't you consider your school work more important than watching slugs let themselves down from chips, no matter how interesting that may be?' And what do you think was his answer? He said: 'No'm, I don't. It's my business in this world to find out about things like that. I study a lot, but not school books. I'm not lazy in my head, if they do think so.' Imagine, George, a boy of fourteen talking like that—stating his 'business in this world!' I tell you he's a remarkable child, with those grave, kind eyes of his that look

you so directly in the face.”

“Yes’m,” agreed George, not deeply moved by his wife’s enthusiasm. “And say—I think th’ cops are lookin’ for ’im, ’Lizabeth. The fella at the skatin’ rink said two big huskies were nosin’ ’round this mornin’, and they looked to him like plainclothes men. He was wonderin’ what they was up to, an’ when I told him a little about this kid he said he’d bet they was huntin’ him. But I told ’im the kid was all right and for him to keep his face closed, and he said it wasn’t any business o’ his, and he would. But what in th’ devil—I mean, what’re we gonta do about it? We can’t afford to get mixed up in anythin’ like this, ’Lizabeth!”

His wife did not answer at once. She stood with her dark head slightly bowed, a forefinger to her lips.

“Sometimes,” she said presently, as her husband came from the stable tent after leading in the ponies, “I think it is best for a boy to get out and learn something of the world. I didn’t use to think so before I married you, but the camp life that I have led, here to-day, there to-morrow, and encountering all sorts of men both young and old, has changed me—made me more liberal. The educational system of the schools is mostly wrong, I am convinced. Also I believe that most parents are wrong in their attitude toward their children. They don’t understand them and don’t try to. They don’t realize their sensitiveness. They don’t make any attempt to find out the trend of their minds, and they force them to this and to that, and—”

“Yes’m—I guess that’s about right, ’Lizabeth. But it ain’t tellin’ you an’ me what we’re gonta do about this kid.”

“I know it isn’t,” she conceded. “And I must confess that I have nothing in mind right now. I hate to see him taken back to that brute of a father, and I hate to see him run away and become a tramp. Which is just what will happen if we set him adrift. Could we use him, George?”

“I reckon we could,” said Bloodmop. “Never saw a time yet about a camp that a fella couldn’t put a strong, husky boy like that to work. The cook needs a helper, and we can’t afford to hire him one. Camp cooks ’a’ got a way o’ quittin’ unexpected, you know, when they begin to think the work’s too heavy and it’s gettin’ to be a long time between drinks. Yes, we could keep the kid busy pretty near all day—but I couldn’t give ’im anythin’ but his found.”

“Well, I’ll think it over to-day,” said his wife.

“Yes’m—an’ what you say goes”—and, whistling, the light-hearted, hard-working gypo man started toward his gang.

But he turned back immediately. “Oh, ’Lizabeth!” he called, and came swinging to her side again.

“This here boy,” he said, “has taken quite a fancy to Madge, don’t you think? He’s gettin’ about the age when they begin to think they’re good f’r somethin’ more’n to have their hair yanked. An’ say—course I know they’re only kids an’ all that—but ’twouldn’t be th’ worst thing in th’ world that ever happened. The boy’s mother was a Florence, they say, and th’ Florences are big folks in Maryland. They got a pile o’ money, and, even if they did turn a cold shoulder on this boy’s mother, that ain’t sayin’ they’ve forgot about her kids.”

“George! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself!”

Bloodmop Mundy’s face grew fiery red. “Lizabeth, it ain’t the money that I’m thinkin’ about so much. He might never get a cent, and the chances are he won’t. But you come of a good family, and I ain’t ever forgot it. You run away with me, a no-count tramp of a dirt-mover, just because I said I’d be good to you an’ treat you right. Well, I done that. That part’s all right. But I don’t know nothin’ and never did—and never will. I’m just nobody—or worse’n that, because I work but don’t get anywhere. And it always hurt me to think that I drug you down to a gypsy life like ours, an’—”

But here she laid a work-worn hand across his lips.

“Hush!” she said softly. “You do all the complainin’, George, and you’re only manufacturing reasons for complaint.”

“Well, anyway,” he laughed, “Sundays, when I shave and dress up like, I ain’t so bad lookin’, am I? And I’m a fightin’ fool! We’ll win out some day, ’Lizabeth. Wait’ll we hit th’ West, where a man c’n swing his arms and hit a lick that counts!”

But what her husband had said caused Elizabeth Mundy to think that morning. She knew her daughter pretty well. Born in a gypo camp, raised with rough men from infancy, Madge was not like other girls in her treatment of the few boys that she met. She had never had a girl associate. Men had babied her from her cradle. So it was only natural that she could not feel the backwardness and restraint that most young girls experience in their early dealings with the opposite sex. She wanted no puppy-love affair between these two, with Madge eleven and Joshua fourteen. But for some unaccountable reason she had taken a fancy to the boy and would have risked the difficulties that might arise from their enforced close association in the gypo camp, were she able to make herself believe it just to take the runaway under her wing. And this last was the problem that faced her during the day.

As for Madge and Joshua, they were together on the grade all morning, after the girl had finished with her studies. For two hours in the afternoon she would recite to her mother in their remote little living tent. Then she had promised to go “down the line” with him to see the work of other camps on the double-tracking job.

The genial Bloodmop, born patron of boyish ambitions, permitted Joshua to drive a team and to “stick pigs.” He talked to the boy as if he were a man, and called him Josh and slapped him familiarly on the back. And if there is anything that warms the heart of a growing boy it is this unconscious acceptance of him as a reasoning being by a grown-up member of his sex. The three went in together at noon, Bloodmop between the boy and girl, laughing boisterously. During the afternoon, while Madge was busy with her schooling, Bloodmop allowed Joshua to drive a wheeler team, and took the time to explain many things pertinent to the construction of railroads. When Madge came she and Joshua wandered down the line. And after supper they had that delicious experience, the undisputed due of young lovers since before the Egyptians builded the Pyramids, of sitting side by side under the twinkling stars.

“Aren’t the stars bright to-night?” said Madge. “But they say that out West they are brighter still. On the desert, I believe. Oh, I’m just crazy to go West! And so is Pa. He talks about it all the time. Look at that cluster up there, almost over our heads. I call that the kite. And there’s the big dipper”—she pointed—“I can always find it.”

“What you call the kite,” said Joshua, “is the Constellation of Orion. In March it’s just a little bit southwest of right over a fella’s head. See those three stars in a line? That’s called the Belt of Orion, and the three hanging down like make the Sword of Orion. The Celestial Equator passes through the belt. Now look at the four big stars that are around the whole business. That red one is Betelgeuse, and thatun closest to it is Bellatrix. Now look at the dim little one in the middle of the Sword. Around that is the Nebula of Orion, and the bright, white star is Rigel.”

“Mercy alive!” cried Madge. “Wherever did you learn all that? Not at school, did you?”

“Naw, jest monkeyin’ ’round,” he said disparagingly.

“And do you know everything about the stars? Why, I don’t know one from another.”

“I know a little,” he told her. “Some day I’m gonta know more. Now look over there to the left. See that big bright one? That’s Sirius, the Dog Star. Now look at the Constellation of Orion again. Remember Rigel? Well, that ain’t one star, but it’s two. It’s so far away’s what makes it look to us like only one. And Number One in the Belt of Orion and Number Three, too, are double stars.”

“Well, whoever heard of the like! I’ve always wanted to know something about the stars, but I never had anybody to tell me before. Nights and nights I sit outdoors and look up at ’em and wonder. Some nights you can see millions and millions of

them, and then again—”

“No, you can’t,” he corrected her. “Folks used to think that a fella couldn’t begin to guess how many stars he could see. But we know better now. You can’t never see over four thousand’. An’ about the most a fella’ll ever be able to see is somewhere between two thousand’ an’ three thousand’.”

“I don’t believe that!”

“Don’t haff to if ye don’t want to,” he said dogmatically. “But I’m tellin’ you what’s what. I know what I’m talkin’ about.”

“Well, let’s not quarrel about it. I guess you ought to know, but it looks funny to me. Tell me about the Big Dipper. That’s my favorite.”

“Well,” he replied, “it ain’t particularly interestin’ to astronomers, I guess. But d’ye see that star that’s right where you’d put your mouth if you was drinkin’ outa the dipper, and holdin’ the handle straight in front of you?”

After a pause: “Yes, I guess I know the one you mean.”

“That’s what’s called the Pointer. No matter which way the dipper turns, that star’s always pointing straight at the Pole Star. There’s the Pole Star—see it over there, with the Pointer pointin’ at it?”

“Ye-yes—I guess so.”

“Five hundred centuries ago,” Joshua went on in a dreamy tone, “the Big Dipper looked like a cross. And five hundred centuries from now it’ll be in the shape of a steamer chair.”

“How do they know that, Josh? Nobody that’s living now was here five hundred centuries ago. And how ever can they tell what it’ll look like five hundred centuries from now? That sounds silly.”

“There’s nothin’ silly about science,” Joshua told her reprovingly. “Well, we know the direction that the stars are goin’. And we know how fast they’re goin’. So it’s easy to figger out where they were five hundred centuries ago, and where they’ll be five hundred centuries from now. And they’ll be just like I’m telling you. The Big Dipper’ll look like a steamer chair. Why, lissen here, Madge: If the fellas that built the hangin’ gardens of Babylon could come back here now they wouldn’t notice hardly any difference in the stars. The stars are travelin’ through space from eight to ten miles a second, but if those ole fellas could come back it would look like they’d moved only about half the size of the moon. You know what I mean—half the size that the moon looks like to us. Maybe half a foot, you’d say. Millions o’ miles up there look like half a foot to us.”

“Gracious alive! That doesn’t seem possible. How far is it up there, Josh? But o’ course nobody knows that.”

"I read where one fella said we were twenty-five million million miles from the nearest star."

"Twenty-five million million!" she gasped.

"Yes, sir—twenty-five million million miles. How's that sound to you? An' lissen here: The sun and the planets—what they call the solar system—are travelin' through space more'n a million miles a day. Right now you an' me's goin' a million miles a day, Madge! Don't it make you feel dizzy? Well, we're travelin' more'n a million miles a day, remember. Well, then, it would take us seventy thousand years to get to the nearest star."

"Aw, you're just makin' that up, Josh! Pretty soon I'm goin' to ask you again, and I'll bet you'll forget how many miles you said."

"All right—try me," invited Joshua.

"I will, all right. But tell me where we're going so fast, if you can."

"I can't do that. Nobody can, I guess. But I know the direction that we're travelin' in. We're travelin' towards a point between the Constellation of Lyra and the Constellation of Hercules. There—see where I'm pointin'? That's about where we're headed for. But you needn't be pickin' up your baggage or puttin' on your hat, Madge. Remember that it ud take us seventy thousand years to get to the nearest star. But we ain't travelin' that way, it happens. Why, just think! In ten minutes from now we'll be seven thousand miles from where we are in space this second!"

"It sounds perfectly awful, Josh," she murmured. "It's kinda creepy, isn't it?"

"And by to-morrow evenin'," he went on remorselessly, "we'll be more'n a million miles from the region of space that we're in right now. I remember readin': 'Prisoners are we on a rudderless ship lost in an ocean of space, voyaging we know not whither—truly symbolic of the spiritual status of man.'"

"Oh, don't say anything more like that, Josh! I don't believe I understand it."

"I do, kinda," he told her. "I heard a lecturer say that, and afterwards I read his book where he said it again. And I committed it to memory; it sounded kinda nice, I thought. And this here, too: 'There where the glorious Milky Way dips below the horizon lies the good ship "Argo," in which Jason and his fifty adventurers sailed from Greece to recover the Golden Fleece. And we too sail on this mystic ship, the earth, bound north-eastward to an unknown port, perhaps to discover the Golden Fleece of greater wisdom and "the peace that passeth understanding."' I thought that was kinda pretty."

"Uh-huh! You're funny, Joshua. I don't see why they expelled you from school."

"I wasn't any good in grammar and 'rithmetic," Joshua explained in all simplicity. "And then—"

But here a hand fell upon his shoulder, and in the light streaming from the dining tent he looked up into a pair of piggish little eyes set in a heavy, florid face.

“I guess that’s about it, kid,” said a voice that somehow matched the face. “And, besides that, you’re a bad actor generally. Guess it’s about time you were goin’ home. Uh-huh—black hair, heavy. Gray eyes, almost blue. Heavy black eyebrows. Face like a girl’s, but well-built and strong. Guess I’ve got you, all right.”

Madge and Joshua had sprung to their feet in amazement. The man stood eyeing them, maintaining a tight clutch on Joshua’s shoulder. Before either of the youthful star-gazers could speak, a big, fat hand darted to the inside pocket of Joshua’s coat and brought forth his father’s razor in its case.

“Uh-huh! I was told I might find this on you. Well, kid, yer dad wants you. Come on with me! And next time you run away, don’t ask any switchman where to go. Come on—it’s gettin’ late.”

“Is—is he arrested?” asked Madge in an awed little voice.

“Uh-huh—sort of. C’m’on, kid.”

CHAPTER VII

JOSHUA WALKS WITH HIS FATHER

Joshua Cole's home was alight when he and the big detective entered the block. The plainclothes man had talked with the boy all the way from the gypo camp, and Joshua had found him a not unkindly person. He himself had a boy and a girl, he said, but they gave him little trouble. He had listened carefully while Joshua told him that he had not appropriated the razor with intent to use it as a weapon of offense or defense during his travels Westward, but the detective could not believe the story of the slug.

"Where d'ye get such confounded weird ideas, kid?" he wanted to know, and repetition of the whys and wherefores only brought forth laughter.

"Well, I don't blame you for runnin' off that way," said the big fellow finally. "You're a smart kid, if you are a little queer, and your dad's a no-good son-of-a-gun, from what I've heard. But that's between you an' me—don't tell 'im I said it. It'd maybe get me into trouble. But no matter how I feel about it, I gotta hang onto you—that's what I'm paid for. Say, where'd you learn all that star racket? Gee! I don't know when I've had as much fun as listenin' to you spoutin' about the good ship What-d'ye-call-it and all that!"

In silence the two climbed the steps of the Cole home, and the detective pressed the bell button. Presently Zida answered his ring, threw aloft her black hands, and rolled her eyes.

"Lawd bless us, heah he is! Wheah yo'-all been all dis time, honey? Yo' mothah done go purt' neah wil'! Come in heah dis minnit! Yo' pappy drownd yo', Ah reckon."

"I wanta see Mr. Cole," said the detective.

But before Zida could call him, John Cole, his dark face as gloomy as a goblin's, came into the hall.

"Here he is, Mr. Cole," said the officer.

"Yes, so I see," returned Cole with seeming cold indifference. "Joshua, sit down there at the foot of the stairs while I talk to this man. Zida, go back to the kitchen."

Both Zida and Joshua obeyed the ruthless voice, and John Cole entered into low-voiced conversation with the detective. This continued for perhaps a minute, while Joshua, pale and suddenly deathly sick at his stomach, crouched on the first step of the flight of stairs. Then the detective's voice began rising gradually, and the

boy heard:

“I’ll tell you just this much, Mr. Cole: I don’t wanta hear o’ your duckin’ that boy! I know all about it. Huntin’ ’im up led me to several niggers that used to work for you when you lived on Park Avenue, and all of ’em told the same story. You ain’t got any right to treat a kid like that, and if I find out you done it I’ll see what I c’n do down at headquarters. That’s all I gotta say, but I mean it. I got kids o’ my own, and I guess they ain’t any better’n other ord’nary kids. But I never found it necessary to hold their heads in a bathtub full o’ water until they fainted.”

“I guess that will be about enough from you, officer,” was John Cole’s dismissal of the man.

“Well, that’s all right. I ain’t lookin’ for trouble. But I’m gonta tell the cop on this beat to keep his ears open to-night, that’s all. I’ll make it hot for you if you try that duckin’ racket to-night. That’s all—good night.”

And the door closed after him.

Slowly John Cole turned to his son. For over half a minute he stood eyeing him with cold savagery, then he said crisply:

“Go up to your room, Joshua.”

“I—can’t I see Mother first?” pleaded the boy.

“Your mother has gone to bed, ill from worrying over you. Go to your room, as I told you.”

Joshua got up and slowly climbed the stairs.

Lester and he had separate rooms, for the house was large. Joshua wanted to talk with his brother, with some one—any one—but he dared not disobey his father. In his room he undressed slowly and, extinguishing the light, climbed into bed. Soon he heard metallic sounds as his door was locked, then dull footsteps as his father went away. There he lay looking up into the blackness, fearful that any moment he would hear the water running in the bathroom and his father’s step at the door.

But the house remained silent, and the silence became cruelly oppressive. When he could stand the suspense no longer, he cautiously climbed out of bed, taking care that no creak came from the springs, and went to a window. Holding the shade aside, he found himself looking at blackness, striped at intervals with the soft radiance of a starry, moonlit night. The soft streaks of light, he found, came in through cracks between heavy boards that had been nailed across the window.

For hours after this he tossed about, and then fell suddenly asleep. He was awakened by a knocking at his door, and when he answered Zida came in with his breakfast on a tray.

He questioned the old negress, for she was his friend, but she had nothing to

report. She had no knowledge of what his father intended to do. He ate but little, and in the midst of his meal his mother entered the room.

She took him in her arms, knelt beside his chair, and sobbed brokenly. Then she arose, caressed his black hair, and murmured, "My poor boy! My poor boy!" That was all she said to him, for presently she tore herself away, and, crying softly, went through the door and closed it after her.

Then came Lester, and in low voices the brothers talked for several minutes. Lester himself was to be confined to his room during the entire period of his suspension from school, but he had neither been whipped nor ducked. A telegram to their father had brought him home when the fickle Lester had told that Joshua was going West. Lester did not know what was to be Joshua's punishment; his father had told him to go in and see his brother for a minute or so, and then to return to his room. And in the midst of their eager conversation John Cole's voice was heard ordering Lester back to his prison, and with a gulp he hurried to obey. The key grated in the lock again after Lester had left the room.

An hour of terrible suspense followed, and then Joshua heard the key once more. The door opened and his father, cold and merciless, stood in the doorway.

"Get your coat and cap," he ordered. "We're going for a walk."

Joshua joined his father in the upper hall. He followed him silently down the stairs and through the front door.

"Step up beside me here," came the command, as they passed through the front gate and started along the sidewalk.

Nothing was said until they reached the business district—a short walk from home. Here John Cole turned into a retail hardware store, and Joshua followed.

"Sit down here," said his father, indicating a chair. "I want to have a talk with the owner of this store."

Now Joshua thought he understood what was to be done with him. He was to be taken from school, for good, perhaps, because he was a failure, and placed in a hardware store to learn his father's business. Well, though he had no taste for business, that was better than being half drowned—better than returning to Old Madmallet next season, a year behind in his studies.

He sat there obediently, gray-blue eyes traveling over the store, while his father talked with a fat man in shirt-sleeves. Frequently he heard his father's voice lifted in laughter, and once he saw him slap the hardware man good-naturedly on the back. What a different man he was, thought Joshua, when dealing with people not connected with his family. The two parted presently with a hearty handclasp, and Joshua followed his father into the street again.

Side by side they continued their journey, and Joshua, believing that there was no opening for him in the hardware store they had just left, wondered where they were going now. Five blocks farther on they entered a second hardware store, where a similar performance took place.

But again Joshua was not called to meet the proprietor, as he had fully expected he would be, and once more the uncommunicative pair resumed their sauntering.

There followed one more similar call, which to Joshua seemed as fruitless of results as had been the previous ones, and then again they walked away together. And now, coming suddenly abreast a large brick building, his father said:

“Let’s go in here a minute.”

Side by side they climbed a short flight of wide stone stairs. Ahead of them and above them were great glass doors in an arched doorway. John Cole turned the knob of one of them, and stood back for Joshua to enter first.

Joshua went in, to find himself gazing at a blue-coated policeman, with white chevrons on his arm, seated behind a high, dark wood desk, busily writing in a large, flat book. There was a low railing before the desk, and on Joshua’s side of it three more policemen lounged in office chairs.

John Cole stepped before the high desk, and the man behind it looked at him inquiringly.

“You remember me, Sergeant,” said John Cole.

“Oh, yes—Mr. Cole,” said the officer. “And this is the boy, is it?” And his keen, quizzical eyes coasted over Joshua from head to feet. “Um! Bad actor, is he? Um! . . . Well, Mr. Cole, you can go right up to the court room. There’s not much doing this morning.”

The sergeant spoke to one of the lounging policemen, and this man motioned to John Cole and led the way out into the corridor. Joshua followed his father, who lagged behind when outside in the long hall, allowing Joshua to catch up with him.

“Now, listen,” he said in a voice so low that the policeman ahead of them could not hear: “When you stand before the judge I want you to tell him that you are willing to do what I want you to. Do you understand?”

“I—I guess so,” faltered Joshua.

“Because,” said his father, “if you don’t, you know what’s awaiting you at home. Think it over before we reach the court room. Make your choice. And remember this: What I have done to you in the past won’t be worth considering to what I’ll do to you if you are left with me.”

Joshua was bewildered, of course. He hardly realized what it was all about, it had happened so suddenly. But there was no doubt in his mind as to the deep threat

in his father's words, and a cold fear took hold on him as he thought again of the bathtub filled with water, the nightmare of his young life.

The police judge was a short, fat man, very brisk and businesslike, with fair skin, blond hair, and big blue eyes that somehow seemed to gaze in an odd surprise at all that came before them. There was little ceremony to what followed, and there were no preliminaries at all. Almost before he knew it Joshua was facing those surprised blue eyes, and the judge was looking him over as if he were some strange new animal just captured.

"Well, well, well!" he said in an oily tone. "Incorrigible, eh? Won't study and disobeys the rules. And he stole his father's razor when he ran away. Incorrigible! Young man, don't you know that you are incorrigible?"

"Ye-yes, sir," answered Joshua. He did not know what incorrigible meant, but he knew the blackness that came with being all but drowned in a bathtub filled with water.

"Tk-tk-tk!" clucked the judge. "And you can do nothing with him at all, Mr. Cole?"

"I'm away from home most of the time, as I told you," said John Cole. "And his mother is not well, and can't handle him at all. Why, didn't he threaten to strike his teacher with a heavy iron poker? And he was so—er—desperately in earnest that Mr. Madmallet, a grown man and used to handling boys, was actually afraid to punish this boy's brother."

"Tk-tk-tk! Well, they'll take a good deal of that out of him at the House of Refuge, Mr. Cole. My boy"—to Joshua—"have you any reason to state why you should not be committed to an institution for the disciplining of incorrigible boys like you?"

But before Joshua could reply he heard a low voice beside him saying:

"Tell 'im yes, kid! Tell 'im you'll be good and that you don't wanta go."

Joshua's frightened eyes fell on the big plainclothes detective who had found him at the gypo camp of Bloodmop Mundy.

"Oh, here you are, Dickinson," said the judge. "And they tell me you found this razor on young Joshua Cole here. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, he had it in his inside coat pocket," replied the detective. "But I think he just took it in fun. He told me all about it—somethin' about makin' one o' these slugs walk on it or somethin' like that. Just kid play, I'm thinkin'. If you'll permit a suggestion, Your Honor, I'd advise lookin' into this matter pretty careful before committin' this boy to the House of Refuge."

"I have the sworn testimony of the boy's father that he cannot be disciplined,"

said the judge. “Mr. Cole is away a great part of the time, traveling as a salesman for a wholesale hardware firm. The mother is not well, and finds it impossible to make the boy behave. He is a thief, behind in his studies—though apparently bright enough—and a terror to the neighborhood. Aren’t all these things true, Joshua?”

Joshua looked at the commanding eyes of his father and said, “Yes, sir.”

“And don’t you think it would be a good thing for you to be committed to the House of Refuge until you are twenty-one?”

Seven years! “Yes, sir,” replied the boy, as if hypnotized by the warning in his father’s steadfast gaze.

“Then I will commit you,” said the judge. “Mr. Cole, you will swear to a warrant.”

Some time later, as John Cole, the commitment papers in his pocket, and Joshua entered the broad corridor they found Dickinson, the big detective, pacing up and down.

“Well,” he remarked, “all fixed, eh?”

Cole nodded briefly.

“Sure you c’n get him out to the House of Refuge by yourself, are you?”

John Cole turned on the man, but Dickinson’s face was a blank.

“Are you trying to make fun of me?” asked Cole. “If you are, I’ll make trouble for you.”

“Who, me? Why, no, Mr. Cole. I just asked you if you needed any help in takin’ the boy out there. I could get a couple o’ policemen to go with you, you know, and then you’d be pretty safe. But o’ course if you c’n handle ’im, all well an’ good.”

“You’re a little impertinent, aren’t you?” asked Cole.

“Oh, no—not at all. But it’s my duty to try and keep the peace at all times. Just offerin’ my help.”

“Well, it’s not needed,” snapped John Cole, well knowing that he was being ridiculed, but helpless to make a complaint that Dickinson was doing more than offering his services in good faith.

“Well, so-long, kid,” said the detective, as John Cole started on again. “Be good out there, and they’ll parole you in about a year.”

“You mind your own business,” raged Cole.

But Dickinson kept on: “Just obey the rules, kid, no matter what happens. And always tell the truth. It’s the only way to make the best of a bad bargain. Don’t fight back. Stand for anythin’ they hand you, and you’ll win out in the end. So-long!”

And then John Cole and Joshua reached the entrance and passed out through the great glass doors.

CHAPTER VIII

NUMBER 5635

They rode in a street car to the furthestmost outskirts of the city. At the end of the line they left the car and walked three blocks toward a high brick fence with iron spikes on top, above which loomed large brick buildings in the center of a vast inclosure. They were met at the entrance by a gate-keeper, who directed John Cole to the superintendent's office. While his father attended to the business in hand Joshua, wide-eyed and wondering, remained in an anteroom. Now and then, in a large, painfully clean room off this anteroom, he saw boys of about his own age and older moving about quietly, dressed in gray suits with brass buttons and red stripes down the trousers legs, little black cloth skull caps, and heavy brogans.

Very soon he was called into the office proper and stood before the superintendent, a tall, grave man with unhealthy white skin and veiny hands. With a brief "Good-by, Joshua," John Cole left his son; and then the superintendent sat looking the boy over in a disinterested though not antagonistic manner.

"Cole," he mused finally, looking at the papers before him on his desk. "John Cole is your father's name? It is strangely familiar. Do you know your mother's maiden name?"—he glanced at the paper again—"Joshua?"

"Yes, sir," replied Joshua. "It was Florence."

"Florence! Are you positive?"

"Yes, sir—I know that was her name."

"Impossible! What is her first name?"

"Blanche," said the boy.

"Blanche Cole. I suspected it the moment I saw your face, but it didn't occur to me while your father was here. You have the face of a Florence. So your mother was a Florence. One of *the* Florences, of course."

"Yes, sir. There's lots of Florences in this state. They come over with Lord Calvert to Maryland."

"Of course—of course. The irony of fate! Do you know, Joshua, that your mother's father—your grandfather, Peter D. Florence—was the founder of this institution?"

"No, sir—I never heard o' that."

The superintendent stared at Joshua until he was vastly uncomfortable, but the fact is that the man did not see the boy before him at all. Presently he roused himself,

assumed a businesslike attitude, and began a string of platitudes to the effect that Joshua would profit by obeying all of the rules and regulations. This in a droning, parrotlike voice, and when he had finished he pressed a bell button and a boy much older than Joshua, dressed in uniform, came into the room. He stood waiting while the superintendent scribbled a note and folded it.

“This is Number Fifty-six thirty-five,” said the superintendent. “Take him in hand and outfit him. Then turn him over to the Juvenile Department, and give this note to Mr. Clegg.”

“Yes, sir,” said the monitor, and looked toward Joshua to indicate that he was to follow him.

In a stuffy room in the main building, where there were great piles of uniforms on curtain-protected shelves, the monkey-capped boy and two assistants outfitted the newcomer, causing him to strip, whereupon they made caustic remarks about his bared anatomy. They rifled his pockets, found a pocket knife, and quarreled over it among themselves. The new ownership finally settled upon, they deposited Joshua’s old clothes in a locker, and while he was donning the new the largest of the boys smacked him smartly on the bare body with the flat of his hand and enjoined him to make greater speed. Joshua turned, the battle fire of his fighting ancestors in his gray-blue eyes. His fists doubled, and he assumed an attitude of defense, while the three monitors grinned at him tantalizingly. Then Joshua remembered the words of Detective Dickinson: “Don’t fight back. Stand for anything they hand you, and you’ll win out in the end.” So, while the three old-timers laughed and winked, he backed up against the wall and continued his dressing. It was alum-bitter medicine, but already he was planning how to run away and continue his interrupted journey westward. He dared not fight back and perhaps jeopardize his chances of escape.

When he was ready he was taken through long corridors and out at a side door, thence across a wide space of ground to another brick building. Here, before long, Joshua found himself in the presence of Mr. Beaver Clegg, head of the Juvenile Department.

Mr. Beaver Clegg, Joshua thought, was the owner of the ugliest face he had ever seen on a human being. He was thin, but not exceptionally tall. He wore a baggy gray suit, and his linen, in its soiled state, did not set a good example for his wards. Joshua looked at him curiously as he read the note from the superintendent. He noticed the nose, twisted to one side, and bumpy at the end; the curious eyes, neutral in color but inclining toward slate-blue, and cocked out of all proportion, one of them appearing much smaller than the other and set lower in the face; the thick lips, corrugated and crooked, contrasting strangely with the bony face; the square,

hairless jaw; the swarthy, mottled skin.

But when this ugliest of men looked up at Joshua and smiled a great transformation took place. The colorless eyes seemed to glow with warmth. The twisted lips somehow seemed to straighten miraculously, and there was nothing hideous about the big, yellow uneven teeth that showed between them. Joshua was reminded of the face of Abraham Lincoln, that tall, gaunt man whose very homeliness endears him to the heart of the nation that he served. Joshua did not know it until later, but he had been placed in the care of Beaver Clegg simply because his mother had been a Florence. He rightly belonged in a department for older wards, but the superintendent knew his subordinates, and had conferred this boon upon the son of the daughter of the founder of the institution.

“Well, Joshua,” said Mr. Clegg, in a voice that went with his face when the smile was upon it, “what have you been up to? Sit down there and tell me all about it. Don’t be backward; don’t be afraid. Just begin at the beginning and tell me the truth. And with me, Joshua, the truth always pays. But more of that later. Now tell me your story. You’ll be talking to your friend.”

It was a long story, and at first the boy talked haltingly. But as he saw the deep, kindly interest in Clegg’s eyes, as he leaned his elbows on the desk and cupped his battle-ship chin in his bony hands, his confidence grew and he talked more freely. When he began speaking of the adventure with the slug Mr. Clegg suddenly scraped forward his chair and leaned closer. His eyes seemed to grow darker and darker until their indifferent blue had changed to a deep, velvety purple, as a cat’s eyes change with its varying moods.

“Just a moment,” he interrupted finally. “You say that a stream of mucilaginous substance—something like that—came from the slug, and that it let itself down to the ground by means of it?”

“Yes, sir,” said Joshua. “It’s just the color o’ tapioca puddin’.”

“Well, well, well! I never knew that before. Go on! Go on! Tell me about the experiment with the razor.”

Joshua began it, but was once more interrupted. Clegg’s tones were eager as he spoke, and Joshua marveled not a little at his interest.

“The entire under side of a slug or a snail, Joshua,” he said, “comprises a walking surface. One might term his whole belly a foot. This walking surface clings to one side of the razor blade, as the slug extends its fore part and bends down over the other side. He is not crawling upon the sharp part at all, you see, but it appears as if he is doing so. Where did you learn about all this?”

“Aw, I’m always monkeyin’ ’round with somethin’ like that,” said Joshua. “I

kinda like it. I'm gonta be a scientist some day. But they wouldn't let me do anythin' at school. I got a dandy collection o' birds' eggs, and a lot o' bugs and pressed leaves, and snakes in alcohol."

"A scientist, eh? And what branch do you prefer?"

"I ain't just sure yet. I like all of it that I've read about. But I guess I like astronomy more'n anythin'."

Clegg's eyes grew darker. "Astronomy—yes, yes! And what do you know about astronomy, Joshua?"

"Not much. But I've read some books. And I c'n pick out a lotta stars and planets easy, and I know what their names are an' everything like that."

Here a mellow gong sounded, and Beaver Clegg's eyes grew neutral in color once more. "That's the dinner gong," he said briskly. "I'll call one of the monitors, who will show you how to fall in and march to the washroom, and afterward to the dining room. After dinner there will be fifteen minutes for play, and I want you to come back here for that period. I want to talk more with you." He pressed a button, and a uniformed monitor came in. "This is Fifty-six thirty-five," said Mr. Clegg. "Take care of him until he learns the rules. That's all for the present, Fifty-six thirty-five."

Joshua marched to the washroom, a large, spotlessly clean compartment where each boy used his individual basin, which hung under a tag bearing his number. When they left the washroom they marched across the court yard to the main building, where was the dining room. Here the inmates of the entire institution partook of their meals, boys from the North Wing, between the ages of eighteen and twenty, those from the South Wing, from fourteen to eighteen, and those of fourteen or under from Mr. Clegg's Juvenile Department. The dining room monitor seated Joshua, and he ate sparingly of soup, coffee, bread without butter, boiled ham, and beans. The dining room was silent as a tomb, as no conversation was allowed. When the meal was finished they rose at a command from the monitor and were marched out into the playground. Here Joshua contrived to evade curious and semi-pugnacious boys who wanted to know all about him, entered the gray corridor of the Juvenile Department, and found his way again to the little office of Beaver Clegg.

Mr. Clegg wore large round spectacles now, for he had been reading. Over the rims of them he looked at Joshua speculatively for a time.

"You will be known here as Fifty-six thirty-five," he said finally. "But when you and I are alone together I'm going to call you Joshua. It seems, almost, that a special Providence sent you to me, and I have hopes that your life here will be more profitable to you than if you had stayed at home. You are very young to have

decided upon a career, and who knows but that you will change your mind entirely before you are a year older? I recall that when I was about your age I was determined to become a minister of the gospel. I had preached a little even then—if one might call it preaching—and was hailed as a boy evangelist. But now I am interested in other matters, and have been since I was twenty-one.

“Let us assume, however, that you are interested in astronomy and want to become a serious student. You are too young to understand, of course—but I may as well tell you now that it is a calling that demands the utmost sacrifice. There’s no money in it, Joshua, or I would not be here at the head of the Juvenile Department in a boys’ reformatory. For that is just what this institution has degenerated to—a reformatory—though your grandfather, Peter D. Florence, had no such thing in mind when he founded it. It was to be a home for parentless boys and other unfortunate youngsters. But your grandfather is dead, and the institution is in the hands of a board of directors and a superintendent who have failed to catch the spirit of your grandfather’s generosity.

“Be that as it may, you will be none the worse off if you are diligent and obey the rules. I say this because I know something of your father, the man whom your mother gave up everything to marry. Here you will learn the common school branches as well as you could outside, and on top of that I am going to give you your first lessons in astronomy.”

Clegg did not heed the boy’s parted lips nor the eager brilliancy in his grave young eyes, but continued:

“It seems to me to be a marvelous coincidence that you found your way to me. For the past twenty years, Joshua, I have studied the stars. I am what is known as a variable star observer, and I have a three-inch refractor which I use at night on the roof of this building. None of the other officials in the school are in sympathy with me, but they tolerate me. They are second-graders intellectually, all of them, or they would not be here. I am here to make a living while I follow my studies, for, as I told you, Science is an indifferent paymaster.

“If I may be pardoned for the statement, I am not altogether unknown to the scientific world. Joshua, have you any knowledge of the variable stars?”

“No, sir,” replied Joshua, a little awed that he was in intimate conversation with a real astronomer, one who owned a telescope. Would he be allowed to look through it, he wondered? Never in his life had he looked through any instrument larger than a pair of opera glasses.

“There are hundreds of stars,” Mr. Clegg went on, “that are known to vary in brightness. In a few cases the causes of this variability are known. There are, for

instance, the Algol Variables. In their case, the variability is readily accounted for by the theory of a dark, eclipsing body, smaller than the primary, and traveling round it in an orbit lying nearly edgewise to us. The two bodies revolve round their common center of gravity. In the case of other types of variables we are still uncertain, or quite in the dark, regarding what is really happening to cause the change in brightness.”

Clegg did not see his listener now. His near-blue eyes were darkening to velvet-purple again, and his vision took in worlds far off in space. Joshua listened in a sort of breathless rapture, though he had small idea of what it was all about.

“Observations of these perplexing bodies, continuing over a long period of time,” Clegg went on dreamily, forgetting that his audience was only a fourteen-year-old boy, “will eventually afford a sufficiently large collection of facts on which to base a satisfactory theory of what causes the observed variation. Out of the hundreds studied by the nearly two hundred members—mostly amateurs like myself—of the International Society of Variable Star Observers, of which I am one, who have contributed a startling number of observations during the past few years, certain stars may be discovered whose peculiar behavior will lead to a true understanding of these interesting bodies. I myself, if you will pardon me once more, have added my share of discoveries to this great work.

“So that is really my business in life, Joshua. It is a work of love, as the society pays nothing in money to any of its members. And, as I told you, I occupy my position here to gain a livelihood while pursuing my hobby, as my critics term my work. My fellow-instructors are out of tune with me, and even go so far as to ridicule me at times. But as the superintendent considers me harmless, and as I try to perform my school duties faithfully, he does not interfere with my astronomical work, which I never allow to conflict with the regular routine. But mine is a lonesome existence. I have longed for some one close to me who is moved by the inspiring grandeur of the heavenly bodies. I have been told that I am a born teacher, but I prefer to teach the things that interest me. You wanted to study science and they refused you. So you see, Joshua, that you and I have a great deal in common. And it will be my delight to make an effort to ground you in the science of astronomy, if you are willing to learn and will help me by observing the rules and regulations of the school, and attempting to master what the directors have prescribed as a course for the institution. I am not altogether unselfish in this offer. I want to teach somebody what I have learned, for I love it and find boundless pleasure in telling others what I know. But there has been no one to tell. And how it will refresh my own fund of knowledge! How does my offer appeal to you, Joshua?”

“It’d be mighty nice,” replied Fifty-six thirty-five, almost unable to believe that here was an opportunity that he had not expected to present itself until he had become a man and master of his destiny.

“I’ll do anything you say, Mr. Clegg,” he promised. “I’m sure much obliged.”

Clegg’s whimsical smile rested upon him in a fatherly way. “You’ll never have occasion to regret it,” he said.

Then the great gong sounded, and the hour of play was at an end.

CHAPTER IX

TRUTH AND HONOR

From one o'clock till four in the afternoon that first day Number Fifty-six thirty-five gave heed to the mechanism of a sewing machine, and mended the rent clothes of the inmates. A large, rather kindly woman was matron over him. By four o'clock he was doing fairly well, and in a week's time was accomplishing his simple machine sewing with speed and neatness. And this became his allotted task. From four to six o'clock the boys were allowed to play in the great yard, and here they were as uproarious and irrepressible as Old Madmallet's flock at home. They marched to the washroom at six again, and thence once more to the dining room, where they ate tea, bread and apple-sauce. From seven to nine they studied the common branches of learning in the schoolroom, presided over by that ugliest of men, the Lincoln-like Beaver Clegg. At nine they went to bed, each in his clean little iron cot, with its crackling straw mattress. Almost immediately Mr. Clegg came in, listened to the monitors' reports of the boys' behavior during the day, and extinguished the lights.

For fifteen minutes now the wards of the Juvenile Department were allowed to talk and tell stories. Joshua, because he was new and might have something fresh to offer, was called upon for a yarn, story-telling being a favorite diversion of the inmates. So well did he acquit himself, drawing without reserve upon his vivid imagination because he was in total darkness and not obliged to face his listeners, that his effort was hailed with a round of applause. Later he became official story-teller of the department, and when he had learned more of astronomy from Clegg's teachings, he evolved wondrous and fantastic tales of adventures in the planets, which were the delight of his fellow inmates. A gong sounded at fifteen minutes after nine, and Joshua, in the middle of a story that had for its main characters a boy and a girl who traveled West in a converted boxcar, with a flatcar back yard coupled on next to it, was ordered to "dry up" by the head monitor. And soon after the soft, regular breathing of the very human little prisoners of the House of Refuge came from all quarters of the room.

But Fifty-six thirty-five lay awake, staring up into the blackness, and thought of a girl with reddish-golden hair and Oriental-topaz eyes. And he was sore of heart, and the stiff white pillow under his head was moist. Then a hand softly touched him and he heard the guarded words:

"Quiet, Joshua! Don't make a sound. Get up softly and join me at the door.

We're going up on the roof to view the moon."

Walking noiselessly in his new bed slippers, Joshua Cole found the entrance to the sleeping quarters, where Clegg awaited him. The instructor led him to a remote part of the building, where they passed through a door, and Joshua struck his toes against the foot of a flight of stairs. Clegg closed the door behind them and lighted a candle, the flickering blaze of which revealed a closed staircase leading to what in nautical parlance would be called a booby hatch in the flat roof.

The night was bright with stars, and a big half-moon rode in the heavens to guard them. Already Clegg had preceded his pupil with the telescope, and had adjusted it on its tripod.

"Joshua," said Clegg, in tones a trifle below normal, "I want you to understand in the beginning that I am breaking the rules in taking you from your bed. But I have considered the matter carefully and have reached the decision that, in this case, I am entitled to make my own rules. So long as we shall be engaged in an undertaking that is praiseworthy, we shall be our own judges concerning what is right and wrong. But I want you to fully understand the confidence that I am placing in you and the risk that I am taking. Do you think you do?"

"Yes, sir," the boy replied. "I won't tell anybody."

"And I think that I can safely trust you," said the master. "I thought so from the first, or such an amazing idea never would have occurred to me. You have made an unprecedented impression on me, Joshua, and it seems unbelievable that I should bring you up here the night of your first day in the institution. But I have done so, and here you are. I perhaps should have waited until I know you better; but to-night, of all nights in the month, is the best for observing the moon. We have a nine-and-three-quarter-day moon to-night, Joshua, and I felt that the opportunity ought not to be put off for an entire month. But repetition of to-night's—er—adventure, we'll call it—will depend on how you conduct yourself in school and with the other boys. Do you understand that thoroughly?"

"Yes, sir," said Joshua.

"You must study and learn things that are distasteful to you during regular class hours. That will be the price of your lessons in astronomy. Can you make that sacrifice?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then—we'll see. Now place your eye to the eye-piece, and we'll have a look at the moon."

Joshua, at once eager and filled with awe, placed his eye to the eye-piece. He caught his breath in boyish ecstasy as the great tinfoil half-moon, chewed to lacelike

filaments on its east and southeast sides, was revealed to him as he never before had seen it. Immovable, absolutely silent, he gazed in rapture, and all the mysticism of the universe wrapped itself about him. He saw the wondrous craters, the mountains, the sea bottoms, the plains, and his fancy peopled them with strange adventurers bent on stranger quests—dream people who lived dream lives and sought dream marvels in a land whose fabric was dreams.

“You perhaps are not aware, Joshua,” Clegg was saying softly in his stilted, academic way, “that you are seeing the moon upside down, in the natural way that we see all objects. Do you know that whatever you see in this world you see upside down? But your eyes have adjusted themselves, and they really appear to you as rightside up. This is known to the science of optics by reason of men born blind suddenly regaining their sight, when their unadjusted eyes see objects upside down. Don’t ask me to explain it, for it is out of my field. But remember that, as you now see the moon, north is south, and east is west.

“Now, the dark areas that you see, Joshua, are flat plains and sea bottoms. The bright areas are mountainous regions. There are nine mountain chains on that portion of the moon which is visible to us earth-dwellers. (And the most that we ever see of the moon’s surface is about forty-seven per cent.) These nine mountain chains contain some three thousand peaks, many of them between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand feet in height. Though you are not able to see it now, there is a mountain peak on the southern edge of the moon which is thirty-six thousand feet high. Mount Everest, as you probably remember from your study of geography, is twenty-nine thousand feet in height, and is this planet’s closest approach to the gigantic moon-mountain of which I speak. Do you follow me, Joshua?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now observe that large crater in the south polar region, Joshua. Where will you look for it?”

“Way up on top, to the right—I mean, to the east?”

“Yes, that’s right—you are quick to comprehend. But remember, now, that in reality that region is far to the south and west. Have you found the crater—by far the largest to be seen?”

“Yes, sir—I think so.”

“What does it resemble? Do you see the smaller craters within the walls of the larger one?”

“Yes, sir—I see ’em. And the one around ’em looks like where they vaccinated me on the arm, when the place where the doctor scratched got sore and was all eaten out.”

“Exactly, Joshua! Fine! A remarkable comparison. Well, Joshua, you are observing the largest of the craters that are known to be on the moon. This is the immense walled plain of Clavius. It is a hundred and forty-three miles at its greatest length, and its floor covers an area of sixteen thousand square miles. The State of Rhode Island would scarcely cover its interior area. The crater-studded walls about it have an elevation of seventeen thousand feet, which is more than a thousand feet higher than the summit of Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe.

“Now just a little above the center of the exposed area—er—of that portion of the moon which is revealed to-night—you will see Tycho quite plainly. This is another immense crater, fifty-four miles in diameter, and with a depth of seventeen thousand feet. Lifting its summit from this immense pit is a central mountain, which rises to an elevation of six thousand feet. Do you follow me, Joshua?”

“Yes, sir—I guess so.”

Mr. Clegg became forgetful of his surroundings, forgetful of his pupil. Carried away by his own lecture-like recital of the wonders viewed by Joshua, he went on rapidly:

“There you view high walls and peaks thousands of feet above the level of the surface. They catch the first gleams of the rising sun, while many deep abysses yet remain in somber lunar night. Many of the dish-shaped plains of this rugged region, once huge pots of boiling rock or lava, are distinguished by no black shadows, having been refilled to the rims; though a few of them still retain walls high enough to throw black shadows eastward on the plains. Conspicuous against the southeastern wall of Clavius is the vast black hole of the ring-mountain Blancanus, fifty miles in diameter, at the bottom of whose abysmal cavity no sunlight has ever shone—the deepest, most cavernous pit known to man. Were the highest mountain-peak on the earth—Mount Everest—standing on the forever darkened floor of this pit, its lofty summit would rise but five thousand feet above the ramparts of the encircling mountain-ring; for the black hole is approximately twenty-four thousand feet in depth—about four thousand feet deeper than Mount McKinley is high.”

Thus he talked on and on until young Joshua’s mind was a confused blank, though his soul was leaping with happiness. And when at last the master came down to earth and remarked that the hour was late, Joshua followed him down the dark stairway without a word.

“Go back to your bed,” whispered Clegg as they reached the foot of the flight. “To-morrow I shall give you photographs of the various regions of the moon and lend you Flammarion’s *Astronomy*. Be patient, Joshua—you will learn all that I know, and much more when you become a man. That’s all for the present, Fifty-six

thirty-five.”

That was the beginning of it. Now the boy Joshua, robbed of his heritage, had a goal to work for, and he worked. Learning the common school branches that he detested was the necessary means to a glorious end, and before long he had proved to Clegg’s unbounded satisfaction that with him the study of science was no mere boyish whim. No other reward could have been offered which would have caused him to apply himself so assiduously to arithmetic, grammar, and other distasteful branches. More, he withstood many temptations to enter into youthful pranks with the other boys, and when he stood aloof repeatedly they grew to consider him a “mamma’s boy,” and treated him accordingly. In that day the word “tony” stood in slang as an adjective to describe one who considered himself above the common herd, and it soon was applied to the young astronomer. They called him Tony among themselves, but functionally he remained Fifty-six thirty-five to his last day in the House of Refuge.

The fact that he was studious and diligently obeyed the rules and regulations of the school brought him a T-and-H medal at the first meeting of the board of directors after his commitment, and T and H meant Truth and Honor. But the medal brought him more trouble than satisfaction, for it placed him above his fellow-inmates in the Juvenile Department and filled their young hearts with scorn and rancor. From the presentation day onward Joshua’s lot was a hard one. He was “framed” repeatedly—dark plots were laid for his undoing. Time and again he was inveigled into compromising situations, skillfully designed to get him into trouble and to break his record. But the word of a T-and-H boy was accepted until he himself had proved that he was unworthy to wear the medal. Joshua was shoved, slapped, pinched, kicked stealthily, and twice a ruffianly youth much older than himself deliberately spat in his face in an effort to madden him to the point of resentment with his fists.

But for the sake of his promise to his benefactor Beaver Clegg, and for the sake of the scientific knowledge that he longed to have, he endured and suffered. Joshua was a fiery tempered lad—a fighter—to which many an old schoolmate in the bygone days of Silvanus Madmallet could attest. Never before had he allowed himself to be bullied and browbeaten, but so great was his love for the mystic nights on the roof with Clegg that he willingly made the sacrifice. He was being tempered in the fire of life and, though he did not realize it, was building up a character which was to become proof against the pettishness of human nature in after years. When the second meeting of the board of directors was called, Joshua was sent for. In the superintendent’s office he stood before a body of grave-faced wisecracs, and, to his surprise, he found that he knew several of them. They asked him many questions,

inquired into his record, and in the end informed him that he would be paroled when his first year was over. They sent him back during the play hour; and then it was that Joshua Cole performed one of the most extraordinary feats of his boyhood.

A ball game was in progress in the playgrounds. Joshua looked eagerly about as he drew near the players, and presently his glance alighted on Number Twenty-three forty-four, a boy older and larger than himself, the one who had spat in his face, willing to suffer punishment himself if he could induce Joshua to fight. Straight toward him walked Number Fifty-six thirty-five, and when he reached him he stood before him and regarded him with his grave, gray-blue eyes, in which an intense fire now flashed.

“Kid,” he said, “I’m goin’ to whip you for spittin’ in my face three months ago. Get ready—I’m comin’!”

CHAPTER X

PARDONED

It was one of the most memorable fights that ever had taken place on that field. For some reason no official was about at the time to interrupt the battle, and the monitors took a chance in order to see the sport. The big boy fought like a young tiger, but Joshua's enduring qualities won for him in the end, and he beat his enemy unmercifully before it was over, gouged at his eyes and bit his thumb, and pounded him until he was a squalling, sobbing, whimpering thing, pleading only that the fight might end.

Beaver Clegg finally arrived and pulled Joshua off the prostrate boy. He led him by the arm with quick steps toward the Juvenile Department, where they faced each other in the little office.

Clegg's face had been red and mottled until then, but now it became pallid as he slowly shook his head and brushed nervously at his canted nose.

"At last, Joshua—at last," he said morosely. "I thought you could hold out."

Joshua's nose was bleeding, and one eye was almost closed. His face was covered with dust, and the blood mixed with it made him a disreputable-looking figure indeed. But his lips were straight and untrembling, and his one good eye looked steadily at his mentor.

"I have held out, Mr. Clegg," he said. "I've put up with a lot more than I've told you about. But I had to do that. They were goin' to parole me at the end o' the year."

Clegg sat up straight, and his thick lips parted in surprise and comprehension.

"Joshua Cole, do you mean that you deliberately started a fight with Twenty-three forty-four in order to lower your record for good behavior so that you would not be paroled?"

"Yes, sir—that's it," Joshua replied. "I want to stay here with you and study astronomy. That means more to me than a T-and-H medal—and—and I don't wanta go home."

For a long time Clegg's colorless eyes looked at him steadily, and his face was hard to read. Then the eyes began to grow bluer until they became dark and purple, and Clegg rose briskly.

"All right, Joshua," he said. "I shall report you to the superintendent, and then you will be taken to the North Wing and punished. Do you know how you will be

punished, Joshua?"

"Yes, sir—I've heard about it. I—I hadn't forgotten that."

"Very well, Fifty-six thirty-five. That's all for the present."

But as the boy turned away Clegg strode after him and caught his arm at the door. "You—I'm sorry, Joshua," he faltered, and his eyes gleamed with tears. "But you and I have made our own rules, and I guess there was no other way. On the roof to-night, Joshua—if—if you are able to stand. There's a sixteen-day moon to-night, you know."

He laid a long arm tenderly over the boy's shoulder, then jerked it away and hustled back to his little desk.

Number Fifty-six thirty-five did not go to the roof that night. He lay in bed unable to sleep because of the pain that racked his body. Each agonizing twinge brought to mind each stroke that had been struck with the terrible bamboo rod, and each stroke had felled him to the basement floor, for he had been made to stoop to receive the torture. Then the great brute of a man who was beating him would wait for him to regain his feet and stoop again, whereupon, with the rod in both hands, he would raise it and bring it down with all his might. Each throb of pain that now shook his shocked young body brought to mind each grunt that had been forced from the man as he put every ounce of his power behind the blows. The pain did not ease because of Joshua's remembrance that Twenty-three forty-four had received the same number of stripes.

After this Joshua became a model inmate once more, and he was treated with greater respect by his fellows. That he could fight with such vigor and dogged determination made them think twice before antagonizing him.

The year passed and another began, and once more Joshua faced the board of directors and was presented with a second T-and-H medal. But when they spoke of parole Joshua told them he wanted to stay in the House of Refuge. He was older now, more experienced, and Clegg had told him that it was unnecessary for him to disobey the rules in order to remain, if he would put the matter squarely to the board. This he endeavored to do, stating that he was interested in his studies and felt that he could acquire a better education there than in public school. The members of the board looked sidewise at one another; they thought they understood why Joshua wanted to stay, for they knew of his father and had no respect for him. Joshua, advised by Clegg, made no mention of his studies in astronomy.

The board dismissed him, promising to take the matter into consideration. Perhaps they decided at last that Joshua, of all the inmates of the institution, ought to be allowed to remain until his twenty-first birthday if he wished to, because his

grandfather had been the founder. Whatever the reason, the boy was told that night by Beaver Clegg that the board had ruled that he might stay. Furthermore, he might remain in the Juvenile Department as long as he saw fit. And Clegg had been authorized to give him special instruction in higher branches than were taught in his department. It was quite plain to Joshua that Clegg had spoken highly of his progress as a student, and that this was the result of his loyal friendship.

And now, with Joshua Cole deep in his studies and steadily acquiring a practical working knowledge of astronomy far beyond his years, it will be necessary for this narrative to skip to a day when word reached the House of Refuge that Joshua's mother was dying. He was sent to her deathbed immediately, but arrived too late.

During the funeral and afterward he was thrown in contact with many of his relatives on her side of the house whom he never before had met. Joshua gathered that they had forgiven his mother now, and for them he harbored a boy's supreme contempt.

One old querulous gentleman in particular aroused his boyish wrath, though the uncle—for so he was—did not seem to realize it. He came from a far-off town in Virginia, and was said to be very wealthy. This was Peter Henry Florence, his mother's oldest brother, who had been given his father's name.

Despite the boy's dislike for him, the flabby-skinned old man took a great interest in him. He had not known before that Blanche's eldest son had been placed in a reformatory, and under his breath he heaped up imprecations on the head of the father. He was for using his influence as the son of old Peter D. Florence, the founder, in having Joshua released. And when he found out that Joshua did not want to leave, and had argued futilely against the boy's strange obstinacy, he purposed going to the House of Refuge at once and demanding special privileges for his sister's son. All of which he seemed to forget entirely in a day or two, for he went his choleric way back home and left no word behind him.

So Joshua returned to the only man on earth that he loved and admired and considered a friend, and wrapped himself in his astronomy for three years more.

Then came a day when he stood, dry-eyed, beside a bed on which lay the still form of Beaver Clegg. The master had been found dead in his bed that morning—of heart failure, the doctors said. It had long threatened him, and the ugly man with a beautiful soul had been prepared, for Joshua held in his hand a note to him which had been penned several years before.

It told him that all along Clegg had tricked him into believing that he—Clegg—was breaking the rules of the institution when he led Joshua to the roof of nights and schooled him in astronomy. Beaver Clegg's department had been virtually his to

regulate as he saw fit, and if he chose to take a boy from bed and teach him on the roof at night it was the concern of no one but himself. Thus had the old instructor inveigled Joshua into mastering studies which were distasteful to him. Thus had he tried him in the furnace to find out whether his love for science was genuine, and one which was worth much sacrifice.

Tears threatened to deluge Joshua's eyes when he read the note, and the flood broke when he was told that Beaver Clegg had willed to him his telescope and books and telescopic photographs, and the clippings of over twenty painstaking years.

And so it came about that Joshua Cole went before the board again and asked for his rights in the matter of parole. Whereupon the board decided to pardon him. And at the age of twenty, a quiet, serious, unworldly youth with an ascetic face and kindly gray-blue eyes, he left the House of Refuge, his home for over six years, with his telescope over his shoulder.

But he did not go home. Lester had long since left the old house on Grant Avenue and was working in a shoe store, living alone in rented quarters. Only the father was there, with the faithful Zida to minister to his fickle wants when he was in from a trip. Joshua had heard that John Cole was playing the races and drinking more than ever, and he had no desire to see him. But he was penniless, so he called on Lester for aid, which was refused. The younger brother was earning barely enough to keep himself, he said, and he looked upon Joshua with little favor, referring often in his speech to his brother's sojourn in the House of Refuge and snickering the name of Tony.

There seemed no friend to turn to in his dilemma, and Joshua, confined to his studies for so many years, imprisoned and inexperienced in worldly matters, decided to carry out the boyish plan that he had evolved when he and Lester waited in the swampy lot for Slinky Dawson to come along with the note that told of his disgrace at school. Out there in the West somewhere was the girl that he never had forgotten—Madge Mundy of the frizzly red-gold hair and the Oriental-topaz eyes. He would find her.

So, with the exception of his telescope, he left in Lester's keeping all of the precious things bequeathed to him by Beaver Clegg; and the night of the same day that he came from the House of Refuge he sought the freight yards under cover of darkness.

Three times, as he stole along looking for an empty boxcar in a train that evidently was about to move out, he imagined that somebody was following him. And now he found his car and pushed his telescope through a side door. He

scrambled in after it, closed the door, and stood silent in total darkness. Soon the train began to move, but whether or not it was westward bound the new recruit in Vagabondia had no means of knowing. It would take him away from Hathaway at all events, and for this he longed, since the city of his birth had showed him little but unkindness.

And on top of the car in which Joshua rode the figure of a young man lay flat, awaiting the coming of a brakeman over the running boards, whose lantern he saw swinging up toward the locomotive. His name was Felix Wolfgang, and he was of Norwegian extraction, but in the House of Refuge his number had been Twenty-three forty-four.

CHAPTER XI

AN OFFER OF PARTNERSHIP

Had Joshua Cole been aware that the other tramp who rode on top of the train had “squared things with the brakeman,” he would not have been so surprised at the long ride he made without being ordered off by some train official. But he knew only that he was not disturbed throughout the entire night, as he lay in one corner on the hard floor, his head pillowed by an arm that ached when he awoke from time to time.

Joshua had talked with many boys in the House of Refuge who had been tramps. In fact, it seemed that the greater portion of the inmates had been committed because they had run away from home to seek adventures on the road. The stories that they told had fascinated him, and he had stored away much information as to how to conduct oneself in Trampdom. Thus it came about that, while having no practical knowledge of the ups and downs of the vagrant life, he was theoretically fitted for his big adventure.

In the middle of the night the train rolled into Pittsburgh and continued on, and still the traveler remained undisturbed. When morning arrived, however, his first knowledge of daylight came when the side door creaked open suddenly and let in a flood of sunlight, while the train was at a standstill.

“Here, you!” came a challenging voice. “Where you goin’?”

Joshua rose from the floor of the car, tucked his telescope and tripod under his arm, and went toward the door. The head and shoulders of a man showed there, as he looked in from the ground.

“Come on! Make it fast, Jack! Get outa here!”

Joshua’s blue-gray eyes studied the man as he stood back well out of reach.

“Huh!” grunted the trainman. “Who’s road-kid are you?”

“Nobody’s,” Joshua replied. He knew what a road-kid was in the parlance of Trampdom—a boy who travels with an older tramp for his “jockey,” for whom the boy begs and steals, and is paid in brutal kicks and cuffs. They had told him about “punks,” or “road-kids,” and “jockers” in the House of Refuge.

“Well, get out and stay out!”

Joshua watched his chance, and, clutching his burden firmly under an arm, ran to the door and jumped entirely to the ground. The brakeman aimed a kick at him as he struggled to rise from the stooping posture in which he had alighted, but he avoided

the man and darted up the tracks toward a little town.

And in this undignified manner did Joshua Cole begin his tour as a lecturing astronomer.

All day long he remained hidden in the willow-screened bed of a river that paralleled the railroad tracks, hungry and afraid to venture forth. He slept a little, making up for his oft-interrupted slumbers of the night. His bones ached like the bones of an old man, for the boxcar floor had been even harder than the straw mattresses of the House of Refuge. But when darkness came he sallied out and sought the main street of the village, where men lazed in the moonlight under wooden awnings, and girls and women, garbed in flimsy lawns, paraded back and forth, with arms encircling waists, through a flower-perfumed night in early summer.

At the principal corner the hungry waif set up his tripod, adjusted his telescope, and trained it on the rising moon. Then his courage, cowed by hunger, bade fair to desert him, and to make him forget the speech that he had been rehearsing all day. But he girded up his loins, and in a squeaky, stage-frightened voice addressed a number of loafers who had been viewing his operations in silent wonder.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he quavered, “to-night the mu-moon is in the last quarter, and the black, pointed shadows of the towering peaks of the lunar Alps are—are very clear. To-night you can see plainly the longest mountain range on the moon. This great range is four hundred and sixty miles in length, and is called the Apennines. Three thousand sharp peaks in this range rise abruptly from the *Mare Imbrum* to a height of from twelve thousand to twenty thousand feet. These are plainly visible to-night through this telescope that I have here. You may look at them for ten cents apiece, and each observer will be allowed three minutes at the telescope. While you look I shall explain the various moon objects that are of interest to you. Now, who—who’ll be the first?”

He looked, as he stood there timidly regarding them, like some young disciple of the eternal stars, sent on earth to scatter the fogs of prejudice and superstition. The pale light of the moon fell softly on his lean, ascetic features and threw them in sharp relief. His coal-black hair accentuated the steel-cut lines in the picture of his face. Even in the half-light those earnest, tolerant, gray-blue eyes seemed to plead; and at last a man, whispering to his neighbor, screwed himself sidewise and reached a hand into his trousers pocket.

“Le’s see what the kid’s got up his sleeve,” he suggested, and walked toward Joshua with his dime.

Being instructed, he placed his eye to the eye-piece. There followed a moment or two of silence, and then Joshua’s first patron breathed a deep sigh and fervently

muttered:

“Gysh A’mighty!”

Wonders of which he had never dreamed suddenly were revealed to him. His phlegmatic soul had been whisked away from his game of horseshoes of the afternoon, his heavy supper of fried pork and gravy and baking-powder biscuits, and was borne up, up, up, as light as the perfume of the flowering night, to a mystic region that his imagination never could have pictured.

“Gysh!” he breathed again.

“Whatcha see, Henry?”—from the shadows under the awning where the man had rested.

“Huh!”

“See anythin’ o’ the cow that Bud Shamleffer lost last week up there?”

“H’m-m!”

And now Joshua, encouraged by the awe in the man’s voice, began speaking. He told in his soft tones of wondrous plains and craters and sea bottoms, and instructed his pupil where to look for them. The other men left the whittled bench and stood around, silent, listening intently to every word. Women stopped in their parade, and halted at the edge of the little throng. Some held youngsters by the hand. Girls giggled at they knew not what.

“Hush, Albert!” came a shrill voice. “Listen to what the young man is saying, can’t you? Yes, it’s a spyglass, and Mr. Haddon is looking at the moon. How much does it cost to look, Pa? . . . Yes, if you’ll be good and keep still Pa’ll let you look through it. Won’t you, Pa? Albert Washburn, if you don’t keep still Pa’ll—”

“The awe-inspiring Sea of Serenity embraces an area of one hundred and twenty-five thousand miles. It is almost entirely surrounded by mountains. The oddly twisted range seen running for—”

“Albert Washburn, will you hush?”

“—hundreds of miles along its western floor suggests the action of water, as does also the wrinkled plain of *Mare Tranquilitatis*. Note how marvelously interspersed are the light and dark regions—”

“C’mon away, Haddon, an’ give somebody else a look. Yer three minutes is up long time ago!”

So for more than an hour and a half the telescope followed the moon across the heavens, while the villagers found dimes and braces of nickels with which to buy a glimpse of the wonder thereof. Albert had had his yelled-for observation and was carried away squalling for more, unquieted by dire threats of what would happen to him when he reached home. But finally interest waned, and then the young

astronomer folded his tripod and lashed it to the telescope, and sought a restaurant on the point of closing. In his pocket were sixteen dimes and six nickels, the first money that he had earned since he taught roller-skating back in Hathaway. And Beaver Clegg had called Science an indifferent paymaster!

Then a man slipped in after Joshua and took the stool beside him at the counter. He gave his order in a low mumble and sat with bowed head awaiting its coming. Joshua glanced at him and gave a start. Beaver Clegg had been ugly of face, but the great heart of him had glorified that ugliness. The man who sat at Joshua's side was a living horror.

He wore disreputable clothes, topped by a black Stetson hat with a round, narrow brim. Dust and sweat had made a gray ring about the hat where the brim and crown were joined. There was a long livid scar on his right cheek, slick and red and hairless. But about it stood a week's growth of stubble, which made the mark more hideous. The ugly mouth, twisted grotesquely to one side, was nothing short of repulsive, and as the dark little eyes looked up ratlike into Joshua's the boy almost shivered.

"Say, Jack," ventured the pitted lips, "dat was a nifty little performance youse put on for de hicks dis evenin'. W'ere'd youse get next to de look-see?"

Joshua was obliged to request an interpretation.

"De telescope—w'ere d'youse glom it?"

"Why," replied Joshua, "it was given to me by my instructor in—in school."

"She's one nifty little money-getter," vouchsafed the other. "I was lampin' youse from acrost de drag. How much d'youse glom, Jack?"

Joshua knew now that he was speaking with a tramp. He realized, too, that here was an old-timer, one of the breed known in Trampdom as John Yeggs. To be called Jack bespoke all this, and Joshua became wary at once.

"I took in nearly two dollars," he made reply to the direct question.

"Dat's goin' some! Cheese, I didn't make four bits wid de skeletons dis afternoon! But dey're woiked to de't' anyway dese days."

"I don't know what you mean," said Joshua.

"De skeletons? Say, ain't youse never seen a guy woik de skeletons on de hicks? Dere's two of 'em, youse savvy, and youse set on a street corner an' make 'em dance on a black clot' by pullin' a black t'read. De hicks usta fall fer dem, but not so much lately. Dat's me graft, Jack—one of 'em. I got sever'l good lines. But dat telescope racket looks good to me. Say, youse're only a kid an' youse need a jocker. Youse're on de road, I know, 'cause I see youse take a sneak from a boxcar to-day and hide in de jungles. Now, lissen, kid—youse're new on de road an' don't

savvy wot's wot. I do—I'm an ol'-timer meself. I c'n put youse wise, an' youse'n me'll make all kinds o' jack wid dat telescope. Youse c'n run 'er an' make de spiel, an' I'll mooch, 'round and chase de hicks to youse. We'll make it all over de country. Dat's wot youse want, kid—youse wanta see de worl', an' I c'n show it to youse. Get me? Dey call me De Whimperer, an' I'll tell youse more about dat later. Wot d'youse say youse'n me hook up togedder? Youse'll be me road-kid, an' I'll perreck youse from a lotta dese no-good stiff's youse'll be meetin' in yer travels. An' we'll make a good livin' wid no woik, an' have a helluva time. What d'youse say, kid?"

CHAPTER XII

WHIMPERMETER

In the vernacular of the road the John Yegg was trying to snare Joshua, and Joshua knew it. Still, he had little fear of the man. He was perhaps too inexperienced to fear anybody who did not threaten to thrust his head into a bathtub filled with water. He knew himself to be a novice at tramping over the country. Also he was lonesome, for he had had friends of a sort in the House of Refuge. He studied the man who termed himself The Whimperer, and wondered if, despite the fellow's repulsiveness, it might not be well to consider his proposal. The tramp could help him over the rough places in his journey westward. It might even be possible that he would be an asset when it came to inducing people to look through the telescope at ten cents a look, for Joshua was not a forward young man and knew that he would find difficulty in selling his knowledge to the public. Then, could he not contrive to steal away and leave The Whimperer whenever the association became irksome? He did not like the man's face. But, then, he had not liked the face of Beaver Clegg when first he saw it; and what a change that ugly man had wrought in his life! Joshua could read the stars, but he had not the experience in life to read the faces of his fellowmen. It was the fact that The Whimperer might help him to get out West, above everything else, that caused him to consider this strange offer of partnership.

For Joshua was determinedly bound for the West. Locked up for so long in the House of Refuge, he had met no girls at all, and the picture of Madge Mundy was still fresh in his memory. She was the last girl that he had met before his commitment, the girl who had aroused in him the first whisperings of the male's desire for the society of the opposite sex. He still thought of Madge as he had seen her last, Oriental-topaz eyes aglow, bronze hair streaming down her youthful shoulders. And, boy though he yet was, he was seriously intent on seeking her, out there somewhere in the West. Perhaps the man called The Whimperer could help him find her.

Their orders were set before them, and the tramp talked as he ate greedily. He told of adventures on the road, covering a period of many years of vagabondage. His speech was quaint and in great part unintelligible to Joshua, but the boy listened despite secret warnings that came again and again.

"Dere's a lotta t'ings a plug c'n folly if he's wise," observed The Whimperer. "Don't worry—youse'n' me'll always get our scoffin's. And if de telescope racket fails and de woist comes to de woist I c'n slip whimpermeter to de Ezras and get us

lumps.”

“I don’t always understand you,” said Joshua. “What’s a lump?”

“A lump,” explained The Whimperer, inwardly gloating over the boy’s innocence, “is wot a kin’ lady slips youse w’en youse batter de back door. If she invites youse in and lets youse t’row yer feet unner de table, it’s a set-down. If she slips youse a lunch in a poiper bag, it’s a lump. See? Get me, Jack?”

“And what is whimpermeter?”

“Dat’s a woid dat I coined meself,” proudly proclaimed the John Yegg. “I’m kinda educated, youse see, Jack. Dat is, w’ile I ain’t got any schoolin’, I see t’ings. Get me? I use me nut, and I read quite a lot. Wot I call whimpermeter is a line o’ patter dat I hand out w’en I’m moochin’ fer de eats. I c’n twist up me face till it looks like I’m geed-up fer good. See dis here scar?” He indicated the smooth, red mark on his cheek. “Dat’s wot youse’d call an artificial scar, Jack. I had dat boined dere wid acid, an’ I had ’er run down into de corner o’ me mout’ apoipus. Den w’en I twist me mout’ towards it—like dis—an’ close de eye on dat side—like dis—dey all kinda run togedder, an’ me face looks like I been t’rough some terrible experience. Hey? Get me?”

Joshua did get him, for his face, twisted as it was, looked hideous.

“Den,” The Whimperer continued, “I was an acerbat in a little circus onct, until de booze got me. An’ I c’n t’row me arms out a joint an’ make it look like I’m all crippled up. Jes’ watch!”

On the stool, he twisted himself sidewise, and there came a succession of bony clicks along his left arm. Through his coatsleeve, even, Joshua could see the knots where bones had jumped their sockets, and his fingers, every one out of joint, were monstrously contorted. The entire arm looked as if it had been rendered useless in grinding machinery.

“Dat wing is me livin’, Jack,” he proudly observed. “How ’bout it? Didn’t I look like I needed some kin’ lady’s help? Den I play like I’m dumb, too—see?—an’ I twist meself up like dat and point to me mout’ an’ shake me head, an’ slip ’em one o’ dese here pomes dat I wrote meself an’ had printed in Chicago.”

He fished in an inside pocket of his greasy coat and produced a dirty card, which he proudly handed to his prospective neophyte.

“Read dat,” he offered.

And Joshua read:

A blighted life, a broken soul,
Sir or Madam, here you see.
Once mv limbs were sound and whole

Once my mind were sound and free,
Then no beggar could I be.

Pride I had, and children too,
A fond wife and a home unmarred.
Every Sunday in my pew
I sat; and other days worked hard.

A miner I, and honestly
I strove to do my best in life.
A great explosion suddenly
Wrecked home and self and wife.

This useless arm, this sightless eye
Were mine, when from the fragments
They bore me to my cot to die
With my wife's tears upon my garments.

One look into my ruined face
And the poor girl swooned away.
Without her care so kind and chaste
My little ones soon knew decay.

For my wife passed—of shock, they said—
And one by one my lisping tots
Were also laid in caskets. Flowers red
They placed about their graves in pots.

But I lived on, the wreck you see.
No hard work can I do.
O Sir or Madam, pity me
As I would pity you—

If *you* were thus by Fate subdued
And *I* was strong and whole!
O help me to a bed and food,
And Heaven bless your soul!

Joshua's lips were twitching over the unconscious humor of this weird verse, but he straightened them when he noted that the author's keen little eyes were watching him defiantly.

"Ain't dat a nifty sob-squeezer, Jack?" he wanted to know.

"It's very good," Joshua lied placidly.

"It gets de coin," remarked The Whimperer, recovering the card. "Dat's wot I call whimpermeter. I make up dem voices meself, an' sometimes I peddle 'em to udder stiffis dat ain't got de savvy an' wot I calls de capacity to compose 'em fer demselves. Dat's w'y dey call me De Whimperer—whimperin' is me graft. See? And I make more money dan any stiff on de road, I'll bet. But if youse're t'rough scoffin', le's get outa here an' beat it down to de jungles. We'll build a fire an' wait fer de eleven-o'clock t'rough freight, bound west. She stops here fer woter. Rap on a dish fer de lady to come out o' de kitchen—and youse pay fer me, too. Wot d'ye say, Jack? I'm a little short dis evenin', but I'll slip youse it to-morrow."

This was more than Joshua had bargained for, but when the proprietress came at his signal he meekly paid for his own and the John Yegg's meal. Then, scarce knowing why he did it, he shouldered his telescope and followed the tramp out into the soft summer night, steeped in the perfume of roses and serenaded by choirs of frogs.

The Whimperer shuffled along toward the river at the side of Joshua. Joshua really had no place to go unless he rented a room in the town's one hotel, and if he could catch a train westward-bound at eleven o'clock that night he preferred to do so. He therefore accompanied the tramp, curious to learn more of the strange life into which he had ventured as mysteriously as man is born upon the earth, willy nilly.

In the river bottom, some distance from the village, The Whimperer built a fire—after Joshua had collected twigs and driftwood.

"It ain't cold," said the tramp, "but a fire's nice. Now youse lay down an' get a little sleep, an' I'll wake youse up w'en de freight is ramblin' in. Go on—do wot I tell youse. If youse're gonta be me kid, youse've gotta min' me."

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARTNERSHIP DISSOLVED

Joshua, worn out from loss of sleep the night before, curled up beside the fire on the ground. He resented The Whimperer's matter-of-fact assumption of jockership over him, but he was too tired to protest. If the John Yegg was willing to stay awake and watch for the coming of the freight Joshua was content, for the present, to allow him to general his Western flight.

He fell asleep almost immediately. Then for a long time the strange man who had forced his companionship upon the boy sat watching him with his inscrutable eyes. Finally, deciding that his charge actually was asleep, he rose softly and shuffled off through the willows into the night.

He fell into a sandy path and followed it for some distance. Then he halted, and a soft whistle, repeated several times, came from his pitted lips.

Presently there was an answer, and before long a shadow fell across an open space in the trees, and the guarded question came:

"Is dat youse, Whimp?"

"Yeah," replied The Whimperer. "Don't make no noise. He's sleepin'."

Felix Wolfgang, the youth who now slipped to the side of the old tramp, was the name of the boy known to Joshua Cole in the House of Refuge as Number Twenty-three forty-four. Wolfgang had reached his twenty-first birthday while Joshua was still studying astronomy under Beaver Clegg, and had been released. He was of Norwegian descent, and had gone to the institution from the slums of Joshua's birthplace.

He had proved one of the most incorrigible inmates of the school, and had been released only because it was not allowed to keep a boy beyond the age of maturity. Felix had returned to his old haunts, had become a gang leader, and had hoboed all over the United States before Joshua came out. Many times he had been arrested, and once the penitentiary had threatened to take him within its gray walls.

He was tall and lean, with sandy hair, and as freckled as a painter's ladder. His expression of face was that of the swaggering gangster, cruel and insolent. He used the argot of gangs and thieves and tramps, and was all in all a tough young rascal on the eve of becoming a conscienceless criminal.

"Well, wot's doin'?" he asked The Whimperer in a husky whisper. This huskiness of voice was habitually assumed for effect, but now it was huskier still for

the sake of secrecy.

“Well, I pretty near snared um,” was The Whimperer’s reply. “Anyway, I got um in camp in de jungles, an’ he’s poundin’ his ear. I’ll get um away on de t’rough freight to-night, an’ den I guess I c’n swing um. But it’ll cost some jack, ol’-timer. I’ll hafta be punmlin’ up to de shacks so’s we c’n ride safe in boxcars. I gotta do dat to keep from gettin’ separated from um. Youse better come acrost wid sumpin, hadn’t youse?”

“How much d’youse want?” asked Wolfgang, not seeming to relish the suggestion.

“Slip me ten bones.”

“I’ll give youse five.”

“Nuttin’ doin’! Five won’t put us—”

“Here—take it and shut up! Dere’s more w’ere dis come from, an’ youse’ll get it w’en youse need it. I know youse, Whimp—if youse get yer glommers on too much coin youse’ll get lit an’ let de kid slip away. Five’s enough f’r now.”

Grumblingly the John Yegg accepted the tendered bill and hid it in his pocket. “Well, wot’s to do?”

“Jes’ stick to um, dat’s all youse’ve gotta do.”

“But wot’s it all about, Slim? Youse only tol’ me dat youse follied dis plug from Hathaway, lookin’ fer some experienced tramp to put on his trail. Well, youse was lucky in findin’ one, Jack, an’ I’ll do pretty near anyt’ing to get me gloms on a piece o’ kale. But wot do I do, an’ w’y do I do it?”

“Youse don’ need to know any more dan I already tol’ youse,” husked Wolfgang. “Youse do wot I say an’ I’ll pay your expenses, an’ w’en de proper time comes I’ll slip youse de biggest piece o’ jack youse ever had yer mitts on. Ain’t dat enough?”

“But, Slim—”

“Dat’s all from me. Take it or leave it.”

“But w’ere’ll youse be w’en it comes time to hand me dis big money?”

“I’m travelin’ right along wid youse, ol’-timer. Youse won’t have no trouble findin’ me w’en de time comes. Now go on back to de fire, an’ be ready to make dat freight w’en she rambles in. I’ll ketch ’er too—don’t worry about me. Get de kid in a boxcar, an’ I’ll ride outside an’ be ready to square de shack if it looks like he’s gonta ditch youse guys. An’ if youse get ditched an’ get another train, keep headin’ West. Dat’s all—leave de rest to me.”

“I don’t like it,” said The Whimperer.

“But youse’re gonta do it jes’ de same, ain’t youse?” sneered Wolfgang, and

went his way through the sand of the river bottom.

Mumbling to himself, The Whimperer returned to the fire to find Joshua still peacefully sleeping. There he sat himself down and fell to dreaming, his piggish black eyes fixed unseeingly on the blaze.

“Dere’s wot youse might call a dark plot on foot,” he muttered softly. “Dat Slim Wolfgang’s a bad acter, fer a kid, an’ I’m wonderin’—jes’ wonderin’. Who is dis here telescope guy, anyway? Dat’s wot I’m wonderin’.”

He continued his wondering for an hour or more, half dozing at times, but too old a hand on the road to allow himself full sleep when a train that he wished to catch was nearly due. And when there came to his half-hearing ears the distant long shriek of a locomotive he was instantly alert and bending over Joshua.

“C’mon, kid!” he warned, shaking the boy awake. “Come out of it an’ get yer look-see. She’s ramblin’ to us.”

Through the night Joshua stumbled along after him, his telescope, as inseparable as Christian’s burden, over his shoulder. They left the river bottom and crawled through a fence. They climbed the fill of the railroad grade, and the big bright eye of the coming locomotive gleamed at them from up the track, showering the rails at their feet with brilliancy.

“Dat’s her, all right,” avowed The Whimperer. “She’ll stop to take woter at dis boig, an’ de tank’s on de udder side o’ de deepo. Dat’ll bring de middle o’ de train somew’eres about here, an’ we c’n glom her easy. Le’s get down de fill an’ lay hid in de grass till we see wot’s doin’.”

The train acted according to the tramp’s wishes, and soon was at a standstill, with a string of dark boxcars looming above the expectant watchers. The Whimperer raised himself lizard-like from their hiding place and looked toward the rear end and the head end.

“Jake,” he presently announced. “Everyt’ing’s clear. C’mon!”

They walked along beside the train, The Whimperer investigating every car for an unsealed door, which indicated an empty. In the course of time he found one, cautiously slid it open, and, after carefully looking up and down the track, scrambled in and reached down a hand to his companion. When both were aboard the veteran closed the door as softly as possible, and then they stood in silence and awaited the dictates of chance.

No “shack” came to rout them out, and before long the short *toot-toot* of the locomotive whistle announced that the train was “out of town,” and then the wheels began to creak.

“Not bad,” The Whimperer praised himself, and sat down on the floor, with his

ever-weary back against one of the boxcar's walls. "Hit de hay, kid," he invited. "Dere'll be lots o' time to sleep if youse travel wid De Whimperer fer yer jocker. He's de plug dat'll put youse t'rough. No foolin'!"

They made a big jump that night, and morning found them well into the misnamed Middle West. They were routed out by an irate brakeman about ten o'clock, to discover that they were in a fair-sized town and to be chased from railroad property by one of the company's detectives. The Whimperer thought the town too large for a scientific lecture, and advised walking to a nearby village.

It was only three miles distant, and they reached it well before noon. Often, as they walked, The Whimperer looked back along the track at a figure following them, then watched his companion to see if he had been observed. When they reached the village The Whimperer protested against a restaurant, and they bought meat and vegetables and "cooked up" in the jungles. Here they rested until night, then went into the town, where Joshua once more set up his telescope and invited the populace to view the moon. The Whimperer stood by, listening to the lecture, but seeming to realize that anything he could contribute to the proceedings might result in failure because of his suspicious looks.

Joshua's earnings were frugal that night, and The Whimperer growled his disapproval, as a good jocker should, over his road-kid's failure to make good. In the middle of the night they caught another freight, were thrown off, caught a second, and were far from their starting point when morning came.

To follow in detail the fortunes of the boy who later became Cole of Spyglass Mountain doubtless would make interesting reading; but that is not the purpose of this narrative. To tell how he was led westward like a dancing monkey on a chain by that errant vagabond, The Whimperer, would be to chronicle a series of strange adventures, the like of which never took place before in Trampdom. Joshua saw all the degradation of tramp life, met famous hobos and infamous hobos; slept in sand-houses, Salvation Army rooming houses, in coal bunkers, stretched out along the backs of several sheep bleating in a stock car, in cars of grain, beneath piles of lumber, and in many a well-known "jungle" camp. He saw all of the inner workings of the itinerant life which is so peculiarly an American institution, worked at many things, fought many battles—some won, some lost. Reduced to bitter hunger countless times, he almost lost his courage and began to believe himself nothing but a pawn of Fate. There is a strange lure about the life of the tramp that pleads with the most circumspect to renounce the ways of honest men and live the life of shiftlessness and freedom, and Joshua Cole did not escape it.

Time and again, in the beginning, he tried to lose himself from The Whimperer, but failed repeatedly. He did not know that, when he contrived to steal away and catch a train alone, a shadow followed him and watched his movements, then wired his whereabouts to his jocker, who overtook him by paying his fare on a first-class train. When the tramp caught up with him, however, he dared not resort to the common practice among men of this type of beating his road-kid. It was doubtful if the stiff old youth-drained yegg could have handled the boy just budding into manhood, so he resorted to wheedling pleas and worked on Joshua's sympathy, at which The Whimperer was an adept.

They had been on the road together nearly a year, and the misfortunes of tramp life had whipped them here and there, north and south and east and west, which left Joshua far from the goal he sought, before The Whimperer learned of the value of the telescope. Joshua's many efforts to evade the yegg had in great measure brought about this zigzag course; for his jocker knew that he was headed west, so Joshua had ridden north- and south-bound trains in the effort to deceive him. Now they were in Kansas, after having crossed that state several times, and settled in a "jungle" camp for the night.

The Whimperer lolled on one side of the campfire, and on the other side sat Joshua, in a begged suit of clothes much too large for him, looking up at his friends, the stars, and vaguely wondering what the future held in store for him.

"Rig up de ole look-see," suggested The Whimperer, "an' give us a slant at de eternal heavens."

To the weird old panhandler the telescope was ever a thing to be wondered at, but, strange to say, he had talked very little with Joshua about it. In his twisted mind was the realization that this young man lived in a world apart from his, and he was not a little awed by Joshua's knowledge. But to-night the stars were soft and radiant, and their spell fell upon the man. Then as Joshua began adjusting the refractor on its tripod, the yeggman asked:

"Say, wot does one o' dem t'ings cost, kid?"

"This one," said Joshua, "is worth five hundred dollars."

The glory faded out of the stars. With a bound the tramp was on his feet. "Wot!" he gasped.

"Five hundred dollars," Joshua repeated.

The Whimperer drew in a long breath and allowed the wind to burst from his lungs. "Kid," he asked in a trembling tone, "d'ye mean to slip it to me dat youse'n'me's been cold an' hungry an' wet an' wid no place to flop a million times, w'ile youse was packin' five hundred bones over yer shoulder?"

“You wouldn’t pack it,” Joshua placidly reminded him.

“W’y, dat’s simply—simply—” Words failed the awestruck Whimperer. “Dat’s simply scand’lous!” he barked out finally. “Kid, we coulda peddled dat t’ing, an’— Well, wot couldn’t we ’a’ done!”

“Peddled this refractor!”

“Sure peddle ’er, Jack. W’y youse’re a bigger fool dan I t’o’t youse was. Gawd A’mighty, kid! T’ink of it!”

A low laugh came from Joshua’s lips. “Forget that,” he said. “Nothing could make me part with my telescope. Here it is. Come on.”

“I don’t wanta look now, kid,” said The Whimperer. “I—I kinda lost me appetite fer de udder universes. Five hundred smackers! Gawd A’mighty!”

For the remainder of that night, while they waited for a train, The Whimperer sat lost in thought. They caught a freight bound west at midnight, and next morning Joshua was rudely shaken to a realization of the stern realities of life by a dark-browed brakeman.

He sprang erect, ready to defend himself against this common enemy of tramps, and found that he had no companion to aid him. At some stop during the night while Joshua slept The Whimperer had left the train—and the telescope had gone with him.

CHAPTER XIV

MAN AND THE SLUG

Man is a human chameleon. Environment plays strange pranks with what he had imagined was the settled order of his life. He owes his mental development to his gregariousness. Aeons ago when the hairy cavemen formed clans the first step was taken toward organized society as we know it to-day.

Transport a man of the street from Broadway and set him down among the Eskimos, and not many years will have elapsed before he will be thinking and fighting and loving and longing as do the brown little people of the North. His ego will clamor for recognition. He cannot endure social ostracism. So as the Eskimos cannot interest themselves in his Broadway, cannot think his Broadway, cannot see his Broadway, the Broadway within him flickers out so that his soul-hunger for companionship may be appeased. You may set him back on Broadway after a lapse of years and in a day none will know that he has ever left it; but so long as he lives in the Frozen North so long will he be an Eskimo. There will of course be memories and unvoiced regrets to torture him through recurring moods of reminiscence, but these will be brief and will occur on lonely nights. Throughout the days he will be an Eskimo. And sometimes he will not care to return to Broadway. Men even deliberately return to penitentiaries where they have spent great portions of their lives.

Man is a human chameleon; it is beyond dispute. His soul craves intercourse with his fellows and without it shrivels to a rattling pod. And if he be associated day by day with only tramps he will either become a tramp or a morbid Pariah—and from the last he shrinks in horror.

This was taking place in the heart of Joshua Cole. By gradual degrees he was growing to think and see and look at life through the eyes of the nomad men about him. Spring was manifest. There seemed to be a subtle incense in the air that drugged him and contorted his views. He was living close to Mother Earth. Creature comforts were all that he craved. There was a sort of strange fascination about living from hand to mouth. The ingenuity required to live on nothing—the resourcefulness demanded—made strong appeal to some primitive satisfaction within him. He took a sort of pride in the comfort of a full belly when it was the result of luck or primitive cunning. To get something for nothing seems always to be the ambition of the race, no matter how warningly reason may rebel. To cover a hundred miles of country

without paying a cent for transportation gave him the same amount of pride or satisfaction or gloating. It all made appeal to his sense of individuality. He was parasitically living and moving and having his being as does some wild thing in the woods—some flower of the fields. Trifling achievements caused his mentality to strut. He was as contented over discovering an unexpected warm place to creep into out of the rain as a merchant is in making an unexpectedly large sale of goods at the close of the day's business. If he outwitted a train crew and made a longer jump than he had imagined possible, his vanity was tickled, even as might be tickled the vanity of a lawyer who has engineered a coup in court and brought about the admiration of the jury and his client, and the discomfiture of opposing counsel. He rejoiced as the caveman rejoiced over insignificant developments; but to him and the caveman they were not insignificant. They meant food and warmth and shelter. On Broadway similar developments might mean more expensive apartments, a new sedan, a trip to Europe, a diamond tiara.

Subtle Spring had borne on her soft wings the pollen of a strange philosophy. After all, what was life but the constant and inherent struggle to live? What mattered it how one lived?—or where? Was not coffee as delectable boiled in a blackened can over a campfire as in a silver-mounted electric percolator? Why did man wear clothes? To keep his body warm, or to turn his acquaintances green with envy? Was there more warmth and comfort in a hundred-dollar custom-made creation than in the whole though unpresentable suit that clothed Joshua Cole? Was his old home in Hathaway any warmer than a Southern Pacific sand-house? Did millionaires travel faster in their private cars than he could travel on top of one of them?

After all, what was the use in being anything but a vagabond? What men called progress brought nothing but aches and pains and shortened lives. Civilization was all pretense and cosmetics. Months had passed since the theft of the telescope, and Joshua, racing wildly here and there, risking his life a dozen times to catch fast trains, had failed to find The Whimperer. He laughed bitterly now as he sat in his camp alone, in Southern Colorado.

For five days he had eaten nothing, and was no longer hungry. Starvation brings weird imaginings to the mind of man. Strange fancies come to him—dreams that are like the dreams of addicts to some potent narcotic. He saw Civilization in all its pretense, in all of its hollow shams, in all of its aimless flounderings toward nothing. Science—bah! What could he ever hope to learn of science? Almost from birth he had been the victim of a cruel Fate. Well, he was through—absolutely through! Fate had ordained that he be a tramp. Why kick against the pricks? He would be a tramp.

Then suddenly he saw something on the ground that whisked his mind back over the years to another day in spring, when he and his brother Lester and two other boys had watched a slug lower itself from a chip by a string of mucus. And what he saw was another slug, of the same species, *Limax Campestris*, blind, wriggling helplessly along, bound nowhere.

Man was like this poor creature, condemned to a short space of endless wriggling about merely because life was in it.

Man the slug! A million million years from now this slug might have a brain and be trying to telegraph to Mars! Wouldn't he look odd in a limousine, in which he would proudly ride until rheumatism confined him to his chair at the age of fifty and indigestion made him growl at his slug attendant. Poor thing! God help him then. Better were it had he remained a slug wriggling along through slime, with man's foot forever threatening to end his stupid life!

Then Joshua saw another one—a snail with a wonderful shell upon his back. He blinked his gray-blue eyes and smiled. Why, here was progress—a closed car, by George! His speed was no greater—it required as long for him to travel from leaf to leaf as it did his more unfortunate brother; but surely the shell spelled progress.

Long and tremulously he laughed at his whimsicality. Was he going crazy? No, no! He was right, eternally right. In the end, what would it matter if he became a great astronomer and won fame and favor? Fame was a hollow thing. Men would forget him two days after he had died. Millions could not keep him any warmer than he had been last night in the sand-house. He could eat only so much, and after he had eaten what recked it whether he had partaken of caviar on toast or cornbread? Did he wish to travel? Before him stretched lines of steel. In ports lay vessels riding at anchor, awaiting his coming as a stoker or a roustabout or a stowaway. Did he crave knowledge, news, entertainment? Great libraries were open to him in every consequential town. Did he need new clothes? There were institutions galore to supply them for a little trifling toil. Did he crave friendship? His world was filled with men who would not hold themselves aloof were he to make advances.

Then why not become a tramp? Why not be original—unique? Save Beaver Clegg, among all the men and women he had known there was not one original mind—not one fearless heart—not one soul that was not clutched and clamped by the prosaic, by the ever-haunting fear that its possessor was not thinking and acting and living just as other men and women were. Why, they actually abhorred the original! Deliberately they stultified such original thoughts as now and then beseechingly presented themselves. Sheep, all of them—bleating, crowding sheep, shouldering one another aside in an effort to gain the protection of the middle of the flock, where

no one might single them out and accuse them of being anything but sheep! Could he, Joshua Cole, a man now, hope to become the bellwether of this wriggling, woolly mass? No, because he would not stoop to setting a pace that their newspaper, moving-picture minds would follow. Pitiably worms slathering in the slime of up-to-dateness! Afraid of their own minds, afraid of their neighbors' minds, afraid of life itself!

He would become a tramp—a unique tramp—king of the tramps! At least he would be an object of wonder, though an outcast. Better a kingpin among tramps than a huddling lamb in a flock of trembling sheep, all just like him!

Joshua maneuvered a stick until the slug was upon it, and as on that other spring day repeated the experiment that had been the actual beginning of his vagabondage.

“How now, old-timer?” he croakingly chuckled. “You’re on an island of wood, and the earth is twenty times your length below you. What will you do? You’ve reached a momentous period in your career. Blind, brainless, inefficient, pitiably helpless, yet Nature has provided you with the means of overcoming a catastrophe like this. And does that mean that there is hope for the race of man?”

Then as the pitiably creature completed its travels over the stick and began lowering itself to the ground, Joshua put down the stick and burst into a fit of nervous weeping, the result of strain and hunger.

Like a repentant blasphemer Joshua Cole threw himself on the grass, sobbing piteously.

“O God!” he prayed passionately, “at last I have learned life’s greatest lesson! Mankind is in the hollow of Thy hand. Not a sparrow falls unheeded. Not a worm is cloven in vain. Somewhere there is a goal worth striving for, and toward it man is always floundering. In him lies the means of his own salvation. Some day in the unseen future he will learn his own humanity; for within him Thou hast planted the power to return to the image of God in which he was created. I will keep on traveling West—and—and find another telescope—and Madge.”

Joshua Cole had fought his first great battle—and won.

CHAPTER XV

OUT WEST

A new railroad to be called the Gold Belt Cut-off was being built in California. At a little desert town named Spur trains arrived with almost weekly regularity which bore the outfits of contractors who were to do the work. These trains and others brought many tramp laborers from all parts of the United States, for tramps are inseparably connected with big construction in dirt and rock. Many people imagine that tramps never work at honest toil. These have never seen a big railroad in the building.

All was hustle and excitement at Spur this morning, for two long freight trains, carrying the immense outfit of the main contractors, Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, had just rolled in, and a hundred tramps were at the unloading. A temporary camp was pitched until the outfit was ready for its forty-mile trip by wagon to the mountains, where lay the heaviest work. The road was to cross the San Antonio Range at an altitude of approximately six thousand feet, and there the aged hills were being torn asunder.

Hundreds of horses and mules were led from the stock cars, and turned over to the stable boss and his helpers. The cooks were busy over several great ranges, set up temporarily in the open, and the air was filled with the odors of coffee and frying ham. Knocked-down wagons and grading implements were being thrown together. The walking boss rode about on his saddle horse, fat and prancing from its long confinement on the train, bawling orders to which no one paid attention. Bales of alfalfa hay by the ton were being opened, and mules brayed and horses whinnied.

To the stable boss came Joshua Cole, grave-eyed and slim. Joshua had just left a freight train that had come to rest at Spur, and the train crew had let him ride for a hundred miles because he was headed for this scene of intense activity.

To the stable boss he said:

“Got a job?”

“Sure—a hundred of ’em. Don’t bother me! You a skinner?”

“Yes,” said Joshua. “But I’m a hammerman, too, and I prefer to work in rock.”

“Then see the walker. Or just go to work unloadin’. Don’t bother anybody about a job, young fella. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” said Joshua.

“Huh!” said the stable boss.

Joshua walked toward the nearest car of the train, from which men were dragging bundles of tents, heavy tent poles, and all manner of camp paraphernalia. He noticed a squat, wide-chested man with a broad-brimmed tan hat on his head, who, though undemonstrative, stood watching the unloading in a half-alooof, half-interested manner which gave him an air of commandship. Toward him Joshua directed his steps, and as he drew nearer he took note of finely chiseled features, heavy iron-gray hair, and kindly slate-colored eyes that looked out from under craggy brows as black as a campfire kettle. They made thick arches, and here and there solitary hairs that were thrice as long as the others stuck out like the spines of a cactus. A stubby gray beard covered the lower portion of his face, and the rest of it was brown as a cascara berry.

“Are you the boss here?” asked the wayfarer.

“Yep”—and the kindly slate eyes gave Joshua a keen, quizzical look that seemed to catalogue him from A to Z.

“I want to go to work.”

“Hop to it.”

Here was invitation enough, so Joshua fell in at the end of the line of men moving to and from the car, and when he reached the door took upon his shoulders the tongue of a wheeled scraper that was handed out. He carried it to where a group of men were assembling all sorts of grading implements, and returned for another load.

For about fifteen minutes he made the same round, carrying anything that was handed out, often assuming a quarter or a half of some heavy piece of freight too cumbersome for a single man. And as he worked he frequently caught the slate eyes of the squat boss upon him.

This man attracted him strangely. The odd contrast of iron-gray hair and coal-black brows made the man’s face compelling. The slate-blue eyes, too, added to the contrast, and the myriad crow’s-feet that made a fine network about them gave the face a kindly personality. He wore a gray flannel shirt, and his colorless trousers were held up by a belt. The heels of his boots were high and slender. The trousers legs covered the tops of them, but they were rolled up smoothly at the bottoms, displaying four inches of bootlegs.

At the end of the fifteen minutes a great triangle was hammered upon in the vicinity of where the cooks labored. Instantly every man dropped whatever he had in hand and hurried in the direction of the odorous ham and coffee.

No tables had been set up, and the tramp laborers formed a line, took their food in their hands from the cook’s helpers in the form of sandwiches, and sat on the ground under lofty cottonwoods. With a cup of smoking coffee in one hand, two hot

fried-ham sandwiches in the other, and an enormous boiled potato in his pocket, Joshua Cole found a place. And as he seated himself he saw, likewise laden and coming toward him, the squat man who had awakened his interest. To his surprise the man came directly to his tree, squatted on his heels with a little grunt, and deposited his grub before him in a nest of clean, slick leaves.

“Hot as hell, ain’t it?” he vouchsafed. “Thought I’d like to make yer acquaintance, pardner. You ain’t a tramp, I take it?”

The last sentence was a question, and Joshua made reply: “Yes, I’ve been a tramp for over a year.”

“Uh-huh—I savvy.” The man imbedded a set of perfect white teeth in a ham sandwich to the ruination of nearly half of it. Then, with his mouth full, he talked on, thus:

“Uh-huh—I get ye, pardner. Guess I been a tramp myself. One right now, f’r that matter. But I mean a reg’lar tramp—like these here jaspers here.” He waved the doomed remainder of the sandwich in a semi-circle to indicate the squatting diners.

“Well, perhaps not,” Joshua agreed with him. “Anyway, I’m on the bum and needed a job.”

“Here, too. I drifted in here from up about Wild Woman Springs. Been drivin’ stage since the Lord knows when between Wild Woman an’ the mines up at G-string Mountain. Six-up over seventeen miles o’ the worst grade in the San Antones. Then what d’ye think they done? Built a new road and put on automobiles. Result—California Bill Fox loses his job. Broke, as always, o’ course. So I drifts down here to Spur yistiddy, and to-day when this outfit rambles in I hits the boss for a freightin’ job. Guess I got it, ’cause I know this country. An’ he took a likin’ to me, seems, for he made me a straw boss over the unloadin’ until the outfit’s ready to move. That’s me, pardner—an’ I ain’t a tramp, rightly speakin’. I know you ain’t either. But what I’m tryin’ to get at is, what are you? Course I ain’t aimin’ to be too bold.”

“Well,” Joshua replied, “I guess I’m not much of anything. I’m from the East—away back, almost on the Atlantic. I was broke, and I rambled West. I worked here and there all over the country at one thing and another, and I’ve been on the railroad grade several times. I worked for three months on a little job on the M. K. and T., and in Texas a while on the Southern Pacific. I learned how to drive a team and I worked in heavy rock a little in Colorado. I can use a striking hammer and handle powder fairly well. That’s what I like best.”

“Not here,” disagreed California Bill Fox. “Me for the *caballos*. I do know horses an’ mules, but I ain’t keen f’r tearin’ up the earth. I like to get behind a ramblin’ six o’ Western ponies and tear *over* the earth, but tearin’ her up goes ag’in’

the grain. Guess I'm what ye might call one o' these here nature lovers. I find rocks an' trees kinda friendly, ye understand. An' I'd rather look at the sun settin' over a mountain top than a three-ring circus. I'm an old nut about flowers and things like that, an' I ain't perticular who knows it. I c'n kill a man, but not a deer. An' that ain't sayin' I don't like venison, either. D'ye think I'm quaint, pardner?"

Joshua laughed at the suddenness of the question, which in itself was indisputably quaint. "You may be that," he said, "but if you are, it's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Uh-huh—I get ye. Thought maybe you'd turn out to be like that when I was watchin' ye this mornin'. These here stiffes get my goat, an' I can't tolerate 'em. I was wonderin' if they wasn't somebody in all this mess o' humanity that I could cotton to, and then you come and I know immediate that you was different. That there word 'different' is all-fired handy, ain't it? I see it in every story I read, pretty near. The heroine says to the hero, 'You're different,' an' he lets out a sigh an' shoots back, 'You're different, too'—an' on the next page she's callin' him dear heart. Get two folks together that's different, an' the stuff's all off—seems."

Joshua laughed. "Do you read lots?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm a great reader. That's what makes me different, I guess. I'm a character, pardner." The keen eyes studied Joshua from under their black shelter. "On the desert and in the mountains I'm just Ole California Bill, but on the inside I'm a character. The inside is what we call the country on the other side o' the range—where the big towns and cities are. Folks from over there would come to the desert and ride in my stage up into the mountains, an' before we'd got to Shirt-tail Bend some skirt would whisper to another one that here was a character. Ain't that nice? Now what would you say they mean—that I'm loco—off my nut?"

"Well, not exactly, perhaps," ventured Joshua. "Wouldn't you rather be called a character than to travel along through life unnoticed—just one of the herd? Seems to me that's only a careless way of saying that you are original—have individuality."

"D'ye think so?"

"Sure."

"I see I'm gonta cotton to you a lot, pardner," said California Bill. "Say, when we ramble out, you make it to ride with me on my freight wagon—if I get one. Will ye? I wonder if ye've got any particular hobby that maybe both of us could talk about."

"Science? Astronomy?" suggested Joshua.

"Know anythin' about 'em? I sure do like to talk about things—kinda wonder about things, ye understand. Me f'r the why-are-we-here business every time. The desert an' the mountains makes a fella thataway—seems. Say, I've wondered about

why I'm here so much that I think I've got the answer. But, then, ye'll only think I'm a nut—so why bother ye? And I wonder about stars and the moon a lot, too. Sun don't interest me much, except that, seein' all life depends on the sun, I c'n sympathize with the sun-worshippers without half tryin'. But the sun's too all-fired prominent to raise my curiosity. The moon and stars, now, I c'n look up at them without havin' my eyes put out. And say—wonder! Leave it to me! D'ye know anythin' at all about astronomy?"

"A little."

The slate eyes studied Joshua again. "Ye was well raised, I c'n see that," said California Bill. "Maybe ye ain't talkin' through yer hat. I've seen men an' men—I think I know 'em pretty well. I took men to the penitentiary—That is, I mean I seen men goin' to the penitentiary that could reel off Shakespeare an' trigonometry an' socialism—say! An' one fella that I saw knew more about this here Einstein than Einstein does 'imself. 'Tleast, it sounded like he did to me. Ye can't tell about men from th' clothes they wear ner the job they got, ner nothin' like that—but I'm a hog fer readin' their face. Well, you ride with me an' we'll talk about astronomy. I'm harmless. Just a character."

"Have you lived in California long?" asked Joshua.

"Longer'n that. I lived here forever."

"Forever?"

"Fifty-three year, if ye press me, pardner. An' I'm fifty-three year old. What call'd they have to brand me California Bill Fox if I'd ever been anywhere else? I was born here an' ain't ever goin' to leave. That's forever far's I'm concerned."

California Bill found it impossible to talk while he gulped down half a cup of hot coffee, so Joshua took the opportunity to shift the conversation into the channel that he wanted it to travel.

"Have you been up where the road is building?" he asked.

California Bill lowered his granite cup. "Yeah—a billion times. But that's before a railroad was thought of. The new wagon road's just been finished to G-string, though, an' I drove stage up there right along until Saturday week ago. Then the Old West says, 'Bill, I'm passin'. It's up to you. What're ye doin'?' An' I says, 'I pass, too.'"

"Know any of the contractors up there?"

"Pretty near all of 'em—seems. Some of 'em been on the job six months, ye know. These people, the main contractors, didn't move in until they couldn't sub-let any more of the work. Then they hadta take holt an' handle what was left—and they got a rarin' tough job, too."

“Back in Utah, as I was traveling West,” said Joshua thoughtfully, “a stiff who had been working here told me that a man called Bloodmop Mundy had a piece on the Gold Belt Cut-off. Is that so?”

“Well, it was until about three months ago, an’ then he ups and dies.”

“He’s dead?”

“Well, they planted him, anyway,” drawled California Bill. “I reckon their intentions was good. Nice *hombre*. His daughter is runnin’ the outfit now. That is, her and her maw; but Madge is the boss because Mis’ Mundy is retirin’ like. Some kid, this here Shanty Madge. Pretty as sunset on a mountain lake. An’ she’s makin’ good with the work, but they got a whopper of a job. One o’ these days a whole blame hill’s gonta fall down on ’em; an’ then I’m thinkin’ somethin’s gonta go bust. Bloodmop was makin’ good for the last sev’r’l years, they tell me. Started in as a gypo man back East, with a few old skates an’ a handful o’ geed-up tools. Come West an’ branched out, and was swingin’ big jobs in Nevada an’ California. Then he took this one, subbin’ offen Demarest, Spruce an’ Tillou—biggest thing he’d so far undertook—seems. An’ then—just gettin’ a good start—he croaked. But Shanty Madge’ll swing it, if that confoun’ hill don’t come down on her an’ ruin her complete. There goes th’ blame’ triangle, an’ we gotta get to work. Say, I didn’t get yer name, ol’-timer.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE ROAD TO G-STRING

So the end of Joshua Cole's quest was at hand. Up there somewhere in the mountains was Madge Mundy—"Shanty" Madge, as California Bill had called her. He wondered, as he worked that afternoon, what she would be like. He knew why they called her Shanty Madge, for he remembered all that she had told him about "gyppo" men and "shanty" men, as small contractors were called on the railroad grade, and since leaving his home town he had worked in several camps, so that he was familiar with the vernacular. She would be over eighteen now, and he tried to picture her at such an age. But always his mind presented the photograph of a pretty little girl with expressive Oriental-topaz eyes, and red-gold hair streaming down her back, with skin the color of the mythical Indian girl who saved John Smith's life.

And Bloodmop Mundy was dead. Aside from Beaver Clegg, Joshua had known no other man friend, and he had warmed instinctively to the bluff, rough-and-ready gyppo man. Would Mrs. Mundy remember him? He had liked Mrs. Mundy, and now, with the experience of years to aid him, he was able to look back and wonder at her serenity and her strange devotion to a man of Bloodmop Mundy's type.

Joshua was unpresentable. His clothes were frayed and his hair needed trimming. His shoes, too, were relics; and altogether he made a disreputable-looking figure. He must work at the camp of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, he told himself, until he had earned enough money to buy respectable clothes before seeking Madge. And the thought of seeking her filled his heart with dread. She might remember him, but that would be about all. Surely, since she had grown up a hundred men had made love to her. Was she still interested in the stars?

Another train rolled into Spur, carrying the third section of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou's outfit, before they were ready to take up the long, tiresome trip to the mountains. But on the third day after Joshua's coming the first six-horse team moved out ahead of a wagonload of tents, and one by one others fell in behind it until the long train, stretched out over the desert, was more than a mile in length.

Joshua rode with California Bill, who drove six big slick mules hitched to a tremendous load of baled alfalfa. They had a place midway in the train. The wagons rumbled over the bridge that crossed the river flowing through the town, ascended a sharp grade hacked in a rocky butte, and reached a level plateau beyond. Here, far as the eye could see, stretched the sandy desert, bare in spots, but for the most part

covered sparsely with sage and grease wood. Jack-rabbits loped off down the avenues between the breast-high plants, bronze-green in the brilliant sunlight. A coyote stared at them, ears erect, then vanished. Here grew a clump of stately yuccas, that mysterious tree of the desert with swords for leaves and a trunk as pithy as a cornstalk. There in the mirage-steeped distance a desert whirlwind traveled along, a funnel-shaped pillar of sand and dust that scarce seemed to move, but which in reality was sweeping along at dizzying speed. Dust clouds arose from the wagon train and hung in the air. The dust was filled with alkali, and it stung the lips and the eyes and made men frequently seek the desert water-bags that hung handy on every wagon.

California Bill lolled on his high seat and smoked brown-paper cigarettes. Somehow, Joshua thought, his bearded lips and his mature years called for a corn-cob pipe, but Bill was too strongly Western for that.

They talked of many things, and as Joshua's confidence in the man grew firmer he told the strange story of his life, omitting nothing. From time to time, as he listened, California Bill sagely nodded his head, as if all matters in the universe were understood by him.

"Well, Tony," he remarked, as Joshua came to a pause and looked off over the desert with unseeing gray-blue eyes, "you've had enough experience to make a man out of you, and I guess it's done it."

"Don't call me Tony," objected Joshua. "That name calls up memories that are not all pleasant."

"I was just thinkin'," said Bill. "Seems to me that name's kinda appropriate. It set you apart from the other kids in the House of Refuge—seems—and it meant somethin'. If I was you, I'd take that name just to kinda spit in the face of Old Lady Fate. D'ye get what I mean? S'pose, f'r instance, that an hombre was to peddle me a salted mine and went away chucklin' in his sleeve. Then s'pose that mine was to unexpectedly show a big pay streak, and make me rich. Now ye get me. Joshua ain't any kind of a name for a jasper like you, anyway. When ye get to be a big astronomer, which ye will some day, Joshua'll be plumb *hi-yu-skookum*—which is Cayuse Indian for 'mighty fine'—but out here on the desert an' in the mountains Tony sounds more sociable. Le's make it Tony. Tony Cole—that's *my bueno*. But ten years from now Dr. Joshua Cole will be the proper caper. Ye must 'a' learned a lot from that ole Clegg party, Tony."

"He taught me all that I know," Joshua replied.

"I'd like to 'a' met that man," said California Bill. "I cottoned to him the minute you began to tell about 'im. I like ugly men. Somehow er nuther they seem the most

dependable.”

“I heard something about you yesterday,” Joshua told him. “They tell me you were once deputy sheriff of one of the northern counties in California.”

“Did they? Huh! Yes, I pattered around a bit at that job.”

“And I was told, too, that you are without fear—that you are a deadly gunman and have half a dozen bullet holes in your body.”

“Shucks, now! Who’s been talkin’ behind my back?”

“A man who lives at Spur told me. Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“That you are fearless?”

“Course it ain’t true. No man is fearless. Why, I’ve heard my own teeth rattlin’ like seed in a pod many a time. Look away over yonder at the mountains, Tony. See that deep scar? That’s Caldron Cañon—hottest place anywhere about here. An’ to the left of it is Buttonhook Bend, where they usta hold up the mail stage for G-string. Old road—abandoned now. And ahead, if ye’ll stand up, ye c’n see a square o’ green on the desert. Looks like an emerald in the middle of a khaki blanket, don’t it? That’s Box-R Ranch. Artesian wells—the only water between here and Wild Woman Springs. We’ll camp there.”

“Have you ever killed a man, Bill?” Joshua persisted.

“Who, me? Reminds me of ole Seth Spicer, that usta be up in Mendocino County in the big-timber belt. Fella ast ’im how many bear he’d killed. ‘When?’ says Seth. ‘Why, in yer life?’ says the fella. ‘In my *whole* life?’ says Seth. ‘Why, son, ye don’t expect me to recollect that, do ye? But I remember killin’ forty-seven one winter.’ But it ain’t as bad as that with me, Tony. I plugged a couple er more, I guess, in my time. But I don’t like to think about it. I’m powerful peaceful, me. That’s why I quit dep’ty-sheriffin’—don’t like to be packin’ a gat and smokin’ up the scenery any too well. That’s what I call plumb *cultus*—which, seein’ ye’re an Easterner, means ‘very bad.’ I like hosses an’ mules an’ trees an’ rocks—seems. Now tell me somethin’ more about Mars an’ the moon. I never get sick o’ that stuff. Is ole Mars inhabited, d’ye think?”

They camped at Box-R Ranch in the middle of the afternoon, and were away again before the sun was up. Next afternoon found the crawling worm that was the wagon train at Wild Woman Springs, which for years had been nothing but a watering station on the road to G-string, but which, since the coming of the nomad laborers, had become a frontier village boasting eleven houses. Every house was built of new, resinous pine and corrugated iron, and all sheltered gambling devices, rude bars, restaurant counters, bunks for the exhausted, and floors upon which to

dance with the highly painted female denizens of the dives. Here were Scotty's Place, The Palace Dance Hall, The Gem, Poker Dan's, The Midway, Shoestring Charley's, Cowboy Mary's Place, The Forget-me-not, and others with names as suggestive and picturesque. A mile or more from Wild Woman Springs the outfit next morning left the desert and began the sharp ascent into the abrupt mountains. They reached Yucca Flat at noon, where they camped, and at two o'clock they entered upon the new road to G-string which had robbed California Bill of his six-up express and made of him a six-mule freighter.

There was one more night's camp before they crawled to the summit, which took place in the middle of the following morning. For hours the air had been growing cooler. All the majestic bleakness of the desert had passed and now friendly pines and tinkling streams and lofty, distant peaks greeted the tired travelers. Then they wound down into a level mountain valley where gleamed a tranquil lake.

"Stirrup Lake," Bill named it. "An' the mountain over there that looks down on it is Saddle Mountain. G-string is at the foot of it, but we don't go that way. We'll lead 'round the lake on the east and follow the south shore. See those peaks over there to the west? That's where we're headin' for—that's where the railroad's comin' through the mountains. Shanty Madge is there."

He looked quickly with his keen, slate-colored eyes at his companion, the dense black brows lifted inquiringly.

"So ye knew Madge when she was a kid, hey?" he asked. "Eleven, did ye say?"

"Yes," said Joshua, and he felt the heat growing in his face.

"Well, she's over eighteen now, I guess. She's good f'r the eyes. I've seen a lotta women handlin' men's jobs in the West, Tony, but none just like Shanty Madge. She's different—there's that confoun' handy word again! But Madge is educated—they say her mother was a wizard at bringin' her up—an' she ain't like any female pioneer that I ever knew before. She's a good scout and all that, democratic an' free, but she's—well, confoun' that word!—she's different. Figger it out f'r yerself. D'ye think ye're in love with her, son?"

California Bill's abruptness was often disconcerting. Joshua's face went red as fire, and his eyes failed to meet the freighter's.

"Excuse me, Tony," Bill said gently. "I'm always shootin' from the pocket—seems. But I know what brung ye out here—just that an' nothin' else. Shut up like ye was in that there he-convent, seein' no girls, ye just kep' on thinkin' of the little girl ye met in the gypo camp, an' when ye broke corral ye loped for her. But I wanta tell ye, son, that Madge is what ye might call a grown woman now—though at that she's only a kid—and she's a mighty much admired skirt. Why, young Montgomery, son

of the big Montgomery of Montgomery and Applegate, big contractors, is after Madge hot an' heavy. I ain't meanin' to discourage ye, Tony—but right now ye're only a tramp, an'—Well, figger it out f'r yerself."

"I'm not going to see her until I've earned enough money to buy some decent clothes," Joshua told California Bill. "I'm a pretty good powderman—it's the only thing that appeals to me in railroad construction."

"That comes o' yer scientific mind," said Bill.

"I suppose so," Joshua agreed. "But the best of it is that a good powderman has a chance to get somewhere, it seems to me, and I'm going to try for a foreman's job as soon as a chance offers."

"Ye're pretty young."

"I realize that. But I'm confident that I can get something before very long. The outfit is as yet short of men—there ought to be a chance for me. Well, until I get on my feet, anyway, I won't see Madge."

"She's used to tramps enough," mused Bill. "But that ain't sayin' she'll fall in love with one. I'm bettin' on ye, though, Tony. Don't get discouraged. An' whatever ye do, don't give up astronomy. That's what ye've set yer heart on, an' that's what ye know best. Get on yer feet, make up to Shanty Madge, make her love ye, an' then get outa here an' go on with yer studies. If Madge is what I think she is, she'd say the same. An' she'll wait f'r ye, too. That is, that's the way I'm bettin'. You'll win, Tony—it's in yer eye. Ye been through hell, an' ye come out of it rarin' an' prancin' an' gnawin' yer bit. Ye're a fightin' fool—my money's on ye, son! Now here we go 'round the east end o' the lake. Come three o'clock we'll be there, an' then—"

"Then I'll begin my life," said Joshua.

California Bill sighed deeply and looked away over Stirrup Lake toward Saddle Mountain, red in the sunlight. "Then ye'll begin," he muttered softly. "Lord! Lord! What must it be like to be young and talkin' about beginnin'!"

CHAPTER XVII

AMBITIONS

Half of the outfit of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou went into permanent camp on a timbered plateau three miles from the lake, thus establishing Camp Number One. The other half journeyed on six miles down the mountain valley that extended in the direction of the coast, where it became Camp Two.

Joshua Cole remained at Camp One, which grew to a white-tent city during the several closely following days. This mountain country thrilled him. The air was light and cool, and the objects of Nature's handiwork stood out in bold relief. The pine forests looked as if they had been newly painted, so bright were the greens, so contrasting the delicate browns. Lofty peaks covered with untarnished snow looked down upon the camp, and the placid lake lay like a blue teardrop in the hollow of a gigantic, caressing hand. Lush meadows surrounded the lake, and here grazed innumerable cattle, the property of Box-R Ranch, down on the desert. All winter long they had cropped bunchgrass that grew under sage bushes on the sandy waste, and had just been driven into the mountains for the summer pasture of saltgrass and bluejoint. Occasionally Joshua saw cowpunchers working with them and heard their shouting from afar.

He had gone to work as soon as the big camp was established, swinging a striking hammer on a drill head, with three others to complete the crew. The work was represented by a gigantic cut through solid rock, and, but for that in the hands of Shanty Madge, was the most difficult on the entire job.

Joshua had become an artistic hammerman, and, though the youngest man in his crew, he was a welcome addition. Always quiet and reserved, he had none of the qualities that often make youth obnoxious to such old-timers as it fell to his lot to labor with. And as he swung his striking hammer or turned the drill he thought of Madge Mundy of the frizzly bronze-gold hair, and wondered if ever he would find courage to go to her.

He began to realize now, with the girl so close to him, that he had come upon a wild-goose chase to seek her in the West. Since he had seen her last she had traveled over the United States and had had many experiences. While he on the other hand had been shut up behind gray walls with Clegg and his books and the telescope. His meeting with her had been a momentous episode in his life, for directly afterward he had been committed to the House of Refuge, where one lived

over and over the bright spots in his past. But it was doubtful now if Madge even would remember him. More and more, as the days passed, he shrank from going to her camp.

California Bill had returned to Spur for more supplies directly after the first long pull into the mountains. Now, one evening, his six slick mules rolled into camp ahead of a load of grain and groceries, and Joshua met him as he came, weary and dusty but wearing his never-failing smile, from the stable tent.

“I’m goin’ to the Mundys’ camp to-morrow mornin’,” he said. “They’re gettin’ low on dynamite, an’ the boss says f’r me to hook up my wheelers an’ take ’em enough to tide ’em over till their freighters ramble in. To-morrow’s Sunday—better come along, Tony.”

“No, I’m not ready yet,” Joshua replied.

The slate-blue eyes studied him carefully. “Scared, eh?”

“I look so tough,” Joshua evaded. “I’ll wait till I’ve earned enough to get some halfway-decent clothes.”

“Uh-huh”—and California Bill waddled away to his bunk tent to prepare for supper.

Joshua did not see him again until Monday morning, and then he was perched on his high seat behind his long-eared hybrids, on his way to Spur for more supplies. And that same afternoon, as Joshua was turning a drill under the ringing blows of his three fellow-workmen, he heard the thud of horses’ hoofs close by, and the voice of the walking boss calling to the hammermen:

“Hold ’em a minute, fellas!”

The blows ceased. Joshua gave his drill a twist and looked up at two mounted figures. One was the walker on his big roan mare, and the other was a girl on a black gelding. She wore a flannel shirt open at the neck and riding breeches. From under a man’s broad-brimmed hat her large eyes, brown as Oriental topaz, looked straight at Joshua. Her hair was frizzly and bronze-gold where the sunbeams caught it.

“Lady wants to see you, Cole,” said the walker. “Let Bluenose turn the drill awhile.”

As a little girl Madge Mundy had been outstanding. Her adorably recalcitrant hair, with its strange gleam of reddish gold, combined with the blended brown-pink coloring of her flawless skin had made her so. Now, a young woman rounding to maturity, she would have attracted instant attention among a hundred girls, all beautiful. Her beauty was unique, her own, and altogether distracting to mankind because of its unexpectedness. That amazing, crinkly hair was now gathered simply

at the nape of her neck and held in place by a ribbon, and below the ribbon it spread fanwise over her back and shoulders, a gleaming, puffy mass of antique gold. But her eyes, as of old, held the steadfast gaze of the discomfited hammerman. Their reddish-brown was like the brown of no other eyes that he had ever seen. The whimsical thought flashed through his mind that Madge, like the untarnished forests and mountains all about her, had been newly pumiced and varnished in honor of his coming.

“Well, Joshua, aren’t you coming to say hello to me?”

Slowly he rose from his seat on a powder can and walked toward the horses. The walking boss and Joshua’s fellow-hammermen were watching him narrowly, and his throat felt dry and parched. He put out his hand as he reached the side of the black horse, and looked up at her with his grave gray-blue eyes.

“Hello,” he said obediently.

The walker snorted, and the girl’s laughter rang out with a clearness that somehow seemed to match her eyes and her skin and her even little teeth. If she had laughed any other way, thought Joshua, the entire effect of her individuality would have been set at naught.

“How did—California Bill told you I was here, of course.”

“Yes, Bill tells me everything. I have him hypnotized.”

He had taken her strong brown hand and held it until it occurred to him to pump her arm up and down and release his hold, which he did with boyish vigor.

“And so you’re West at last. We’ve thought about you a thousand times. And when are you coming to tell Ma and me all about it? Next Sunday?”

“I—I can come then.”

“I wish you would. We’ve so much to talk about. We know about your—where you went when you left us in Hathaway that night. Pa meant to take me to see you, but—Well, he didn’t get around to it. We left for the West only a week afterward. But I mustn’t keep you from your work. You’ll remember that Ma wouldn’t let me have a holiday from my lessons when you called on me. We’ll expect you down Sunday, then. Isn’t it funny that you’re here after all these years? Good-by!”

She waved a hand at him and smiled and swung the black about. The walking boss fell in behind her, and she rode back the way she had come. Joshua slowly returned to his seat on a powder can and mechanically took the drill from Bluenose.

“Good night, kid!” muttered that expert powderman. “Say, you’re it! Dat dame’s got ’em all crazy. How’d youse make de riffle?”

“I knew her back East when we were kids,” said Joshua simply. “Let’s go!”

And the music of the hammers began again.

Saturday evening Joshua Cole had charged to his account by the commissary clerk the following resplendent raiment:

1 Stetson Hat	\$7.50
1 Pair Shoes	5.00
1 Package Hungarian Hobnails	.50
1 Handkerchief	.10
1 Leather Belt	.50
1 Blue Chambray Shirt	1.25
1 Pair Brown Overalls	2.50
	<hr/>
Total	\$17.35

And Bluenose cut his coal-black hair for nothing, for which cruelty Bluenose should have had the straight-jacket.

Then, next morning, he walked six miles and called on Madge and Mrs. Mundy.

The camp of the Mundys was on a lowland flat, covered sparsely with bull pines. Because of the big shots that were being fired day by day the tents were nearly a quarter of a mile from the work. The task of Shanty Madge and her mother was, as California Bill Fox had proclaimed, enormous. It consisted for the most part of a long tunnel through the bowels of a rounded hill, which jutted out obstinately into the deep cañon that the right-of-way was trying to follow. The hill had been without a name until the coming of the construction men, but now it was known as the Hill of Springs.

Its top was composed of grainy soil and shattered rotten-stone, and in this porous formation frequent springs bubbled up. Some of them were mud springs, and spurted up blue batter to a height of several feet. Others spouted soda-and-magnesia water. But all were inconsiderately moist.

This moisture leaked into the tunnel all the time, and made the operations there damp and difficult and a constant aid to rheumatism. But the worst of it was that Madge feared the entire top of the hill might slide into the tunnel at any unexpected moment, and the work went ahead cautiously and with the slowness that caution calls for. And Shanty Madge was worried.

She met Joshua at the door of the tent in which she and her mother lived. A cluster of lofty pines stood about it, and it was screened and had a floor of tongue-and-groove. It was white and clean, and the few furnishings within were tastefully arranged. In the mountain camp, it was a little oasis in canvas, touched by the magic

hand of woman, which leaves its delicate imprint wherever it is reached forth to make a habitation.

Mrs. Mundy was graying a little, but she was as wholesome and serene as ever. As when he was a boy, she talked with Joshua in a sincere manner and listened to him with that courteous, undivided attention which puts one at his ease and is the topmost pinnacle of good breeding. Joshua did not mean to intimate such a thing, but he said something that morning that proved his puzzlement over Mrs. Mundy's devotion to a man of the stamp of Bloodmop. And, showing no offense, she explained it simply:

“Why, when I was eighteen the man just swept me off my feet with his irresistible love-making, and after I'd surrendered he kept me off my feet with his everlasting goodness.”

Madge, trim and neat in her olive-drab shirt and bellows breeches, sat by and listened to her mother and Joshua talk. She seemed to hear everything that was being said and to be drawing as many conclusions as if she were engaging in the conversation, but her clear brown eyes were faraway and dreamy. She looked almost boyish as she sat there, hands thrust into trousers pockets, her slim, rounded legs crossed and stretched out before her.

“And now,” said Elizabeth Mundy, “tell me how you and your friends the stars are getting on.”

At once Madge's eyes lost their dreaminess, and she looked at Joshua alertly, patently interested in what his reply would be.

Then out came the story of life in the House of Refuge and of Beaver Clegg and his wondrous telescope.

“Why, you've accomplished marvels!” Madge finally interrupted. “Here we've been feeling sorry for you, and now you tell us that you've been helped on toward the goal of your ambition in a way that never would have happened if you'd not been sent to that reformatory.”

“Yes, I learned a lot from Mr. Clegg,” said Joshua. “But now I've got to begin at the beginning again. Science is progressing by leaps and bounds these days, and unless a fellow is in constant touch with new developments he's out of luck. My first payday goes back to Hathaway for my books and Clegg's notes and the photographs. If there's any left I'll subscribe to several scientific magazines and try to catch up. Last Sunday I found a cave about a mile from our camp. Just stumbled onto it. I'm going to appropriate it as a study and laboratory, and I'll spend all of my spare time there. I can give at least three or four hours every night, and all day of every Sunday, to study. I'm a hound for work, if I do say it myself, and I'll be caught

up before this job is finished in the mountains. Then I hope to put another new idea to work.

“I discovered something else last Sunday. Before I’d stumbled onto the cave I walked around the lake to the other side, and climbed that rocky ridge over there to see if I could get a view of the desert. It’s a steep climb, but I made it—and, say, the view is marvelous. For miles and miles, far as the eye can reach—and I was told by the doctor at the House of Refuge that I have particularly good eyes—the desert sweeps below you, the most magnificent sight on earth. It seemed that from that particular mountaintop—for it is a miniature mountain—objects on the desert stood out with a clearness almost unbelievable. I turned and looked into the range at the forests and peaks, and they too seemed clearer than I had ever seen them before. And I got to thinking.

“It strikes me that there is something mighty peculiar over there on that ridge. To the west of us lies the coast—to the east the desert. All of the western slopes of the range, they tell me, are covered with trees—great forests of pine. And on the eastern slopes nothing much grows but scrubby piñons, cactus, yuccas, and sage. You can almost see the dividing line at the lake shore. Haven’t you noticed that there are no pine forests on the other side of the lake, and that they begin abruptly on this side? So over there we have the influence of the dry desert in the atmosphere, while at the same time we have an altitude of over six thousand feet.

“Well, all this seems to make for the clearest atmosphere on top of that ridge that I have ever seen. And I’m going up there to-night to see what it’s like after dark. If I’m right, that mountain that I stood on last Sunday is the most marvelous spot on earth, atmospherically, for astronomical observations. And if repeated visits prove that I am right as to the atmosphere’s rare transparency—”

“Yes, go on,” urged Madge.

“Well, then that’s *my* mountain,” replied Joshua, “and I’ll install a telescope there and astonish the world of science. That is—perhaps.”

“But where will you get your telescope?” asked Madge’s mother.

Joshua threw out his hands in a gesture of submission. “I’ll have to earn it,” he told her. “And the one that was given to me cost Mr. Clegg five hundred dollars. Whew! And I’m only a hammerman for Demarest, Spruce and Tillou. But that doesn’t discourage me. I’ll earn the money in time. And while I’m doing that I’ll make a telescope for myself—one that will do for the time being, anyway.”

“Make one!” exclaimed Madge.

“Yes, I think I can. Among my notes, back in Hathaway, are directions for making a small home-made glass that will show the mountains, craters, and plains of

the moon, the rings of Saturn, at least four of the nine satellites of Jupiter, and at certain times the polar caps of Mars. Also any large spots that may appear on the disk of the sun. We have a good blacksmith shop in camp, of course, and I know Blacky will let me use his tools. Then I'll use that telescope until I can buy a five-inch one—which is my great ambition in life—and then I'll—Oh, well, I'm boring you, I know. I get too enthusiastic over these things, I guess.”

“I wouldn't be ashamed of the enthusiasm, Joshua,” Madge said, her brown eyes dreamy once more. “But tell me this: Is there any money in it?”

“Money! Who cares for money?”

“But you'll have to live.”

“Yes, of course. I suppose that's true. But I can work on the railroad grade as long as the road is building. That will be six months to a year, I think. I ought to save some money in that time. And maybe I can get a job somewhere about here after the outfits have moved on. There's work at G-string, in the mines, isn't there?”

“You couldn't work in a mine all day and study the stars at night, could you?” observed Mrs. Mundy. “It seems to me that would soon ruin your health.”

“I could ruin a lot of that and still have plenty to spare,” he laughed with boyish assurance.

“I should think,” Madge offered, “that, rather than do that, you would want to save up for a university education.”

“No, I think not,” he said musingly. “Clegg was against it. He said in his whimsical way that he entered an Eastern university once, but that he quit because it took too much time from his studies. No, I want to observe the stellar bodies, not read about them and look at pictures.”

“But, Joshua, don't they have enormous telescopes at the universities?”

“Yes, they do,” he conceded. “But right here I'll tell you something that you perhaps don't know. There are difficulties that arise when an astronomer attempts lunar or Martian observations with high-powered telescopes that the layman knows nothing about. This is too involved for me to attempt an explanation, but believe me when I say that moderate magnifying power, under certain conditions, has its advantages in the study of Mars and the moon. Why, some of our greatest discoveries have been made with small instruments. It's the transparency of the atmosphere, the ability of the observer to concentrate and his constant application, coupled with good vision, that get results. Oh, on that mountain over there—if I'm right—and I know I am—”

The older woman was smiling at his enthusiasm and sincerity, and she saw in him now just what she had expected of the queer little boy who had come courting her

daughter at breakfast time, and revealed to her the wonders of the stars that night. Joshua's handsome, ascetic face was aglow with the warmth of his feelings, and his tolerant, gray-blue eyes mirrored the intensity of his thoughts. "What a lover he'd make," she mused, but aloud she said:

"You're only about twenty-one, aren't you? But you talk and act like a man of thirty. Are you all for astronomy? Haven't you any of the yearnings that most young men have?"

"Well," he replied thoughtfully, "there was no use to yearn in the House of Refuge, and I guess I got out of the habit of it early. But I've always wanted to be a cowboy—honest"—and his eyes twinkled. "I suppose I am a bit cramped mentally. I don't know what I would be like if I hadn't been a tramp for a year or more. That took a lot of the Ethelbert stuff out of me, I guess, and put what he-man there is into me. Now don't think I'm a freak. Because a man's a scientist he doesn't have to have stooped shoulders and be absent-minded and wear glasses as big as check-strap rings. I'm human and sinful, head over heels in love with life, and like to play draw poker. And if The Whimperer did steal my refractor and almost break my heart, he taught me to smoke tobacco and drink a glass of hundred-proof without batting an eye—for the appreciation of which good things of earth I thank him. Just the same, I'm a born astronomer. I'm not meaning to be boastful—I merely was fortunate enough, by a rare fluke, to find out early in life what I was put here for. And I'm just telling you. I know I'm boring you, Mrs. Mundy."

Madge did not give her mother time to say yes or no. "But you haven't answered my question," she said. "Is there any money in it, Joshua?"

"I've hardly considered that," he told her. "I don't want to consider it. But I may gain fame. For about a year before I left the House of Refuge I was working on a pet theory of my own. It's in connection with Mars, which planet had occupied my interest almost exclusively for some time before Mr. Clegg died. If I can prove my theory to be fact—Well, then I'll make 'em sit up and take notice. And as for money, why, I can earn all I'll need right here in the mountains, I guess. All I want is a living and a horse to carry me over the mountains and the desert, a little cabin back from the lake in a clump of sprawling junipers that I know about—and a five-inch telescope on my hill."

Madge laughed shortly. "That sounds romantic enough," she admitted, "but—Oh, well, come take a ride with me and I'll show you what an eighteen-year-old shanty queen can do. And I warn you right now that I'm mighty proud of myself, and you must conduct yourself accordingly. I may never achieve fame, but if we're reasonably fortunate we'll get the money. That's what counts these days."

“You don’t mean that at all,” he said hopefully, for the first time a little disappointed with his Penelope in bronze.

“Humph! Don’t I? ’By, Ma”—and she led the way out into the cool sunshine and fresh forest smells.

CHAPTER XVIII

NEW PROSPECTS

The Mundys' stable boss saddled for Madge the black gelding that she had ridden when she called on Joshua, and for him a blaze-faced bay which had been Bloodmop's saddler. Side by side they took up the trail through the woods, and soon were ascending sharply to the work above.

They watched the strings of dump-cars traveling swiftly under momentum from a fifty-foot cut which extended to the mouth of the drippy tunnel. Muck from the tunnel was being carried to its dump over another route by men "pullin' 'im by the whiskers," which, in construction parlance, means leading with a rope a horse or mule hitched to a cart. They looked on in silence for a time, then Madge said:

"This means a lot to me, Joshua. You know, I was a harum-scarum kid when you met me, pretty good with a team and a wheeler even at that age, and wild about railroading. Well, I never got over it. It's my delight to-day. I love the work and the free-and-easy, democratic life in the open country. I fell into bossing the job naturally when poor Pa died, and I've been making good. Ma, of course, thinks it's no job for a girl, and if we could let go I guess she'd be willing enough to get me away from it all. But she's an old dear—she never tries to make me quit. Well, why should I? Isn't this the day when it's up to women to show the stuff they're made of? And I'll show 'em, if we can swing this job. Tell me one thing," she broke off abruptly: "Why are you here?"

"Why," Joshua replied, trying to put innocence into his tones, "didn't you invite me?"

"I mean why are you out West—on this particular job?"

He looked her over carefully, the ghost of a smile on his lips. He was far from disconcerted.

"I may as well confess to the truth," he told her. "I came hunting you."

She drew in her breath slightly.

"Your question was a frank one, Madge—I made my reply as frank. During all those years in the House of Refuge I never forgot you. It was my boyish ambition, you know, to travel West with your father. And when they nabbed me and put me away I clung to the idea. Then when I was pardoned I had no place to go. My brother—the boy for whom I went to the House of Refuge, if you want to get down to fine points—would have nothing to do with me. My father, of course, was still

impossible. So I went on the bum and hunted you up. I knew I'd find you out here somewhere."

"How did you know that?"

"Well, a hunch, we'll call it. I wanted desperately to, and perhaps psychology did the rest."

For a long time she looked at him searchingly, and then her reddish lashes hid her eyes. "Let's get off and have a look at the tunnel," she suggested.

She led the way inside the damp cylinder in the hill, and they watched the human gophers forging ahead through the solid rock, from the open crevices of which came a continuous ooze. The men timbered carefully ahead of them as they progressed, and the huge beams used seemed capable of withstanding almost any strain.

"Madge," said he, as they blew out their candles at the tunnel's mouth, "I don't like the looks of things in there. Of course I don't know anything about the nature of the hilltop, but California Bill says it's a mass of springs. By George, if she caves on you you're ruined."

"I know it," she readily agreed. "But we're praying that it won't cave until the concrete gang gets on the job. We're timbering heavily, as you saw, and if old Jawbone only will listen to the walker and me we'll get by, I think."

"Who's Jawbone?"

"The most obstinate old Irish boss-powderman in the entire game," she explained. "He's a wonder, but too reckless. He's fired some marvelous shots for us—shots that have made us big money. But on this kind of work he's simply dangerous. I'd as soon think of firing myself, though, as to fire Jawbone. He's been with us ever since we hit the West, and Pa swore by him."

"How is he dangerous?" asked Joshua.

"Well, he uses too much powder for tunnel work like this. I tell him—and Steve, the walking boss, does too—that the big shots he's firing in there to loosen the muck are likely to bring the entire hill down on his silly old head. He growls at us and keeps right on. He's one of these faithful-old-retainer types—been with the outfit so long that he thinks he owns it. And he takes advantage of me since Pa died, thinking, of course, that I'm in his hands and helpless without him. But he got a little slide the other day and eased up a lot on the giant, and I'm hoping he learned a lesson before it is too late. If he'll only stay sober! But the minute he gets a few drinks under his belt he'll get reckless again."

"I'd watch him like a hawk, then," was Joshua's advice. "If that wet hill slides down in your tunnel—Well, then you'll be mighty busy, to say the least."

"I know it," she returned. "And I confess I'm worried. But I can't fire Jawbone

—you don't understand, perhaps. I have one of his own men watching him on the sly, and I'll know it if he begins shooting heavily again."

Joshua left the camp of the Mundys at three o'clock in the afternoon and walked slowly homeward. His reception and subsequent treatment by the two women had warmed his heart, and made him feel anything but the tramp laborer that he actually was. He smiled now at his frankness in telling Madge that he had come West seeking her, and wondered where he had found the courage. It was plain that she had suspected why he had come; she must have realized that coincidence had not set him down in a camp next door to hers. And she had asked the meaning of it. Had she expected the brave reply that he had made? Joshua whistled as he followed the well-beaten footpath that ran parallel with the new railroad grade. He was well satisfied with the result of his renewed friendship with the Mundys. Physically Madge was even more glorious than he had expected her to be, but he grew a trifle morose when he remembered her reference to money-making. Joshua was too much of a dreamer, too thoroughly wrapped up in the romance of astronomy, to give great heed to money matters. And he wanted the woman he was going to love—Madge, in short—to be as indifferent to the moron idea of slaving day and night for riches as he was. But Madge would be all right—he was too young, too full of youth's enthusiasm over life in general to beckon difficulties. And if they came uncalled he would surmount them. Yes, Madge was all right—more than all right.

He returned to his block-hole drilling the following morning, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred until the ghost walked. Then, with his pay in his pocket, he trudged around the lake to Ragtown, a new tent village which had sprung into being since the establishment of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou's Camp Number One, and sent a money-order to his brother. His letter asked that all of his belongings be expressed to him immediately. Then he sent money to three magazines devoted to the science of astronomy, and returned to his muscle-building hammer-work once more.

He wanted to call on the Mundys the following Sunday, but refrained. It would not do to presume too far on their friendship. Yet he longed desperately to see Madge again. He wondered about young Montgomery. What was he like? Madge had not mentioned him; Joshua knew only that California Bill had referred to him as one of the ardent suitors of the shanty queen.

California Bill arrived in camp in the course of a day or two, and that night Joshua saw him for the first time since his trip down the line. They sat on the ground at the edge of camp and watched the lake turn red, then violet, then purple as the sun sank to rest behind Saddle Mountain; and Bill, as he listened to Joshua's

accusation, sang softly:

“My head likes liquor, but my stomach don’t.
My feet cut up, but my stomach won’t.
My hands play poker and my tongue sings a song,
But my stomach keeps a-sayin’, ‘There’s somethin’ wrong.’”

“But what’re ye kickin’ about?” he broke off. “Wanted to see her, didn’t ye? Well, I told her all about ye, an’ she said she’d ride up next day an’ see ye. I knew ye wouldn’t look her up short of a month, an’ by that time maybe Jack Montgomery’d have her dead to rights. Now she’s seen ye, though, she’ll think a while before lettin’ Montgomery run away with her. What she have to say about yer astronomy, Tony?”

“Why, are you so greatly interested in my astronomy?” asked Joshua.

“Certainly am. Thing like that always takes on me. Now, if ye had a project in mind to make a million or two I wouldn’t give ye a smile. But somethin’ reg’lar, like astronomy, an’ I’m out to help. Did ye send f’r yer traps back East come payday?”

“Yes, I’ve sent for them,” said Joshua. “And I’ve subscribed for three scientific magazines, too. I’ll get to work evenings as soon as my things come. It’ll take a lot of study to bring me up to where I was when I left the House of Refuge.”

Then he told Bill about the little cave that he had discovered, where he could hide himself away and find quiet for his work. And this disclosure led to the one concerning the miniature mountain beyond the lake, where the atmosphere seemed so rare.

“By golly!” Bill applauded. “That’ll be just the place, Tony. We’ll fix ye up there all snug an’ tight, when ye get that telescope made, an’ ye’ll become an institution in the mountains—a character, ye know, like me. Tony of Telescope Mountain, they’ll be callin’ ye. No, that there don’t sound just right—seems. Le’me think! Spyglass sounds more romantic than Telescope, don’t it? Tony of Spyglass—No, by golly, I got it! Cole of Spyglass Mountain! That’s the dope. An’ say—why didn’t I think of it before, Tony? Just the caper. C’mon to my bunk tent with me—I got somethin’ to show ye.”

When they reached the big tent in which California Bill slept during his short periods in the mountain camp, where men lay in bunks three tiers high and talked or read, Bill reached under his straw pillow and pulled out a newspaper. He carried it to where the light of a candle, fused with its own drippings to the lid of a can, threw a feeble radiance over one end of the tent. He found what he wished to show his friend and handed him the paper. He rolled a cigarette and watched Joshua from

under bushy black brows as he read.

When Joshua looked up from the article California Bill winked knowingly and laid a finger on his lips. Then, pocketing the paper, he led the way out again.

“Well, how’s it strike ye, Tony?” he asked as they walked through the trees once more.

“I don’t believe I understood all of it,” was Joshua’s reply.

“It’s jest like this here,” said Bill. “All o’ this land about the lake here, an’ f’r God knows how many miles beyond, is in the forest reserve. It ain’t been used f’r anythin’ but the delight o’ hunters an’ the fattenin’ of Ole Lee Sweet’s cows f’r a few months in the summer. Lee he owns Box-R Ranch, down on the desert, where we camped first night outa Spur. Them’s his cattle ye see roamin’ ’round the lake. Well, now along comes the gover’ment—seems—an’ says this here land’s good f’r somethin’ else. It c’n raise things besides sagebrush and blue-weed and saltgrass, an’ it ain’t the gover’ment’s purpose to let good land go to waste. So they’re goin’ to throw her open to homestead entry pretty soon.

“I remember myself when the gover’ment surveyors was up in here last year, runnin’ lines, but I never paid any attention. Had a lot o’ State University boys with ’em, an’ I thought they was jest practicin’, maybe, or reestablishin’ the lines of an old survey that was made here forty years ago. Anyway, they was separatin’ the agricultural land from the worthless parts—seems—an’ now it’s out that a fella c’n take up a homestead here.

“Well, sir, I read that there account in Spur, an’ f’r some reason er other I tucked the paper under my wagon seat. Thought f’r a little, I guess, that maybe I’d take up a piece f’r myself an’ settle down an’ quit my foolin’, but I’d forgot all about it until ye tells me about Spyglass Mountain. Tony, what ye wanta do is this: Ye wanta go to work an’ get down to Los Angeles an’ file a homestead claim as close as ye c’n get to Spyglass Mountain. Maybe the lines run beyond the mountain, because pretty good land runs right clost to the foot o’ the slope. Then ye c’n have yer own mountain right on yer prop’ty. Now that the railroad’s comin’ through this country, it won’t be no time before every acre o’ that land’s took up. There can’t be much of it. Ye gotta act quick. Tell ye what we’ll do. Le’me think a minute.

“Yes, tell ye what we’ll do: You lay off to-morrow, an’ when I go out I’ll drive clean ’round the lake with ye an’ take ye to G-string. There’s an *hombre* there I know—name o’ Golden. He’s a mining engineer, but I reckon he knows about surveys, too. Course he will! Well, we’ll get this Golden an’ have ’im go with ye an’ make location on the land ye’ll want. Take a hundred an’ sixty—all ye c’n get. Then I’ll have to be drivin’ on to Spur right away. But you c’n come on down on the stage

next day, an' beat it to Los Angeles to make yer filin'. Got any jack?"

"Not much," answered Joshua, catching Bill's enthusiasm. "Scientific magazines are expensive, and—"

"Well, I got about forty bones I c'n loan ye. Guess it'll cost ye somethin' over twenty-five for yer filin' fee, an' ye won't have much to blow on peanuts. But ye'll make it all right. Yes, sir, that's jest what you'n'me'll do, Tony. An' maybe later on I c'n pick me out a piece f'r myself."

"Look here, California," said Joshua, laying a firm hand on his friend's shoulder, "do you want a piece of that land?"

"Naw," scoffed Bill. "Jest kiddin' myself. What'd I do with a farm?"

"I believe," said Joshua, "that you do want a piece, and that if you had more money you'd go with me and make a filing too."

"Ferget it! No such thing. I was jest kiddin'."

"Bill!"

"Honest to God, Tony! Why, I'll be drivin' hosses all my life—seems. Couldn't do anythin' else if I wanted to. Shut up now. G'wan an' tell yer boss ye're layin' off a day or two, an' then go to bed. I'll see ye in the mornin'. Cole of Spyglass Mountain—that's the stuff!"

There came a severe tickling in Joshua's throat when he tried to raise further protest against the old man's generosity, but Bill grabbed him by the arm and turned him about. Then, administering a light kick, he bade him to "shut up an' hit the hay," and Joshua, too hopefully elated to refuse good fortune when it came his way, hurried into camp and to the walking boss.

Next morning he rode around the lake with California Bill toward G-string, his body on the high seat over the rolling backs of Bill's slick mules, his soul sailing in the heavens.

CHAPTER XIX

A TRIO OF SHOCKS

Mr. John Golden, mining engineer at G-string, readily consented to help Joshua Cole for the sake of his friendship with California Bill. Nor did he ask anything for his trouble and experience, for such is the custom among friends who live in the free and generous outlands. Bill would have helped him build a stable or a house, had he required such aid, and would have been offended if he had offered pay. So now he helped Bill's friend.

California Bill drove on to Spur after leaving the two in the vicinity of the newly named Spyglass Mountain. Joshua and Golden spent the entire day searching for the stakes of the recent survey and running lines. They discovered that only a part of Spyglass Mountain was covered by the survey, and the portion that had been included was within the limits simply because it had been impracticable to leave it out.

But this did not down Joshua's ardor. The hundred and sixty acres finally settled upon lay at the foot of the steep rise, and a great deal of the land beyond it, on the desert side, would be in the forest reserve. It would therefore be open to his use, and it might be, even, that he could obtain a special permit from the forest service to build an observatory on the mountain's top. So California Bill had encouraged him, anyway, and Bill knew much about the workings of the government offices that control the forest privileges of homesteaders and cattlemen.

So with the legal description of the desired land in his pocket, Joshua walked to Ragtown early next morning and took the stage to Spur. That evening he reached Los Angeles by train, and was on hand at the Federal Building next morning when the land office was opened.

He found the land office people unwilling to aid him beyond showing him a formidable-looking book wherein the land was listed. Unfamiliar with such procedures, he wrestled with the big book for an hour, then gave it up, secured an application blank, filled in the data, and passed it to a clerk. It was taken in to the commissioner, presumably, and presently he was called inside, where the fee was extracted from him. He was told that he would be notified by letter whether or not his claim would be allowed, and that if it was not allowed his money would be returned to him. This seemed to be all that was required of him, so he took his leave, in the dark as to whether or not his mission had been a success.

He had money left. He remembered what it would be necessary for him to buy in the way of materials for the building of his proposed telescope. So in order to forestall another trip to Los Angeles, he bought a seventy-inch piece of brass tubing, a small plano-convex lens about an inch in diameter, a few smaller pieces of tubing, a hand magnifying glass, and an ordinary camera tripod. And now there remained only five dollars and some odd cents of the money that both he and California Bill had saved from their first payday with Demarest, Spruce and Tillou. However, he had his return ticket to Spur and enough for stage fare back to Ragtown, but he could not buy a meal. Oh, well—hunger was no new thing to him. He could eat when he reached camp again, to-morrow night! He would be a poor servant of Science if he could not sacrifice four meals in her cause.

Shortly before dark the following evening the stage topped the summit of the mountains and rattled down the steep grade toward Stirrup Lake. Joshua still had four miles to walk after reaching Ragtown, and he wondered if he could persuade one of the cooks or flunkies to give him a hand-out. The stage reached the level of the lake and made speed around the eastern end toward Ragtown, whose lights blinked out with subtle invitation.

Ragtown was such a mushroom growth as springs up in wilderness localities wherever big construction is taking place. Like Wild Woman Springs, it was composed of new pine-shacks and tents. There is always a “rag town” close to a big railroad-building job, so called because of its tents, but this one had not chosen a name to distinguish it, so it was Ragtown to the thousands of laborers traveling up and down the line. It was a riotous place, of course, the scene of many drunken brawls and wild nights of carousal, but it was typical of the pioneering West, sinful but picturesquely sinful.

The tent saloons and dance halls were filled to overflowing as the stage wheeled to a stop before The Silver Dollar, in which was the store and post-office, hypocritically partitioned off with thin boards from the bar and dance hall, with a convenient archway between. A hundred men, perhaps, were in the one street that extended through the town, and a dozen saddle horses were tied to a hitching rack, proving that the Box-R cowpunchers were making the most of this spark of civilization that had flared up over night.

Joshua climbed out of the stage, his heavy bundle under his arm. He had no money to buy food or entertainment at Ragtown, so without a look to right or left he started up the street, which was no more than an inhabited portion of the long road from Spur to the railroad grade. He saw a knot of men standing in front of The Golden Eagle, a saloon, restaurant, gambling den, and dance hall, next door to The

Silver Dollar, and as he passed them he glanced at the object that held their interest. Just then a spectator swung away from the group, and Joshua saw a man seated on the beaten ground beside the road—there was no sidewalk—and before him a black cloth was spread, on which two skeletons five inches high danced weirdly.

It was the old game of The Whimperer, but Joshua was surprised to see anybody trying it here. He stepped closer and through the half-light looked at the operator's face. The black hat was pulled down over the man's eyes, but there was no mistaking the evil-looking scar that glared out from its surrounding patch of stubby beard.

The master of the skeleton dance was Joshua's jockey, the man who had robbed him of his dearest treasure, The Whimperer.

For a little Joshua saw red, as thoughts came to him of all the misery that this tramp's treachery had brought upon him. Next instant he had dropped his bundle and was elbowing men aside as he marched to the squatting panhandler.

"Well, Whimp," he said in tones that trembled slightly, "where's my telescope?"

The skeletons ceased their dance and toppled over. For two tense seconds the old John Yegg stared up at Joshua, his ugly mouth open. Then he made the quickest move that Joshua had ever seen him make, for with a squirming jump he had flipped himself to his feet and was fleeing down the street.

Joshua pursued, his youthful heart afire with the lust to mete out punishment for a great wrong done him. The Whimperer darted between two tents as Joshua closed in on him, then whipped to the left and was out of sight when Joshua reached the rear. But ahead a tent swayed back and forth, as if some one had entered it violently and collided with one of the poles. Toward it Joshua darted, flung back the flaps, and looked inside.

There came a guttural howl, and The Whimperer threw himself flat on the hard earth and wriggled under the rear wall of the tent. But Joshua did not pursue him. He stood stock still in the entrance, gazing in unbelief at a man who sat at a rude table, on which was a lighted candle in a beer bottle, and stared back at him, half risen from his chair, motionless.

And this man was Felix Wolfgang, lean and sandy-haired and freckled as the egg of a guinea hen—Number Twenty-three forty-four in the House of Refuge.

Joshua was the first to recover from the shock. His tense muscles relaxed and his surprise found voice.

"Say, am I off my nut, or are you Number Twenty-three forty-four? It's one of the two—that's certain."

Slim Wolfgang settled back into his seat and a sickly smile played on his lips.

“Youse ain’t nuts, I guess,” he croaked half moodily. “I’m Slim Wolfgang, all right—Number Twenty-three forty-four. An’ youse’re ole Tony. I’d know youse any place. How’s ever’t’ing, Tony?”

“What in the dickens are you doing here?” Joshua took several steps into the tent, but did not offer his hand when he reached Wolfgang’s side.

“An’ I might ast de same of youse, ol’-timer,” Wolfgang retorted, rolling a cigarette and letting it drip from his lower lip when lighted.

“That’s quickly told. I’m working as a hammerman for Demarest, Spruce and Tillou.”

“Well, I’m runnin’ a stud game in De Golden Eagle,” Slim stated in his husky tones. “An’ I just drifted in here because I hoid dere was good pickin’s among de construction stiffis. I been runnin’ stud layouts fer sev’ral years out West.”

Joshua pondered over this. Slim’s explanation seemed logical enough; and, but for the fact that The Whimperer had scurried through that tent, Joshua would have considered this one of those strange chance meetings that occur in the lives of men who travel far from home.

“But that tramp,” he questioned—“how does it come that he ducked through here when I chased him? Do you know him?”

“Who—dat geed-up guy? Yes, I seen um about here a little since I come. Dat was yesterday. But I don’t exactly know um. Was youse chasin’ um, Tony? Wot for? He comes bulgin’ in here an’ pretty near knocked de old rag flat. I’m buckin’ solitaire—see?” Slim indicated a spread of playing cards on the table. “An’ before I c’n get outa me chair to fin’ out wot’s doin’, youse show up an’ dat yegg frogs it unner de back wall o’ de tent an’ beats it. Wot’s it all about, Tony?”

Joshua did not answer the question. It struck him as the strangest coincidence imaginable that, away out here in Ragtown, six thousand feet above the sea, he should meet the man who had robbed him in the Middle West and chase him through the tent of his old enemy in the House of Refuge.

“And you say you don’t actually know this fellow?”

“Naw—jes’ seen um hangin’ aroun’. He’s a stiff—dey folly big construction, don’t dey? Maybe de likes o’ dis plug don’t woik much, but dey hang aroun’ an’ help de busy little bees spend dere payday. I don’t know nuttin’ about um. W’y’re youse astin’ me?”

This dialogue was bringing Joshua no information whatever, and it had caused him to lose track of The Whimperer, who by now was without doubt securely hidden. Joshua turned about and started for the entrance to the tent.

“Ain’t sore, are youse, Fifty-six thirty-five?”—from Slim.

Joshua turned at the door. "No, not at all," he replied, regarding Wolfgang studiously. "In fact, I made a fool out of myself by chasing The Whimperer, and now I'm going home and forget it. Good night."

"I see youse don' wanta renew de old acquaintance, Tony," said Wolfgang, "so we'll let 'er go at dat. But if youse feel like a little stud any time, drop into De Golden Eagle. Me game's clean, an' if youse win youse'll get away wid it. I ain't got no hard feelin's, Fifty-six thirty-five. Wot we did as kids don' count f'r nuttin' now. We was bot' nutty den, I guess."

"Call me Tony, if you want to," Joshua offered, "but cut out the Fifty-six thirty-five, will you, please?"

"Don' like to remember, eh, Tony?"

"It's just as well not to."

"I guess youse're right at dat. Maybe youse don' want dese plugs aroun' here to savvy dat youse was in de House o' Refuge."

"There's no call to advertise it," Joshua told him. "I was committed unjustly, and ___"

"Dat's wot dey all said, Tony."

"Well, anyway, it's more convenient to say 'Tony' than 'Fifty-six thirty-five.' Good night."

"S'long, Tony. Don' forget de number."

The tent flaps fell behind Joshua, and he hurried back to the street to recover his abandoned bundle.

He found it kicked to one side against the front of The Silver Dollar, shouldered it, and set off through the night toward camp, utterly amazed at what had taken place.

But a new shock awaited him there. One of the cook's flunkies, whom he persuaded to go to the cook tent and set out some cold food for him, told him while he ate that Shanty Madge's boss-powderman, Jawbone Mahoney, had gone on the job intoxicated and had fired a big shot, with the result that the wet, crumbly top of the big hill was sliding into the tunnel and that all efforts at stopping it had been of no avail. Shanty Madge, the old-time stiff's were gossiping, was ruined.

CHAPTER XX

“A LITTLE SLEEP”

Since Joshua Cole already was on vacation, he decided to extend his absence from work for one more day and hurry in the morning to Madge and her mother. He would at least be able to voice his sympathy over the catastrophe, though he realized this would help matters not at all.

Directly after breakfast he set out afoot, and covered the distance between the camps in a little over an hour. Mrs. Mundy he found in their home tent, but Madge was up at the works.

“I felt that it was coming, Joshua,” Elizabeth Mundy said wearily. “They say Demarest, Spruce and Tillou will have to take over our outfit in the end in payment for the help and materials they will have to supply us with to clear the tunnel. We haven’t much besides the outfit—that is, in the way of cash. If they are obliged to come to our aid we’re lost. You see, it will be just as if we were put on force account by the railroad company. When it becomes apparent that a contractor working directly for the railroad company—as are Demarest, Spruce and Tillou—is not going to make good on his contract, the company puts his outfit on force account. That means that the owner and his outfit are virtually hired by the day to do the work. He receives so much for each team, so much for each man’s wages, and so much for his own salary. And in the end, if he fails under this procedure, he is obliged to forfeit everything. With us, since we are sub-contracting from Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, we are responsible to them rather than directly to the company. So it will be they who will take everything from us if we can’t fulfill our contract. They’re nice gentlemen—all of them—but friendship won’t—mustn’t—stand in the way of their fulfilling what they have contracted to do. Poor Madge! She’s nearly distracted.”

“Is the situation entirely hopeless?” asked Joshua.

“I’m afraid so.”

They talked for an hour before Joshua left to go to the tunnel, and in the course of their conversation he told her of his prospective homestead.

“Joshua,” she said, “I’m going to tell you something that you mustn’t tell Madge. You’ll be astonished to know that, if we fail and lose the outfit, I shall be glad. I don’t want my daughter to follow railroad construction as her life’s work. I suppose I’m selfish and old-fashioned, but I can’t bring myself to feel that a girl was brought

into this world to do work like that. So far as the outdoor life is concerned, I am delighted with that phase of railroading. But I'd prefer to be on a farm somewhere—or a ranch here in the West—and live a simpler life. Madge would like it too if she could be convinced that she was not deserting the ship by giving up contracting. She wants to carry on the work started by her father, who was just gaining a good foothold when he died. That is a pretty sentiment, but it is all wrong. If Madge were his son it would be a different matter. But I'm tiring you—and I know you understand my feelings. If only we could have one of those homesteads—that's what I'm trying to work up to. Then Madge could still work off her surplus energy with implements and horses, which seems to be her delight. She would be right at home, and we would be free of forever running over the United States, from job to job. But she never would consent."

Joshua remained thoughtful for a time before he said: "Why wouldn't it be a good idea, Mrs. Mundy, for you to file on one of the claims without letting Madge know anything about it? Then if she fails on the job and loses the outfit, you'll have something to fall back on. You won't be required by the government to establish residence on the land until six months after you have filed. That would give you plenty of time to find out whether or not you are to lose everything. And if you do lose, you could surprise Madge and raise her spirits immeasurably. There would be something left, I imagine—some money and stock and tools to work your claim with?"

"Yes, they scarcely would be able to strip us down to nothing—especially if we get out early. Joshua, I think you have given me good advice. Will you help me?"

"I'll do anything I can, Mrs. Mundy."

"Then if I can get out of the mountains for a few days without Madge suspecting that I have designs on her future, can you see me in Los Angeles and show me how to proceed?"

"First," Joshua told her, "you will have to pick out your land. But that's easy, and I can attend to it for you. The land that is to be thrown open lies in a semi-circular strip about the lake, and nearly every hundred-and-sixty extends out into the water. Mine doesn't, for I chose the piece nearest to what California Bill has christened Spyglass Mountain. Mine is perhaps the poorest of all for agricultural purposes, but it's just what I want. But what I'm trying to get at is that there is little choice, from a farming standpoint, among any of the hundred-and-sixties offered. So why not take the claim next to mine? It has as many trees on it as any of the rest, and is as picturesque in every detail. It extends out into the lake, so that you are always assured of a supply of water. If you'll let me decide for you, I can give you the legal

description right now. It will be easy to figure out since it adjoins mine. Then we can —”

Here Joshua paused and looked uncomfortable. “Well, I’ll have to be frank,” he said. “I can’t go to Los Angeles with you because I haven’t the money.”

“Don’t look so miserable about it, Joshua,” she laughed. “Why, we’ve been flat broke a hundred times, and know all about it. Would you let me pay your expenses?”

“I wouldn’t like to.”

“If I were a man you’d consent readily, since it is purely a business matter and there would be no reason whatever why you should give me your services free. Be sensible, Joshua.”

“Why not go alone and look up a land lawyer in the city?” he suggested. “He could give you better service than I can, and it probably would cost you less. That’s just the thing to do, it seems to me. You’ll be able to find the advertisement of one of these fellows in the liners section of any Los Angeles paper. I’ll give you the legal description at once. You’ll have no difficulty at all.”

“That does sound easy,” she agreed. “Give me the data, then, please, and I’ll have myself driven to Ragtown to-morrow morning and take the stage out of the mountains. Madge will think I’m deserting her in her hour of trouble, but I’ll plead sickness and strain and tell her I’m going to a friend of ours in the city for a day or two. Will the deception be justifiable, Joshua?”

“I’ll shrive you,” he smiled.

“Then we have a secret between us, Joshua. Not a hint to Madge, now!”

Joshua crossed his heart and “hoped to die,” and Elizabeth Mundy laughed like a girl.

“You’ve given me a new heart, my boy,” she said. “I feel a different woman since you came.”

“You must remember,” he warned, “that there is the possibility of our claims being rejected by the land office.”

“Oh, no! Not a chance in the world, Joshua. Fate could not be so unkind as that. Go on with your gloominess—go see Madge and cheer her up, while I pack my suitcase. A woman has to have at least a full day to pack for a three-days’ trip, you know.”

Work was in full swing when Joshua reached the mouth of the tunnel—but what a waste of energy! For fifty feet the walls and roof of the tunnel presented solid rock, then one reached the spot where Jawbone’s fatal shot had been fired. Here the roof and the timbers had been unable to stand the shock, and had given way. And the top

of the mountain was literally sliding into the tunnel. Every cartload that was hauled away made room for another cartload to slide down in its place; and it was plain to be seen that, if no way was found to stop the gap, the entire top of the hill must be carried out through the tunnel's mouth.

Madge was in the tunnel. With her were Demarest and Tillou and three engineers. Up on the hilltop, where the mud springs and magnesia waters gushed, were more engineers, studying the trend of the slide.

"Hello, Joshua!" Madge called as she saw him entering with his candle over his head. "You'll have to excuse me to-day. I'm not at home. But it was kind of you to come. Just make yourself at home, and I'll talk to you at dinnertime."

Her tone was a brave attempt at cheerfulness, but even in the dim light cast by the candles in the tunnel Joshua noted the tired look about her eyes and the slight sag of her lower lip, which told him that she was about all in. He watched the men at work for a time, then went out and clambered to the hilltop.

The engineers foregathered here, lean brown men in neat outing suits and trim puttees, paid no heed to the man in overalls who went about looking over the ground. They were talking among themselves, and they all looked wise and dictatorial. Moseying here and there, Joshua studied the slide, and at last stepped close enough to overhear the conversation of the engineers.

"There's only one way to go about it, I'm telling you," he heard. "I saw a similar situation on the Denver and Rio Grande, when I was with old La Salle. There they hauled in hundreds of tons of baled hay and chucked it into the gap. And it held the slide back till they could timber up again and work beyond the hole in the roof. Now here it's simpler than that. Baled hay costs money, but we've got a heavy forest all around us. It won't take any time at all for a good timber crew to fell enough trees to stop that slide. In a week's time everything will be moving along as before. Let's put it up to the boss. I tell you I know she'll work like a charm."

"Provided," thought Joshua, "that what remains of the tunnel's roof will continue to stand the strain when they begin firing again."

He did not see Madge again until noon, when he ate with her and her mother in their living tent. Usually Mrs. Mundy and her daughter dined with what is known in construction circles as "the royal family," which consists of the contractors and their families, the walking boss, the commissary men and bookkeepers—almost every one in camp holding a position above that of common laborer. But to-day Joshua declined to eat with Mr. Demarest and Mr. Tillou, who were guests of the camp, in order to avoid a possible embarrassing situation. So Madge made excuses to her guests for herself and her mother, and ordered dinner for three served in the living

tent.

Madge was quiet and thoughtful, with little lines of worry at the corners of her mouth and eyes. Still, she was hopeful, for the young engineers had told her the essence of what Joshua had heard on the hilltop.

“Oh, we’ll pull out of it, all right,” she strove to assure herself.

Joshua said nothing to this. He was thinking deeply. He was afraid that, after the gap had been stopped with tree trunks, as soon as another shot was fired, no matter how light it might be, another cave-in would occur, and they would find themselves back where they started. But he said nothing of this to Madge, and tried to interest her in his homestead to take her mind from her worries.

He bade the mother and daughter good-by in the middle of the afternoon and returned to his own camp. Next morning he was swinging a hammer again in his old place, his mind full of many things.

A month passed, during which time he was unable to visit the Mundys again. He worked all day, and at night he wrestled with the problem of making his telescope in the blacksmith shop. His express shipment had long since arrived at Ragtown, and he had his notes to aid him, but he soon found out that it is easier to tell one how to make things than to actually do the work.

In that month he frequently heard gossip as to the situation at the camp of the Mundys. Slide after slide was taking place, though the forest about the camp was being denuded of its magnificent trees in an effort to stem the tide. A famous engineer from the East had been summoned, and he was on the job at an enormous salary; but still the rotten stone and mud continued to slide into the tunnel. And now, it was said, it was coming from three directions. Then the buzz went through camp that Demarest, Spruce and Tillou had offered twenty-five hundred dollars to the man who could stop that slide, regardless of the expense.

“Bluenose,” said Joshua to his fellow-workman when the foregoing report had been confirmed, “I’m going down there and figure out a way to stop that slide. I’ve one grand little idea in my head. I would have suggested it before, but thought I’d be butting in and couldn’t attract anybody’s attention—least of all the attention of those big engineers. But now it’s open to anybody, and I’m going down to-night. But keep it dark, will you? I don’t want to make a monkey out of myself until I’ve looked over the ground again.”

“Say, kid,” was Bluenose’s encouraging remark, “you’re absolutely nuts! *You* stop that slide, when Emanuel Peters, one o’ th’ highest-paid engineers in the U.S.A., can’t cut th’ raffle! Gaw wan! Come outa yer pipe dream, ol’-timer. That offer ain’t meant for a stiff. It’s for old railroaders who know their job. What d’you

know about engineerin'?"

"Nothing," admitted Joshua. "And more than that, I have no head at all for figures. But I've got one asset, Bluenose, and I think it may win out for me. The trouble with these big engineers, it seems to me, may be that they're too theoretical. They figure things out by rules and formulas. Why, in school we had a boy who could work almost any problem in mathematics, and he got his results with a method all his own. He never worked out a problem as it was supposed to be worked out, but he got correct answers every time. He used what I'm going to use down there at that slide."

"What'd he use?" growled the unconvinced Bluenose.

"Horse sense," said Joshua.

"You're a goof," Bluenose told him.

It was still quite light when Joshua set off after supper for the Mundys' camp. He followed the trail that many feet had trod along the right-of-way, through darkening forest and grassy meadows. He was deep in his plans, walking with his eyes on the ground, when suddenly from the trees on his left, came the echoing bark of a rifle.

It startled him, and somehow he felt queer and weak. Then such pain as he never before had felt gripped his entire body, it seemed, and the forest began to rise and float off toward the clouds. There came another shot, but it seemed far away. Joshua sank slowly to his knees, then felt like lying down to sleep. He did not fall, but lowered both hands to the ground and eased himself down into a comfortable position. He knew that a stream of warm blood was running down his arm, but he did not mind. All he wanted was a little sleep, and then he would be going on to the Mundys. Ten minutes sleep—and then he would hurry on to Shanty Madge!

CHAPTER XXI

THE SURRENDER

Joshua Cole recovered consciousness in the railroad hospital at Ragtown, and stared blankly at a streak of light that came in between the new pine boards of the walls and pointed out a resinous knothole in the floor. The shack which bore the dignified name of hospital was on the outskirts of the settlement, a two-room affair that, if it had been a little more expensively constructed, would have served well as a stable for mountain horses, who do not need shelter except when rare blizzards rage. Each workman on the entire job contracted for by Demarest, Spruce and Tillou had a dollar of his pay subtracted each month whether he approved or not, and this was his hospital fee. It assured him of medical attention without other charges if he became ill. There were perhaps fifteen hundred men working directly or indirectly under Demarest, Spruce and Tillou. That made fifteen hundred dollars to be divided between the doctor and the main contractors, the latter, of course, being entitled to something for permitting the doctor to conduct the hospital. And Joshua Cole was the fifth man to be sent to the hospital since it had been established. No wonder that Dr. J. Miles Stanhope had much leisure and much money to spend in the Silver Dollar, where his preferences were roulette, and whisky with a dash of angostura bitters, and a blonde Jezebel named Gladys, who waltzed rather well.

He was at his favorite haunt, it appeared, when his patient awoke, for Joshua not knowing where he was, called feebly again and again, but received no answer. He strove to get out of the single white-enamel iron bed in which he found himself, but discovered that he was sore all over and rather weak. His efforts had made him sleepy, and he sank back on the pillow and floated into coma again.

When he awoke the second time night had fallen, for no sunlight streamed in at the crack where the loose batten hung. Lamplight, however, came in through the quarter-way-open door between his "ward" and the dispensary, or whatever the other room was called. He lifted his voice again, and was answered by a shuffle of feet.

In came Dr. J. Miles Stanhope, and one of the frames of the door showed an inclination to come with him. The doc righted himself, however, and swayed toward his patient, his face beaming with solicitude.

Dr. J. Miles Stanhope was a young man inclined to corpulency. He affected a Van Dyke beard, as all medical men should. His gray eyes were kindly and he could

not have injured a mouse—nor could he have cured one. But he was a jolly good fellow and wished nobody ill. Who couldn't be like that, with a monthly income of over a thousand dollars from a two-hundred-dollar investment?—and the doc had kicked like a bay steer when the carpenters presented their bill for the erection of the hospital. It might be pointed out that the time and money spent by the doctor in acquiring his medical education would bring his investment to a higher figure, but as he displayed no diploma from a medical college on the wall, it may be assumed that he considered the price of a diploma too insignificant to be taken into consideration.

At any rate, here he was at Joshua's bedside, good-natured, democratic, breezily cheerful, and a trifle shaky on his feet.

"Well, well, well! So you're conscious, eh? Thash th' stuff, ol'-timer! How d'ye feel by now?"

"I'm sore as hell," growled Joshua. "Where am I? Who are you?"

The last question seemed to grieve Dr. J. Miles Stanhope, and he reprovingly explained that he was the medical adviser of the community, something that Joshua should have known merely by glancing at his Van Dyke beard. As to where Joshua was, he was in the hospital conducted by the medical adviser of the community. And if he was sore, there was good reason for it, since he had been shot to hell with a thirty-thirty rifle. But he—the medical adviser of the community—had found the bullet and extracted it, and he was of the opinion that his patient was on the mend. Did he want some chow? The Silver Dollar's cook was out of fresh meat, and the doctor supposed the rest of the joints were in the same fix, since no freighters had arrived for three days. But there was salt meat in plenty to be had, storage eggs, bread, and oleomargarine. Concerning the question of where Joshua had been shot, it was in the left shoulder, very low, and well in toward the heart. The doc had no idea who had shot him or why, and it seemed that it had not occurred to anybody to investigate this phase of the matter. Two stiffis walking up the grade from Camp Two to Camp One had found him lying in the trail, and, after appropriating two dollars found in his pockets and his flannel shirt and belt—these facts were discovered later—they had dutifully carried him to the hospital, had called Dr. J. Miles Stanhope from the fondling arms of Gladys, and had gone their way rejoicing. Now what about the bacon and eggs?

Despite the bungling services of Dr. Stanhope, Joshua Cole's wound healed quickly, for he was in the pink of health and a stranger to dissipation. While he was confined to the little bed in the hospital, left alone for hours on hours at a time, he was allowed to read and study, for the doctor could not see that it would do him any harm. "Just go ahead and amuse yourself any way you feel like, ol'-timer," was the

medical man's kind invitation; so Joshua had sent for his books and notes, and with these and his new periodicals to aid him, progressed rapidly at bringing his astronomical information up to date.

He puzzled for hours, of course, over who had shot him, and why. Naturally he thought often of The Whimperer and Slim Wolfgang—the only people in that country who could possibly have a grudge against him—but always he discarded them as his possible assailants for the reason that it seemed illogical they could harbor a hatred so fierce as to make them try to murder him. After long contemplation, he was forced to adopt the conclusion that some deer hunter had shot him by accident and had fled and left him to his fate rather than face the possible consequences.

Madge Mundy came to see him one afternoon, and apologized for not coming sooner, pleading that she was almost distracted over the grave matters in her camp and was kept busy from morn till night.

She sat beside his bed and smoothed back his raven hair with her soft, cool hand. Joshua was nearly well and suffering not at all, but immediately he convinced himself that he was very ill and needed these tender ministrations. His gray-blue eyes looked up into her reddish-brown eyes pleadingly, and Madge, too, believed that he needed these tender ministrations. At any rate she continued them, and Joshua lay with eyes closed, trembling with ecstasy, afraid to look into her face again for fear that she would see that he was in the seventh heaven of delight.

They talked of Shanty Madge's problem, but with Joshua, at least, the words, "slide" and "tunnel" and "dynamite" were spoken with a caressing cadence that carried an undercurrent of meaning.

"I guess all is lost," Madge had told him when first the subject was brought up.

And now she continued: "The entire top of the hill keeps slipping in an easterly direction directly into the tunnel. We are able to stop it with timbers and baled hay—which last we are using now as likely to form a more solid wall to hold the slide—but as soon as we attempt to go ahead and fire a shot, no matter how light, the roof caves again, and down comes another avalanche. Of course we are working toward the slide from the other end of the tunnel, too, and so far the roof holds there. But it's a long tunnel, and where we're losing time is in not being able to progress a foot with this end.

"Another big engineer has come from New York, and he says nothing more can be done than has been done. Everybody is up in the air. And—and, Joshua, I have given up and turned the outfit over to Demarest, Spruce and Tillou. I'm on salary now. I'm through. I know when I'm whipped, and I must make the best of it. In the end, of course, we'll have to sign over everything to them, and I guess they're no

more anxious than I am to continue the heart-breaking work. That slide is like the heads of the Hydra that Hercules slew. Its heads grew as fast as one was lopped off, you know, until Hercules applied a firebrand to prevent their growth. And I—I'm just through forever with railroading, Joshua—that's all. Joshua, we'll be broke."

She was near to tears, and Joshua cursed the bullet that had laid him in a bed in Dr. J. Miles Stanhope's flimsy hospital.

"Madge," he said, "I'm going to tell you something; though, if you are convinced, it will perhaps hurt you. Maybe I'm the Hercules to apply the firebrand to your nine-headed monster. I firmly believe that I could have stopped that slide when it first occurred. I believed so the day I went to your camp and examined the top of the hill and the tunnel. But there were big engineers on the job as well as two old-time contractors, and I thought surely they would find a way to solve the problem. Then when days and days passed and nothing was accomplished I hated to offer my services for fear I'd be laughed at and told to mind my business. I'm only a construction stiff in the eyes of those fellows, you know, and they would have put me in my place in short order.

"But things looked different when Demarest offered twenty-five hundred dollars to the man who could stop the slide. Then it seemed to be open to anybody, and I was on my way to your camp when I picked up this bullet. If I had succeeded I would have felt wretched, to think that I could have done the same at the first and had failed to offer my services until the reward was announced. But I guess you would have understood.

"Anyway, I still think that I may be able to hold the thing. What it will cost to try my plan will be as nothing compared with the money that is being expended now in fruitless efforts. So, to make good with you, I'm going to give you my plan right now, and you can put it up to the engineers and see what they think of it. And the reward, of course, will be yours. Will you see if you can find a piece of paper and a pencil out in that lean-to that the doctor calls his office and dispensary?"

"Joshua," she said, "I will do nothing of the sort. Your plan is yours, whatever it is, and, knowing you as I do, I fully believe that it is worth something or you would not consider it. In other words, boy, you convinced me years ago, when you told me about the stars, that you are not given to talking through your hat. I firmly believe"—she forced a wan smile—"that—in how many centuries is it?—the big dipper will look like a steamer chair, simply because you told me so. And now the reward for stopping that famous slide has been raised to five thousand, and if you can win it we'll let her slide until you're ready to show us. That's that!"

"But, Madge, listen to me. Take my plan now and, if it works, stop the thing at

once. A pile of money will have been spent before I'm out of this confounded shack. Take it, and save your outfit. Then if you care to split the reward with me—"

"I'll split nothing with you, young feller! Neither will I take your plan and present it to anybody! And as for losing the outfit, let her rip! I'm through—me! Trying to stop the slide has cost so much that, even if we pulled through, we'd be so badly in debt that it would require years to get on our feet again. No, the outfit must go to give us a clean slate, and we'll let the future take care of itself.

"I've been too cocksure—too swell-headed. And now I'm being slapped on the wrist for my presumption in strutting around with old-time railroaders, old enough to be my grandfather, and talking wisely about this and that thing about which I knew nothing. How they must have laughed in their sleeves at me. Oh, it makes me sick now! I tell you the past few weeks have taken all the pep and bravado out of me. I'm whipped, and I'm through.

"And Ma tells me that you and she connived together against me and got her a homestead here in the mountains. Well, I'm glad. I'm for that. And I'm going to get out while the gettin's good, and save what I can of tools and teams and cash to run the homestead with. Back to the farm for little Madge!"

"But—"

"I tell you I'm through—stubbornly through, Joshua. I bit off a chunk and couldn't swallow it. Now let's drop that aspect of the matter. When can you totter around, does the doctor think?"

"Why, Doc doesn't think at all, except when he's over the roulette wheel. I can go any time I myself think that I can, and the sooner the better for him. It's a great strain for him to carry my meals to me three times a day. I guess I'll try it in about a week. I've been up four times, I believe, and walked about a little. I won't be able to work myself, but I can put others to work. Three men will be enough to put my idea across."

"Then you get on the job as soon as you can and stop that slide. You need the money."

"I do," fervently agreed Joshua. "But I'll probably never get it. I expect my big idea will prove a frost."

"I'll see that you get a chance to try it, anyway," Madge promised.

As she took her leave Dr. J. Miles Stanhope came in with Joshua's slim mail—a scientific magazine and a letter from the land office. The letter informed him that his claim to a hundred and sixty acres in the San Antonio Mountains had been allowed.

CHAPTER XXII

HERCULES AND HIS FIREBRAND

Ten days after Shanty Madge visited Joshua Cole in the hospital he left that highly efficient institution and wended his slow way to Camp One. It was in the morning. He at once inquired for Mr. Demarest, and was told that he was at the Mundys' Camp. Joshua was obliged to wait until afternoon, when a freighter would be traveling down the line, before continuing his journey to the scene of the slide, for he dared not attempt such a walk in his weakened condition.

He saw Bluenose and the other members of his crew and asked if they would go to the camp of Shanty Madge and work under his instructions, provided Demarest, Spruce and Tillou gave consent. He wanted men whom he knew and could in a measure place confidence in; and, though they laughed at him, all three promised to go if called upon.

At one o'clock in the afternoon the freighter set off, with Joshua perched on the high seat beside him, and shortly after two the passenger alighted and worked his slow way up to the tunnel in search of Demarest or Spruce.

He found both contractors at the tunnel's mouth, talking with Shanty Madge and the engineers. The forest all about the grade had been laid low by axmen, and the great logs snaked into the tunnel in a vain effort to stem the tide of rotten stone and slush. Thousands upon thousands of dollars had been expended with no result, and in construction centers Shanty Madge's tunnel had become famous for out-and-out obstinacy throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Madge saw him coming and ran to meet him, her brown hand outstretched. The engineers and the main contractors looked on with wide eyes, for Joshua, since he had been shot, had gained a certain prominence, and the men doubtless wondered what could be the connection between the girl and this construction stiff.

"Oh, but I'm glad to see you out again!" Madge was saying, and she permitted him to hold her hand rather longer than was necessary. But, then, Joshua had been wounded, it will be remembered. "There are your enemies, and they're eyeing us rather oddly," she whispered. "Buck right up to 'em, old kid! I think I'll call you that now and then," she laughed. "You and I are only kids, after all. And I, for one, have become tired of playing grown up. Go right at Demarest with your proposition. I'll back you up. I'm still manager of this camp."

Joshua released her hand reluctantly and turned toward the watching group. At

Shanty Madge's side he walked toward them, and Demarest gave him a brief nod as the pair drew near.

Philip Demarest was a bluff, rough-and-ready old contractor, worth millions, but very human. He had come up from the grade—first a common laborer, then a gypo man, and finally the head of one of the biggest contracting firms in the United States. He was kindly, erratic, outspoken, and a terror when roused to anger. Now his blue eyes looked at Joshua in wonderment, and the blue veins in his ruddy cheeks and about his pudgy nose stood out prominently, as was their way when the man's interest or curiosity was aroused. He plucked at his stubby, well-trimmed white beard while he waited for Joshua to have his say, for by every token Joshua had a say.

"Mr. Demarest," said Joshua, "I'd like to talk with you about stopping the slide in this tunnel. I understand you have offered five thousand dollars to the man who can stop it. I'd like to make a try for the money."

"Humph! Would, eh? And who are you?"

"My name is Cole, and I'm a hammerman at your Camp One."

"That *so!* Heavens to Betsy!" (The contractor's favorite expletive.) "Ain't you the bird that got winged on the grade here about a month ago?"

"Yes, somebody shot me."

"The hell they did! What for?"

"I've never been able to find out."

"Oh! Just like that, eh? Well, young fella, what d'ye savvy about stoppin' slides in tunnels?"

"I have an idea which I think will work out."

"The hell ye do! How long you been railroadin'?"

"Not a year, altogether."

"Humph! Well, what'll it cost us to stop the slide, followin' your grand idea?"

"Not much. Not more than you are spending in three days as matters stand now."

"Th' hell! Cheap at half the price. Well, Mr. Cole, I guess we can't use you on this job. I got two o' the best known and highest paid rascally engineers in the country here, and both of 'em are stuck. But say—le's hear your plan."

Joshua smiled. "Write me a check for five thousand dollars and I'll give it to you in five minutes," he said.

"Just like that, eh? And suppose it don't work?"

"Well, then—then I'll give you your five thousand back."

The engineers, Spruce and Demarest, saw fit to indulge in hearty laughter at this

point; and then Shanty Madge stepped forward, a deep resentment in her reddish-brown eyes.

“Mr. Demarest, I’m ashamed of you,” she said. “I’ve always considered you open-minded, ready to listen to anybody, and not too big to take off your hat to a man who can show you something you didn’t know.”

The young engineers looked uncomfortable, for there was not one among them who did not long for the favor of this bronze girl of the mountains. Demarest himself looked at her admiringly, then laid a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

“Kinda peeved, ain’t you, Madge?” he asked. “Too much slide here lately, maybe. But you’re right. I do consider myself an open-minded man, and I do consider that I’m willin’ to learn from others. Maybe I was showin’ off a little? What d’ye think about it?”

“I guess that’s right.”

“An’ I guess you’re all wrong, young lady. Heavens to Betsy!—this fella here is gonta get his chance to lay his plan before us, but if he hadn’t stood a little kiddin’ I’d ’a’ come to the conclusion that he hadn’t it in um to evolve a plan that was worth our time. Cole—is that your name?—le’s hear what you have to say. If it sounds good to the engineers and me, we’ll try it out. And if it works you’ll get the five thousand without the blink of an eyelid. That’s the promise of Philip Demarest, for the firm of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou. And here’s witnesses all about. Want any of it?”

“It sounds good to me,” said Joshua. “May I use that table?”

“Hop to it.”

Joshua went slowly toward a collapsible table used by the engineers and seated himself in a camp chair before it. He produced paper and a pencil.

“If you’ll gather around,” he invited, “I’ll lay the whole works before you in two minutes.”

The men and Madge drew close about him and watched while he drew a rough sketch, which is here reproduced:

[Illustration]

He leaned back and pointed with the pencil.

“Consider that you are above the hill in an aeroplane, looking down,” he began, “and that you have the gift of seeing through earth and stone. ‘EE’ represents the hill. ‘A’ is the tunnel. ‘B’ is the point to where the tunnel had progressed when the slide occurred, and also the gap through which the muck is sliding. ‘D’ represents the slide. ‘C’ is the other end of the tunnel. You could abandon the ‘A’ end and complete the tunnel by working the ‘C’ end only, of course, but you are not able to work

enough men on one end to complete the job on time and as per contract. You must have two gangs working toward each other. But a slide occurs at 'B' which you cannot stop. It strikes me that the rock roof is thinner at 'B' than you found it while working toward 'B,' or else the slide would have occurred before it did. This being the case, I assume that the rock stratum is heavier on both sides of 'B,' all around it, in fact, than it is at 'B.' So all that we have to do is to work our way around 'B' and approach it from the other end.

"And to do this in the least possible time I suggest a coyote hole—'F,' 'G,' 'H' and 'I'—a very small tunnel through what in all probability is solid stone, the workmen timbering up ahead of them and shooting very light. Especial care must be taken when they make the turn from 'H' to 'I' and all along 'I' until the slide is reached. Then when they reach the slide let them timber soundly, and continue timbering through the slide until they reach the other end of it. And when all is timbered, you can go right ahead with your big tunnel with no fear of another slide. Is that all clear?"

For fully a quarter of a minute nobody spoke. All stood studying the diagram. Then came the heavy voice of the first expert engineer who had come from the East.

"Utter rot!" he opined. "Tell me, will you, why we will be able to work through the slide and timber up ahead of us any easier from your small tunnel, 'I,' than from where we are now? Your idea is a howling farce."

"I'm sorry you think so," said Joshua, very red in the face. "But my plan hinges on the feature that the slide is traveling in a slanting direction toward 'B.' And the coyote hole, 'I,' runs into the slide from the other direction. You have no roof above you now to hold back the slide. But 'I' has been run through solid stone, and has a solid roof above it. And when you timber from 'I' into the slide, you haven't the pressure against you that you have at the other end of the main tunnel. *You've worked behind the pressure, can't you see?*"

Another moment or two of silence, then from Philip Demarest: "Heavens to Betsy, boys! He's right! It's simple as the nose on your face, and a ten-year-old kid oughta figgered it out. Do you see it, boys? Do you see it? This bird gets behind the pressure of the slide instead of buckin' it. God, but we've been a pack of fools!"

"Oh, Mr. Demarest!" cried Madge. "Do you mean it? Do you actually mean it?"

"I mean we're gonta try it as quick as we can get to work!" he yelled excitedly. "It may not work at all, but it's the only sensible thing that's been advanced since the timbers and baled hay failed to hold her. And if she does work—this bird's not only made his five thousand bucks, but he's got a job that he won't be ashamed to tell his folks about."

Ten minutes after Demarest's violent decision to give Joshua's plan a trial a gang was at work on the preliminaries of the coyote hole. Joshua was disappointed in not being permitted to boss the job himself, and had no chance to bring Bluenose and his other fellow-workers into the limelight. But he was not yet well enough to have stood the strain of a day in the coyote hole, and there would be no room in there, anyway, for a man who was merely boss. He remained at the camp, the guest of Shanty Madge and her mother, and every day he crawled to the tunnel and spent his time there until sheer weariness forced him down.

A night gang and a day gang worked intermittently, and the coyote hole was growing fast. All efforts to remove the hilltop through the mouth of the main tunnel had ceased, and men awaited with eagerness the outcome of the new experiment.

In less than two weeks the night gang turned the last corner and were "coyoteing" toward the slide. Every care was taken now; the timbering was careful and heavy, the shots extremely light. So far there had been no suggestion of a cave-in in the roof, but the real test of Joshua's theory would come when they reached the slide and attempted to timber through it, and remove the muck through the coyote hole.

The engineers, Demarest, Tillou, and Joshua spent much of their time at the mouth of the coyote hole now, waiting for word from within. And at last, about ten o'clock one morning, one of the powdermen came out and reported:

"We've struck de slide, bossman."

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Demarest. "And is she holdin', ol'-timer?"

The dyno raked a stream of perspiration from his forehead with his forefinger. "She's holdin' so far," he answered, and dived back into his hole on hands and knees.

And hold it did until, five days later, the men had worked their way entirely through the slide, which the great timbers now served to keep in place. Then came a moment when the anxious men in the main tunnel heard them at work beyond the partition of slush that separated them. And an hour after this a timber came poking through, then another, and another, and in fifteen minutes the coyote hole was joined to the main tunnel, with solid roofing overhead.

"Now," said Joshua Cole to Demarest, "begin working to right and left and widen your coyote hole until it is of the same dimension as the tunnel, and go ahead as if nothing had occurred. I guess I win, Mr. Demarest."

There was a choke in his voice, and there were tears on the bronze cheeks of Shanty Madge. Demarest's voice, too, was husky as he said:

"Yes, you win, Cole. You win five thousand at one rattle outa the box, and

anything you want in the way of a job with Demarest, Spruce and Tillou.”

But Joshua shook his head. “Thanks,” he said in a low tone. “You’re mighty kind and appreciative, but I’ll take only the five thousand. I have no desire to become a railroad builder—I have other plans.”

“But, man, you’re made!” cried Demarest. “You’ll be known all over the country in no time as Cole, the man who stopped the famous Mundy slide, when two of the biggest engineers in the U.S. failed. Don’t throw away such a chance as that! Take your five thousand and study engineering—your job’ll be waiting for you when you’re through.”

“Thanks, no,” Joshua returned, embarrassed; “I have no brain for engineering. What I did was just the result of common sense, and I couldn’t probably do anything like it again in a thousand years. No, I have other plans.”

“Joshua,” cried Madge, “do you realize what you’re doing? You have nothing—this is the chance of a lifetime!”

“I realize that,” he told her, “but I can’t accept. Here it is September. You perhaps don’t know that on the eighteenth of next June the planet Mars will occupy the best position for observation since Nineteen-nine. And there will not be another chance so good until August, Nineteen twenty-four. So I must get well, build a cabin on my homestead and in general prepare for the hard winter that is predicted in these mountains. Then I must build a trail to the summit of Spyglass Mountain, put up my observatory, and install the eight-inch telescope that I have now decided to buy. The snows will hamper my work next winter, so that it will keep me rustling to have everything in readiness for the eighteenth of next June.”

“What’s all this? What in thunder ye talkin’ about?” barked Philip Demarest.

“Madge will tell you,” said Joshua. “I’m going down to camp now for a little rest, if you’ll excuse me. I find that I’m pretty much all in from the strain and excitement of the last few hours. And that big engineer, Branscomb, nearly pumped the arm off me, on the side where I got shot. You explain for me, Madge. Good-by and—thanks!”

CHAPTER XXIII

“WHEN THE MOMENT COMES!”

Elizabeth Mundy found it necessary to fold Joshua in her arms and kiss him when he and Madge reported the triumph of his idea. The three sat together in the Mundys' comfortable little tent, Madge very thoughtful, with hands in pockets and legs stretched out before her and crossed; her handsome mother rocking gently in a little maple rocker; Joshua seated at the table reading the letter that notified Mrs. Mundy that her homestead claim had been allowed. They began to plan.

“California Bill dropped in on me a few days before I left the hospital,” said Joshua. “It was he who warned me against the coming hard winter. Bill is something of a scientist himself, but he doesn't realize it. He told me about the millions of yellow jackets that he had seen hovering over the mud on the lakeshore. That, he says, is one sure sign of a hard winter in the San Antonios. Also, he says that the ground squirrels are burrowing far back from the water, in anticipation of a rise in the lake, I suppose—and that's another sign.

“Now, by the time snow flies, the steel won't be laid on the new railroad. So that means that we've got to depend on freighters coming from Spur to Ragtown for our supplies. Unless we have a team of our own and can freight them in ourselves. That would save us money, of course. First, though, we'll have to bring in lumber for the cabins—and for stables, for I'm going to have one horse at least. All my life I've wanted a saddle horse. Now, Madge, what are you going to have left from the wreck of your fortunes?—if you'll forgive me for bringing up a painful subject.”

“It's hard to tell just now,” she replied absently, her eyes fixed on the floor. “But the slide has put us so badly in debt that I imagine it will take about everything to square us with the world. Mr. Demarest and I will get at it to-morrow. Ugh! How I dread it!”

“And to think,” mused Joshua, “that if I hadn't stopped that thirty-thirty bullet I could have saved your outfit for you! It seems to me that some subtle power was at work to make things turn out as they did. Your mother wanted you to stop railroading. And I'm afraid that I did too. And—”

“And I don't give a whoop—now,” Madge interrupted.

All three were silent after this, each wrapped in his or her own thoughts.

“You, though, Joshua, failed to-day to show the same common sense that stopped the slide,” said Madge at last. “You are a man—a young man at that—just

making a start. You earned a neat little piece of money and a big reputation in one fell swoop. And then Demarest offers you anything you want in the way of a position—and that doesn't mean a mere job—and you turn him down. Why, boy—kid, I mean—he would have made you! I failed because I'm only a girl. You are a man; and with your brains and ability to figure things out, there's no limit to what you might attain in big construction."

"But the fact remains," he pointed out, blissfully warmed by her praise, "that I have no inclination for construction work. I have set my heart on astronomy. That's what I'm fitted for. When all's said and done, it was the fact that my parents and old Silvanus Madmallet, my teacher, tried to make me learn something for which I was not fitted that sent me to the House of Refuge. No, my path is laid out for me—I'll follow it to the bitter end."

Madge repeated the question that she had put to him when he first called at the Mundys' camp: "But is there any money in it?"

"As I told you before," he replied, a trifle nettled, "I don't know. Nor do I care. I'm not out for money."

"But one *has* to have it, Joshua! Have you no ambition?"

"Does he? Not much, I'm thinking. Ambition, eh? So you, too, consider ambition in terms of money. My ambition is to add something worth while to the knowledge of the race. If I'm paid for it, well and good. And if I'm not I'll manage to struggle along. How 'bout it, Mrs. Mundy? You'll back me up. Do you consider that a fellow can have no ambition merely because he doesn't hanker for wealth?"

"By no means," she replied quickly. "And Madge doesn't either. Just the same, Joshua, matters are different with you. You are a man and have a goal to work for. We are only two women, with nothing to work for but a living. What else can we hope to get from the homestead, provided the land is productive, a market develops, and we are able to carry on the work? For my part, of course, I would almost be content to live a simple life in these mountains, away from the strife and hurry of the world, with plenty of books and magazines and music, and with now and then a trip out to some city to feed up on everything that civilization has to offer. That would make for the keenest appreciation of what men call the good things in life. What city people see every day falls on them, and they become fretful, blasé, unappreciative. But to me, fairly reveling in it two or three times a year, it would bring a wonderful satisfaction. I guess you feel the same way about it, Joshua. But whether Madge does or not is a question."

"Don't worry about me, Ma," Madge put in. "I'll try anything once."

"But we don't want you to feel that way about it, Madge," Joshua told her.

“But I do feel that way about it,” she retorted shortly, “so let’s forget it.”

Joshua slumped down in his chair, and copied Madge by extending his legs and crossing them at the ankles. Then he tamped the burning tobacco in his briar pipe and gave his soul to dreams.

“For me,” he said, “what I consider an ideal life is just opening. I love the freedom of these majestic mountains, the grandeur of the clean, cool forests, the fascinating colors of the lake. Up here a person can be himself and will be able to rise above the petty squabbles, struggles, ambitions, hatreds, and copycatism of life in the congested districts. I’m more or less a caveman, I guess, so far as my physical well-being is concerned. Listen to this:

“““And I, too, sing the song of all creation,—
A brave sky and a glad wind blowing by,
A clear trail and an hour for meditation,
A long day and the joy to make it fly;
A hard task and the muscle to achieve it,
A fierce noon and a well contented gloam,
A good strife and no great regret to leave it,
A still night and the far red lights of home.”””

Again the trio lapsed into reverie, which the girl was the one to break.

“I tried to tell Mr. Demarest about your astronomical studies,” she announced, “but I suppose I made a botch of it. He called you a fool, swung away from me, and let it go at that. But of course I couldn’t be expected to explain what you told him about Mars occupying the best position for observation next June, simply because I know nothing about it myself. What did you mean, Joshua?”

“Just what I said,” he told her. “On the eighteenth of June, next year, Mars will be about forty-two million miles from the earth. By the end of August the distance will be increased to sixty-six million miles. And this closeness will not occur again until August, Nineteen twenty-four. So you see that I must hurry to get everything ready to make the most of an opportunity that will not come again for over two years.”

“And what do you hope to find out next June?”

Joshua did not reply at once, but slumped down lower, absently sucking at a dead pipe. Then he roused himself.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, as if the decision to expose his ideas had just come upon him. “But”—his grave eyes twinkled—“I warn you at the start that there probably will be no money in it.

“I have a theory,” he went on. “I am one of those who firmly believe that the planet Mars is inhabited. Also I believe, with others, that the inhabitants are trying to communicate with us. You have been reading the papers, of course, and you probably know that on the first of this month, I think it was, Signor Marconi made some experiments on the yacht *Electra*, and made the announcement that he had received wireless waves of greater length than those of the highest-powered station in the world. Hence, he argued, these waves could not have originated on the earth. However, he did not say, as he was reported to have said, that he thought these communications—if such they were—came from Mars. Still, he would not say that such a thing was improbable.

“Edison has expressed the belief that the inhabitants of some heavenly body are even now trying to communicate with us, and has predicted that wireless from star to star will be an accomplished fact within the next few years.

“Then the American scientist, Mr. B. McAfee, says that he is convinced that life exists on Mars, and he expects to prove it.”

“But what makes them think so?” Madge queried, her interest aroused as it had been on the night when Joshua told her about the good ship “Argo,” far off in Hathaway. “Now make it as simple as possible, please.”

Joshua Cole’s eyes grew dreamier still. “Arguments are advanced by certain scientists that Mars is physically incapable of sustaining life,” he told his listeners. “This, they claim, is because of its thin atmosphere, low mean temperature, and small amount of oxygen and water vapor. Despite all this, I believe that plant life and animal life exist on that planet.

“Through my own refractor—heavens, how I’ve missed it!—I have seen great white patches, occasionally covering an area of some three hundred thousand square miles of the Martian surface. That’s about six times the size of the State of New York, Madge. These white patches I have observed to come and go, and in the course of time they were followed by green patches covering the same region. And later the green patches turned brown. To me, all this signifies the accumulation of vast masses of watery vapor, the precipitation of rain, the springing into life of green vegetation, and the gradual drying up of the soil and the conversion of the green growth into patches of brown, dried-up plants.

“Again, if there is no water vapor on Mars, how does it come that frost patches can occasionally be observed in the Martian summer?—which, by the way, lasts for one hundred and forty-nine days. I’ve seen these frost patches—have seen them disappear before the rising sun just as they would on this earth. They never last until noon. And it is well known that at rare intervals atmospheric storms have appeared

in projection on the sunrise edge of the planet.

“But, laying all this aside, it is the canal system on Mars that convinces me it is inhabited. It consists of a beautiful network of long line-like markings, continuous and uniform throughout, encompassing the planet from pole to pole. These lines have definite beginnings and definite endings, and each proceeds with definite directness from one oasis—or dark, oval area—to another. In some cases these lines are near together in pairs, and mathematically straight. Double canals, these are called. In other cases two lines intersect, and then both continue to run precisely on their own straight courses. Now, do natural markings on this earth—rivers, for instance—do that? Then are we not justified in the assumption that these geometrical lines on Mars are the work of intelligent engineers? And are we not justified in assuming, also, that these canals were constructed for the growing of vegetation?”

“Just a moment, please,” put in Mrs. Mundy. “What are the oases?”

Joshua assumed a pedagogic attitude.

“The oases,” he explained, “are probably round or oval lakes, fed by the irrigating water courses, probably serving as reservoirs or distributing centers, and forming centers of civilization—cities or urbanlike farming communities. They average about three hundred miles in diameter. The northern hemisphere of Mars is mostly desert, but crossed by canals as they travel toward the regions where vegetation is grown. Some of the canals are as much as eighty miles in breadth—and average about thirty miles. The word canals includes water and vegetation.

“During the winter months the canals are so faint as to be invisible in most cases. Beginning at the snow line, the canals assume a blue-green color—a sort of robin’s egg blue—which eventually extends to the entire system. With the approach of autumn the color changes, and instead of green the canals become a reddish-ochre, or russet, remaining this color until winter, when they begin to grow gradually fainter, and sometimes disappear entirely.

“Now, to return to our theory of irrigation, the irrigation of an entire planet, as seems to me to be the case on Mars, certainly would tax the mathematical and engineering abilities of experts on our own earth. And this wonderful system of irrigation canals—one of them over three thousand miles in length—is not the pipe dream of some over-imaginative star gazer. Many of the canals have been recorded repeatedly on the one hundred thousand photographs made at the Lowell Observatory during the past fifteen years.

“Well, now, ye thirsters for learning who have come to the fountain head of wisdom, let us assume that Mars is inhabited. Let us say, further, that her inhabitants are intelligent beings—far more intelligent than we, as proved by their amazing

system of canals. And let us adopt the belief that these super-intelligent Martians are striving desperately to communicate with us. They may have discovered radio, and the wireless waves received by Marconi may indicate an attempt to get in touch with us. But we don't know for sure that those waves came from Mars or any other planet. What we do know, however, is that the Martians excel in engineering; and we have no proof that they excel us in anything else.

“So then, since we understand engineering after a fashion, isn't it logical to harbor the hypothesis that the Martians may resort to their knowledge of engineering to establish communication with us?

“Communication by means of wireless waves may be all right for Marconi and others, but it's out of my line. I'm a telescope fiend, and I'm hoping to prove that Mars is trying to communicate with us through the medium of sight instead of sound. So during my last few years in the House of Refuge, and even while I was tramping over the country with my friend The Whimperer, I spent many nights while Mars was in opposition to the earth in looking for some physical demonstration on the part of the Martian engineers.

“There is but one universal language, and that is mathematics. And it is my belief that the Martians are trying to communicate with the earth by excavating canals which will, when completed, form a geometrical figure that could not possibly be misinterpreted as having been fashioned by natural causes. Canals could be constructed for the purpose of letting us know that the Martians are intelligent beings, and at the same time these same canals could serve them as waterways for irrigating purposes.

“And I think—I'm almost sure—that such a figure, on a colossal scale, is being made for us to see. I think that I have seen it growing, and it was that one fleeting glimpse that gave me my theory. After that I was constantly on the lookout, until The Whimperer stole my telescope, but saw nothing after that first unusual observation. You perhaps do not understand fully that, even though such a figure were constructed on an enormous scale, it might become visible for only a moment or two at one time, even under the most favorable atmospheric conditions. Even established astronomers, using the world's greatest telescopes, might miss that rare, exceptional moment. They might be looking in the wrong place, you know. And, besides, the higher magnifying powers can seldom be used advantageously in observations of the Martian surface. If a keen-eyed, tireless observer has a small telescope favorably situated he may be the first to glimpse such a signal when the rare moment arrives. For the canals of Mars may be looked for in vain, night after night, with mighty telescopes, and yet remain invisible. Then suddenly comes a moment of

exceptionally good seeing, as telescopists call it, and the fine, hairlike lines stand forth in all their fascinating geometrical symmetry—for one brief moment only! And what if I, Joshua Cole, inmate of a reform school for over six long years, tramp, construction stiff, should be on watch on Spyglass Mountain when that moment comes! . . . I thank you for your kind attention!”

Madge began to speak, but was interrupted by a smart hand-clapping at the door of the tent, and a male voice boomed:

“Good! Fine! Give us the other barrel! I don’t know who you are, but you’re there with the goods!”

“Why, Jack! Where did you come from?” cried Madge, as the flaps were parted and a good-looking, brown-haired young man stood revealed in a gray Norfolk suit and shiny puttees, with a leather quirt hanging by a thong from his wrist.

“Hello, Madge! Hello, Ma Mundy! How’s the old slide coming down?”

Smiling genially and confidently, the young man stepped into the room and shook hands with Mrs. Mundy and Madge. Then, with an amused twinkle in his fine brown eyes, he turned and surveyed the young astronomer, who had risen from his seat.

“Joshua,” said Madge, “this is Mr. Jack Montgomery. Jack—Mr. Joshua Cole, the hero of the day, the expert slide-stopper and adviser of world-famous engineers—Cole of Spyglass Mountain!”

CHAPTER XXIV

WATER AT RAGTOWN

Jack Montgomery proved himself to be an affable young man, admittedly wise in the ways of the world, distinctly of the earth, earthy. Joshua inferred from his conversation that the contracting firm of which his father was the head was struggling along bravely without meddling advice from him. He spent a great deal of his time out of the mountains, and had much to say about recent plays, repeated many golf-links stories, and claimed that if he hadn't returned to the mountains when he did he would have danced his head off. When in the mountains he rode about on horseback from camp to camp, "kidding" his friends, and visiting Shanty Madge. He was older than Joshua. He had been graduated from an Eastern college, and considered the achievement sufficient laurels on which to rest.

There were two distinct reasons why Joshua Cole did not like him: He was insincere, and he thought himself in love with Shanty Madge. Montgomery laughed at Joshua's theory of life on Mars, and though it was plain that he recognized in the young astronomer a man with the capacity for deep thinking, he treated him with a sort of polite tolerance which Joshua found hard to bear.

Montgomery considered himself a modern gentleman. Joshua Cole was the scion of a long and illustrious line of gentlemen. With no social training whatever beyond what his mother had given him before he was sent to the House of Refuge, the instinct with which Joshua had been endowed at birth gave him an air which convinced others that he was a man of culture. Montgomery was patently puzzled at this, especially after he learned that Joshua had been a hammerman for Demarest, Spruce and Tillou until he had stopped the slide.

Madge and Montgomery talked about many things that did not concern or interest Joshua, so he gave his attentions to Mrs. Mundy, and together they planned their future on the homesteads. When Joshua took his leave, an hour after the noonday meal, he was unable to interpret Madge's attitude toward Jack Montgomery. He realized fully, however, that Jack had many things to offer her, which, if Joshua were to attempt an offer of the same, would call for sacrifices too great for him to make. It would mean his complete abandonment of the study of astronomy and his immediate acceptance of Demarest's impulsive offer—in short, Montgomery's offerings spelled money with a capital M.

Now Joshua became a busy man. First, he mailed his check to a Los Angeles

bank and opened an account. Next, he sent two thousand dollars to the publishers of a scientific journal, in which he had seen advertised a second-hand eight-inch telescope. It had been the property of an astronomer who had recently died, and his family, having no use for the instrument and finding themselves in need of money, had made an offer to dispose of it at an astonishing sacrifice. If the publishers considered the telescope all that it should be, Joshua's letter authorized them to turn over the check to the owners and to at once ship the instrument to him. His great fear was that the bargain had been snapped up long ago, for when he first saw the advertisement his longing heart had not dared to hope that in less than a month he would be in a position to avail himself of the opportunity. And his next move was to gather together his pitifully few belongings—including the half-constructed telescope which was now become a mockery—and, with a small tent and camp outfit, which California Bill freighted in for him, go to his claim and establish residence.

Then when his tent was pitched under the sprawling junipers, and his provisions cached, he took stage for Spur and train for Los Angeles, where he notified the land office that he had taken up residence on his claim. But another matter had brought him to the city, for he could have notified the land office in the form of a letter. The next morning after his arrival found him in a saddlery store, where he gave in to a natural inclination to emulate a drunken sailor and bought a saddle, a bridle, and a set of martingales.

For Joshua Cole, despite his seriousness, still cherished the boyish ambition to ride in a picturesque saddle and appear as a picturesque son of the West. Great thinkers invariably have tucked away in their brains a little spring, which, when unexpectedly released, reveals a flaw in their mental equilibrium. The flaw is always some delightfully, laughably human conceit, trait, hobby, or perhaps merely a great longing for something unattainable and amusingly foreign to what they have set out to do in life. And the flaw in the brain of Joshua Cole demanded a prancing horse, a hand-carved saddle with low-swinging tapaderos, a plaited, silver-mounted bridle with martingales to match, and some one to stare at him open-mouthed as he rode by. Can Joshua be forgiven for this, when we remember that Ben Jonson took great delight in counting the pickets of a fence as he walked along, and, if he made a mistake, retraced his course to rectify the error, and that Edgar Allen Poe was inordinately proud of the small size of his feet?

The horse he bought upon his return to the desert, one of which California Bill had told him, a dapple gray five years old, half broncho, quarter Kentucky thoroughbred, and quarter just horse. And Joshua was five hundred dollars poorer, but gloriously content, as he rode into Ragtown, bought a sack of tobacco—though

he had a full sack in his pocket and a carton of them in camp—and then galloped on around the lake toward home. The erstwhile owner of the gray had called him Prince, but Joshua had changed his name to Argo. He could sail over the desert, his fine white mane and tail a-stream in the wind, like the mythical ship that sailed with the Argonauts questing for the golden fleece. But there was another reason why Joshua called him Argo!

Joshua did not at once buy lumber with which to build his shacks, for he was waiting until the Mundys had settled their affairs with Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, when they would order together, and perhaps he would haul the loads with such equipment as the Mundys could manage to save. So for the present he occupied his time by sinking a shallow well and beginning his trail up Spyglass Mountain.

Unfortunately there was no spring on Joshua's land, but the piece taken by Mrs. Mundy boasted one. However, Joshua struck good water twelve feet from the surface. He lined his well with stones and covered it with brush until such time as he could build a wellcurb over it.

Argo was content on a picket rope down by the lake, where the salt grass grew. The wandering cattle did not disturb him, but their constant cropping of the grass made it necessary to move the horse quite frequently. When the well was lined Joshua began mapping out his trail to the top of the mountain, and while he was engaged in this Madge rode up one day and shouted to him to come down.

Joshua discarded his pick and shovel and retraced that part of the trail already made. Madge had dismounted before his tent, and was sitting on her heels, cowpuncher fashion, holding the black's reins in her hand.

"Well, Joshua, here you are," she said. "We've been wondering why you have deserted us, but I suppose you've been busy."

"I intended to ride around to-morrow," he explained, and proudly pointed to his new equestrian outfit and the dapple gray at graze beside the lake.

"My! My!" she cried. "What a spendthrift! But I haven't time to stop long. I just rode over to tell you that we've paid our pound of flesh and are almost ready to move onto the homestead. We'll have about two thousand dollars in the bank, and I saved two span of my best mules, with harness, a couple of good wagons, a few slips and a scraper, all of the blacksmith tools, lots of hand tools, and—oh, a lot of junk! We feel quite prosperous. And now we're through. Ma and I have nobody to depend on now but you. So whenever you're ready, we'll appreciate it if you will come over and help us move."

"I'll be over to-morrow morning," he told her. "Are you glad it's over with, Madge? Will you be content?"

"I'm glad it's all over—yes. And as to my being content, you'll have to take a shrug for an answer. Couldn't you ride over to-night with me, so we can get to work early in the morning?"

"You bet!" cried Joshua, and grasped his saddle by the horn to shoulder it. "Let's go!"

At ten o'clock the following morning Joshua drove a team of mules hitched to a laden wagon from the camp that the Mundys were deserting forever. Argo and Madge's black gelding followed the wagon on lead-ropes. Shanty Madge, with her mother on the seat beside her, drove the other wagon and followed Joshua, and behind her trailed a wheeler. The white-aproned cook came out as they passed and waved his cap. A flunky at the woodpile lowered his ax and called good-by. Up at the works some of the men spied them, and a long shout of good will came down to them. The new manager, a Demarest, Spruce and Tillou man, hurried from his office tent, and, finding himself too late to offer his hand, stood spread-legged and waved his wide-brimmed hat.

There were tears in the reddish-brown eyes of Shanty Madge as she waved back right and left, but she straightened her sturdy shoulders and shouted ahead, a little tremblingly, to Joshua:

"Push 'em in the collar, old-timer! It's a long trip, and we've got a load!"

"You poor dear brave child!" said her mother. "This is breaking your heart, yet you're taking defeat like your father always did—with a shrug of the shoulders, and up and at 'em again!"

"Pooh!" sniffled Madge. "One has to experience a set-back now and then, Ma, to get new adventures out of life and keep from growing stale. This is gonta be good! Hey, Joshua!" she shouted ahead. "I feel like an old-time pioneer! Thus was the wilderness subdued! Hey, old-timer?"

"Thus was she subdued!" Joshua shouted back.

Philip Demarest had been considerate in settling up with Shanty Madge, and to cover her indebtedness had selected such articles as would be of no use to her as a homesteader. So Madge had been permitted to help herself to commissary supplies and baled hay, and there were three more loads to be hauled after they were settled. Demarest's thoughtfulness had made it possible for the homesteaders to fill their larder for many months to come, but there were a few things still needed, and to buy them Joshua stopped his little wagon train at Ragtown about one o'clock.

While he was watering the stock Madge made the few purchases that were necessary. It was Ragtown's quietest hour, for the revelers were still sleeping off the drunkenness of the night before and the gambling games had not yet opened up.

From the doors of saloons here and there came an occasional loud voice or a burst of throaty laughter, breaking in harshly on the mountain stillness.

As Joshua was leading his team from the trough to make room for Madge's he saw, leaning against the corrugated-iron front of The Silver Dollar, his kid enemy of the House of Refuge, Felix Wolfgang. He was the picture of lassitude. A brown-paper cigarette hung from his lower lip. He wore a fancy striped-silk shirt and a vest made of green billiard-table topping, with six five-dollar gold pieces for buttons. The vest was open, showing the flowing ends of a black-satin tie, its knot held firm by a diamond stick-pin. A broad-brimmed Stetson hat, carefully creased to a Mexican peak, looked enormous above his cadaverous face and seemed to cause his many freckles to stand out more plainly. His eyes were insolent, as always, as he gazed with half-interest at Joshua, which interest was quickened as Shanty Madge's lithe figure came from the store and post office and crossed toward the wagons.

She was scarce ten feet from The Silver Dollar when several men appeared behind her in the door. They watched her as she crossed the street and mounted to the elevated seat beside her mother. Then a man slightly behind the rest pushed his way through and came staggering after her.

"Lee, c'mere! C'mon back here, Sweet! Get onto yerself!" called several voices in semi-guarded tones, but the man paid no heed and kept on across the road.

He was such a man as one seldom sees in cities. He was a tall, burly giant, well proportioned and with a stride that was confident for all its present wobbliness. His face was large and red, and a half-moon of leonine whiskers, coarse and curly as a frayed-out hempen rope, encompassed his jaw. He wore a Columbia-shape black Stetson, a purple-and-green-plaid flannel shirt, a black-silk neckerchief with a silver clasp, fringed leather chaps, and high-heeled cowboy boots with fancy quilted tops of morocco leather, on the counters of which hung large-roweled silver-mounted spurs. Petulant, domineering brown eyes were set deep in his unsymmetrical skull, and the corners of them displayed "sleepy men," caused by a night of drinking and a morning of fortification against repentant hours to come.

Once more some man called to him to come back and "tend to his own business," but his chap-clad legs whistled on until he swayed before the astonished Joshua.

"So you're the Ike they're callin' Cole of Spyglass Mountain, are ye?" he wanted to know, and he made no effort to drive sarcasm from his tones.

"I believe I'm to be called that," Joshua replied good-naturedly. "But I didn't know it had got around as yet."

"Huh! Fancy bird, ain't ye?"

Joshua smiled tolerantly. "You'd better go back to The Silver Dollar, hadn't you?" he asked. "Your friends want you, I think."

"Ye do, eh? Well, ye ain't supposed to think. D'ye know who I am?"

"I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance," said Joshua in an amused drawl.

"Haven't th' pleasure, eh? Well, then, I'll interdooce myself. I'm Lee Sweet, owner o' Box-R Ranch, halfway from here to Spur. Now d'ye know me?"

"Yes, I've heard of you," Joshua told him. "If you'll please stand to one side, Mr. Sweet, I'd like to lead that other team to the water trough."

"Ne'mind th' other team, young fella. I got somethin' to tell ye. An' it's this here: You're th' bird that started this here homesteadin' around th' lake, and now a lotta folks are comin' in an' takin' up good grazin' land. Ye can't raise nothin' on that soil—it's plumb full o' alkali. Ye'll all starve to death. An' ye might's well make up yer mind to beat it. That land ain't good for anythin' but grazin' cows in summer, an' at that the pickins is poor enough. But all that's neither here ner there. My point is that ye gotta get outa there before I drive ye out. Do I make myself pretty plain, pardner?"

"But you wouldn't stop me from watering those mules, would you?" laughed Joshua in an attempt to humor him. "Won't you please stand aside a little? Then when you're feeling better, come over and see me and we'll talk about this matter."

"I'm feelin' fine right now," Sweet declared. "An' right now's the time for me to tell ye I won't stand fer ye buttin' in on my summer pasture."

"Well," said Joshua, "the government has allowed our homestead claims and we've made some rather extensive arrangements to go ahead and develop them. I think you'd better see the land office, Mr. Sweet, if you have any complaint to make. Really, now, I must be watering this team so that we can be getting on. We've a pile of work to do before nighttime comes."

"Ne'mind waterin' the team now"—and the cattleman placed himself between Joshua and Madge's mules. "What're ye gonta do?"

"I'll tell you," said Joshua: "If you don't get out of my way right now, so that I can lead that team to the water, I'm going to shove you out of the way. I've stood about all of the browbeating that I usually contract to stand from anybody. Will you let me water this team, now?"

"T' hell with yer team! You get yer things an' pack up, and beat it outa—"

But at this point Mr. Lee Sweet was pushed violently backward by Joshua Cole, and he lost his balance and sat down in a very undignified manner.

Unconcernedly Joshua started toward the heads of Madge's span of mules, and then the girl shouted a warning from her seat:

“Look out, Joshua! He’s up and—”

Joshua swung about just in time to ward off a blow from one of the stockman’s heavy fists, but before he could retaliate a stubby-fingered hand fell on Sweet’s shoulder, and from then on he had to deal with California Bill.

“Tut-tut-tut!” came Bill’s soothing drawl. “Lee, I’m ashamed of ye, all lickered up before these here ladies, an’ carryin’ on plumb *cultus*, like ye’re doin’! An’ you with a wife an’ a couple o’ th’ nicest kids this side th’ Tehachapi! Lee, ye don’t carry yer licker like ye usta—seems. Come on back to Th’ Silver Dollar an’ try to get a little sleep.”

The big bewhiskered cattleman stood stock-still and made no move to show his resentment over the interference of California Bill. Over in front of The Silver Dollar a crowd had gathered, watching the altercation in silence. Slim Wolfgang continued to lean listlessly against the building, his hat drawn down low over his eyes of faded blue, the cigarette still drooping from his thin and sallow lips.

“You mind yer own business, Californy!” Lee Sweet said to the freighter, but he said it in a way that convinced nobody that he meant to follow the implied threat with physical action.

“You darned ole fool!” chuckled California Bill, slapping the cowman on the back. “C’mon over to Th’ Dollar now, an’ try an’ get on yer feet. These here folks ain’t botherin’ ye, Lee. Why,—why, I’m jest naturally surprised at ye, ol’-timer! Here’s you, th’ king o’ the mountains, ye might say, tryin’ to start a quarrel with these here people on th’ public highway. Le’s you’n’me go h’ist a couple f’r ole times’ sake, Lee!”

The big fellow looked into Bill’s genial face for a moment or two, and then an expression came over his own that twisted his features as if he had tasted alum water. His bearded lips trembled, and began working spasmodically, like the lips of a burro sorting bunchgrass from a nest of spiny cactus. And behold, two great tears streamed down into his beard, and his voice broke into a tremulous boo-hoing that brought a fit of laughter from Shanty Madge.

“There, there!” soothed California Bill, winking at his friends and boyishly holding back his laughter with a broad hand placed across his mouth. “There, there, ol’-timer! Ye didn’t mean what ye was sayin’ a-tall, Lee—jes’ th’ ole licker talkin’, eh? And ye’re sorry an’ all, and these here folks forgive ye ’cause they understand. Now le’s you’n’me go over to Th’ Silver Dollar and study our blame’ old nerves. C’mon, Lee—that’s th’ *hi-yu skookum* thing for us to do.”

And sobbing and sniffing, the brawny cowman allowed himself to be led across the street by the stocky freighter, whose head came below the giant’s shoulders. Bill

looked back as he guided his charge along and winked mischievously, and once more placed his unoccupied hand across his lips like a boy who laughs at his elders behind their backs.

“Can you beat that?” came slangily from Shanty Madge. “I wonder if that’s the way California Bill took men to the penitentiary when he was deputy sheriff up in Chaparral?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Joshua, at last able to lead the thirsting shavetails to the trough. “But I didn’t know we’d created any enmity. I’m sorry this occurred, but it’s just as well that we know how matters stand.”

California Bill came rolling across the street before Joshua had mounted to his wagon seat.

“Hello, there, folks!” he cried, shaking hands all around, the crow’s-feet dancing under the thick patches of coal-black hair above his eyes. “Seems like for once I was Johnny-on-th’-spot. He’d ’a’ fought ye, Tony, all right, but they ain’t any harm in ’im when he’s sober. Jes’ a big blusterer, an’ ye don’t wanta pay any attention to ’im a-tall. He’ll rave an’ faunch about ye’re bein’ th’ one to start th’ raid on his grazin’, but he’s harmless. He’s weepin’ over th’ bar now, an’ don’t know I’ve left ’im—seems. An’ so ye’re on yer way to Spyglass Mountain at last, eh? I gets in last night, an’ was wonderin’ about ye. An’, Tony, ye sure taught yer grandmother to suck eggs when ye sat down on that slide, didn’t ye? Ye’re th’ most talked-of *hombre* south o’ th’ Tehachapi right now. Five thousan’ bucks, eh? C’n ye believe it? I can’t. I never saw that much money in my life.”

“Here’s that forty that you saw not long ago and then lost track of, anyway,” laughed Joshua, tendering bills to the amount that his friend had loaned him.

“Well, I’ll take ’er—seein’s it’s you, Tony. An’ look at our new saddle an’ bridle, will ye? Say, Tony—they are *hi-yu skookum* an’ no *mis*-take. That’ll make ye a character—that an’ yer doin’s on Spyglass Mountain. I been spreadin’ that name broadcast from here to Spur, an’ ag’in th’ trains begin tootin’ on th’ new railroad, they’ll be rumnin’ excursions up here to see Cole o’ Spyglass Mountain. Ye got a heap o’ taste, my son—a rarin’ *hi-yu skookum* taste, I’ll say! Now, them’ll make ye unique, Tony—an’ that’s what ye want. An’ ye jes’ wanta ride into Ragtown on that rarin’ gray I picked fer ye, with this here lovely outfit on ’im, get off seriouslike an’ walk into th’ post office, with yer head down an’ lookin’ neither to th’ right ner left, get yer mail, tell th’ storekeep to give ye a big two-bit Havana seegar in a low, quiet tone, light up, take a couple puffs, an’ then go out an’ fork th’ gray ag’in an’ ride off slowlike, with yer head still down an’ yer thoughts on Mars, never sayin’ a word to nobody.”

“Bill, you’re an old hypocrite,” Madge accused.

“Yes’m, I guess ye’re right, Madge. But I know what a fella’s gotta do to become a character. I’m one—I oughta know. Well, so-long, folks! Ye gotta be goin’, I know. Drift ’round an’ see ye next time I ramble in. So-long, now—be good!”

As the wagons drove out of town Felix Wolfgang continued to lean against the front of The Silver Dollar and watch them from under his pulled-down peaked hat.

CHAPTER XXV

ON THE ROCKY ROAD TO RAGTOWN

For over two hours Joshua Cole and Shanty Madge drove their mules along the north shore of Stirrup Lake, then turned up through the unbroken sweep of sagebrush toward Spyglass Mountain. They saw several camps as they passed along, and it appeared that a colony of homesteaders had just come in from somewhere outside the country. Tents had been pitched and stock stood about and nibbled hay in the wagon beds.

The sage, though breast-high in places, broke easily before the passage of the mules, and the wagons crackled their way up the slope, breaking a trail which afterward was to become a road. Joshua drove to the *sienea* on Mrs. Mundy's claim. Here they climbed down, hurriedly attended to their stock, and went at the pitching of tents and the arrangement of various articles necessary to a temporary camp.

Evening was coming on, for at an early hour the sun sank beyond Saddle Mountain, and somber shadows were even now stealing over the placid lake. Elizabeth Mundy ceased her work and watched the reflection of the sunbathed clouds on the surface of the water. The lake lost its bluish tinge and took on a giddy yellow, which quickly changed it to a lake of fire so dazzling as to hurt the eyes. Darker tones crept in—orange, cerise and orange, then orange splotched with crimson, then crimson for a minute, which brought forth cries of delight from the women. Gradually the crimson deepened, and once more the natural blue came back to blend with the crimson and lend to the waters a bold violet tone. Then strident purple, then blue again, then deep indigo, then velvet black.

Far to the south and west loomed lofty mountains, timber-clad to the line of perpetual snow, dazzling white above. A soft, fresh breeze blew from the lake and told stories in the branches of the fragrant junipers. Red-breasted linnets, songful until now, went twitteringly to sleep in the juniper tops, and the water gurgled a chanty song to the pool below the spring. Back of them Spyglass Mountain upreared itself, its summit gilded with the sun, and at its base great grotesque rocks stood grimly silent, sentinels there since the days when the earth was young.

A long sigh escaped the lips of Elizabeth Mundy as she turned from the blue-black lake. "It will be home," she said, "when you've built a fire, Joshua."

And as the flames leaped up and licked at the black kettle hung over them to

boil, the drunken laughter of two coyotes floated down from some haunted fastness of Spyglass Mountain.

Later they sat on the ground and ate fried bacon and boiled potatoes as the cold black mountain night gathered round them. Away to the east the twinkling lights of Ragtown threw serpentine swords across the lake like the blade in the hand of the angel who stood before Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Here and there on the sagebrush slope between them and the water other campfires gleamed. Down there the little dabchicks clucked as they fed on tender water growths, and the mudhens scolded one another for greediness.

Then Joshua lighted his pipe, and Shanty Madge asked him about the young man with the resplendent green vest, who had leaned against the saloon in Ragtown and never removed his eyes from them throughout the altercation with Lee Sweet. So Joshua told her of his meeting with Slim Wolfgang and The Whimperer, and put it up to her to solve the strange riddle of the connection between the pair.

“But, Joshua,” the girl exclaimed, “you never were actually that tramp’s road-kid, were you?”

“Well,” he replied, “not in the strict sense of the term, perhaps. He tried to boss me at first, but I was physically a little too much for him. Still, it took a long time to shake him, and it has always been a mystery to me just why I couldn’t. He seemed to have an uncanny luck in trailing me up. I guess he would have been with me today if my telescope hadn’t tempted him. I’ll bet he had a glorious jag after he’d peddled it!”

“It’s the strangest thing on earth,” Madge mused, “that you should encounter these two here in Ragtown. And the fact that The Whimperer ran through this Wolfgang’s tent proves to me that there *is* some bond between them. But I can’t fathom the mystery.”

They gave it up finally and began planning their future activities on their homesteads. They decided that next day Madge and her mother would make themselves comfortable in a semi-permanent camp, and Joshua would start out of the mountains for lumber. He would take one team and drive to Spur. A single team would be sufficient to haul the load to the foot of the mountains, and there Shanty Madge would meet him with the other team, and they would drive four-up to the summit.

Madge was doing most of the planning. Her mother sat on a camp stool lost in thought. Joshua, stretched on the ground, looked across the campfire at Madge and watched the play of the firelight on the girl’s bronze hair.

She too lay prone on the ground, her supple body relaxed, her hands locked

behind her head, her eyes gazing up at the stars and the black sky.

Cole of Spyglass Mountain was dreaming dreams. From boyhood he had been an individualist, a loather of the commonplace in life. Here, then, was a situation that made distinct appeal to him, and here was a girl that appealed. All about was the mountain stillness, for, somehow, the lover of the outdoors does not estimate the sounds of nature in terms of noise. The breath of the sage was sweet. There came from the blackness that welled about the little circle the sound of the crunching molars of the mules as they ate their hay. Here indeed was the beginning of an adventure far from the commonplace, and a girl far from commonplace was the nucleus of it. What a girl was Shanty Madge, dethroned gypo queen—a girl who knew more about horses and mules and wagons, and the ways of rough, hard men than he did. Yet what a picture of feminine beauty she made as she lazed beside the campfire, all woman, all rounded curves of loveliness! And he—Joshua Cole—had sought for her and found her out in the West of his boyhood dreams—and she was here with him, with only a flickering blaze between them—and, in a measure, her happiness was in his hands.

And so with her picture in his heart he arose, said good-night softly, and trailed away through the blackness toward his own little tent.

He was away at dawn behind one of the teams of mules, his wagon rumbling musically through the weird silence of the infancy of another day. The shavetails topped the summit, wound their way down the mountain, around Hairpin Curve and Shirt-tail Bend, across Yucca Flat and Cactus Slope, and down to the yellow desert—to Wild Woman Springs and Box-R Ranch, to Bobcat Point, and on through the rocky pass to Spur. Two days later he was returning over the sandy waste, with a groaning load of lumber under him. And when he reached the foot of the mountains, late in the evening of the second day, he found Madge Mundy awaiting him with the helper span of mules.

He had not expected her that night. The plan had been for him to camp at the beginning of the grade whenever he reached it, and to wait there for the coming of the girl next day. But to save time and get an early morning start, Madge placidly informed him, she had decided to come that afternoon and camp with him that night.

She noted the color and the worried look in his face, and laughed without a blush.

“Chaperons mean nothing in my young life, Joshua,” she said. “I’ve been a railroader, associated with all sorts of men too many years to give room to any old-maid ideas like that. But I might have known you would be a prude. About all that you know of life you have learned from books. Isn’t that true? Now don’t stand

there looking bashful. Throw the leather off 'em and feed and water 'em, while I dig greasewood roots for a fire. I'm hungry as a wolf."

"Your—er—your mother—she approved?"

"About all that she had to remark on the subject was that you wouldn't. But I told her I'd make you. Pioneers can't afford to observe the stupid niceties of society at large; they have work to do. Let's get busy, then. Night's coming on."

"I was only thinking of you," Joshua defended.

"Don't, then."

Joshua, his head in a dizzy whirl over this unexpected development and the guilty delight it gave him, went at the unharnessing of his team. Shanty Madge, her hat off and her sleeves rolled above her elbows, took a mattock from his wagon and trudged away to the nearest greasewood bush. By the time that he had attended to the mules she returned with an armful of roots. She built a fire while he took the camp kit from the wagon and sorted out the grub.

And soon they were once more seated one on either side of a cheery campfire—but this time Joshua was alone with the girl of the frizzly bronze-gold hair and the Pocahontas coloring and the topaz eyes that had brought him West.

As the campers ate their ham and eggs coyotes yodeled off in the dimly outlined foothills. The camp was by a foothill spring, where a watering trough had been set up; and over it tall cottonwoods spread their leafy comfort. To the east, and slightly below them, the night wind rehearsed the never finished dramas of the wastelands in the daggers of the yucca palms. Above them towered the mountains, the old men of the earth, symbols of wisdom and understanding, forbidding and grim to those who love them not, friendly and tolerant to those who do. And over all lay that uncompromising hush that throttles the souls of men who cannot think, but which, to those who are masters of their minds, is like the touch of a mother's hand at bedtime.

They were silent, these two who sat beside the tiny greasewood fire. They felt their insignificance and lack of power, and still were unafraid. The fire was not between them now, for the Adam had risen to offer the weary mules more water, and when he returned he sat beside the Eve. And then, somehow, his arm stole round her and he buried his lips in her bronze-gold hair.

"Shanty Madge," he whispered, "I love you."

"I know it," said Madge. "But—but I didn't ride down here for this. You—you shouldn't have taken advantage, Joshua. No other man with your natural refinement would have taken this situation to broach such a subject. I might have known. It's because you're so—well, I guess innocent is the word—no, unsophisticated."

“But this is the first time I’ve been alone with you,” he pleaded naïvely. “It was the night, and the mountains, and the desert. They—they made me say it. They told me that you and I were the only people in the world. What could I do? . . . Madge, you love me, don’t you?”

A long silence set in after his words. Unseen bullbats, sailing about in the air above them, swooped down on luckless insects and their wings went *bur-r-r-r*. A frog, coldly comfortable in the drip under the water trough, croaked his approbation of all things earthly. A mule, his stomach stuffed with hay, lay down with a thump, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

“Sometimes I think I do,” said Shanty Madge. “And then again I think I don’t. All women are like that, I guess. I—I—Really, Joshua, you shouldn’t have—have told me that—to-night.”

“I know it,” he replied. “But I couldn’t help it, Madge. Do you think you’ll love me when you know me better? I’ve loved you since you were eleven years old. Do you think you will, Madge?”

“I—perhaps. I think so. I mean I don’t know. You must—you must take your arm away, Joshua. I’m going to take my blankets over there on the hillside and go to bed.”

Obediently he released her and stood erect.

“If you’d only forget your foolish astronomy, Joshua. I can’t think about—well, about what you just said—until you do. When I think of your spending two thousand dollars for that telescope, Joshua, why, I—I’m almost afraid you’re crazy! I can’t live in the mountains always. I’ve seen too much of life. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you must make money, dear boy. If we were—well, now—married, we’d have to have money. And you can’t make it up there—that is, unless the land proves to be good, and things turn out all right, and you work your claim for all that’s in it. There isn’t a living on Spyglass Mountain, Joshua.”

“Why, I can make a living for us, Madge. I mean to work my claim, of course. But I can’t give up my astronomy.”

“It will take all of your time,”—her tones were positive. “And besides, I consider that land only a stepping stone to something better. I mean to develop it and then sell out to some one who hadn’t the nerve to pioneer as we intend to.”

“Does Jack Montgomery want to marry you?” he asked abruptly.

“Should you have asked that, Joshua? You’re so unsophisticated!”

“Why not?”—his voice was boyishly belligerent.

“Well—he’s asked me to.”

“Do you love him?”

“I don’t like your tone, Joshua!”

“Do you?”

“No! That is, I don’t know. Sometimes I think I do. If he’d only—well, knock ’em in the collar a little harder. I can’t tolerate a drone. But he’s promised to go to work with his father’s company if I’ll—well, you understand, marry him.”

“You could never love him, Madge.”

“Perhaps not. But he can give me what I want.”

“Money, eh?”

“The things money will buy, at any rate. And above all, he’ll be somebody if he ever puts his mind to something. He has brains.”

“And I haven’t.”

“I didn’t intimate any such thing, Joshua Cole! You have more than he has, perhaps, but your mind has a different trend. But his brains are the brains that’ll count in this world’s struggle. You’re a—a—Now, I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re a dreamer, Joshua.”

For a long time Joshua proved that he was a dreamer, for he gazed unseeingly into the dying coals and said not a word. But when he looked up his lips were straight, and in his eyes was that look of firm determination that had kept him true to his trust from boyhood, against all odds. Yet those grave gray eyes were tolerant and smiling as they looked at her.

“Yes, I’m a dreamer,” he admitted. “And I’m going to make a dreamer of you, too, Shanty Madge. Listen: Do you know this one, by John Boyle O’Reilly?”

“I am tired of planning and toiling
In the crowded haunts of men;
Heart-weary of building and spoiling,
And spoiling and building again.
And I long for the dear old river
Where I dreamed my life away;
For a dreamer lives forever,
And a toiler dies in a day.

“I can find no pride, but pity,
For the burdens the rich endure;
There is nothing sweet in the city
But the patient lives of the poor.
Oh, the little hands too skillful,
And the child mind choked with weeds;
And the daughter’s heart grown willful,
And the father’s heart that bleeds.

“No, no, from the street’s rude bustle,
From the trophies of mart and stage,
I would fly to the woods’ low rustle,
And the meadows’ kindly page.
Let me dream, as of old, by the river,
And be loved for the dream alway;
For a dreamer lives forever,
And the toiler dies in a day.”

The bronze eyelashes hid the eyes of Shanty Madge as Joshua’s voice ceased. She looked up presently, to smile back at him despite herself.

“I know that,” she told him, “and I like it. I—I fight it—sometimes.”

Joshua turned abruptly to the wagon.

“Which room have you picked for yourself?” he asked. “Point it out and I’ll carry your bedding there.”

Then suddenly, from close at hand, came the tread of many hoofs on the rocky road to Ragtown.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MORON

Had they not considered themselves so entirely alone in a vast wilderness, the ears of Shanty Madge and Cole of Spyglass Mountain long since would have been acute to the low rumble of California Bill's heavy six-mule wagon. But the past few minutes had been tense ones with these two, and they had heard no sound until the little hoofs of Bill's mules left a sandy stretch in the road and clicked upon the rocks.

Madge and Joshua stood still and listened, and now all of the sounds that are a part of a heavily laden mountain wagon on the move were distinguishable—the click of hoofs, the grumble of the shifting load, the crunch of the six-inch-tired wheels, the creak of leather, the jingle of harness hardware. And soon a great bulk hove in sight, growing mysteriously out of the night like a huge shadowy leviathan climbing up out of the sea.

There came a hail. California Bill had glimpsed the twinkle of the campers' fire.

"By golly, it's California Bill!" Joshua exclaimed. "I didn't know he was behind me. I'll poke up the fire and get him something to eat while he's 'tending to his skates."

Then he lifted his voice in welcome.

California Bill dexterously swung his straining team out of the ruts in the road, and, with the cargo swaying perilously from side to side like a top-heavy tug in a pyramidal sea, he drew up beside Joshua's load of lumber, where the six mules stopped without command and fluttered their pink nostrils in a "blow."

"Hello, there, Cole of Spyglass Mountain!" came the cheery greeting from the top of the load. "An' I'm an ornery beef critter if Shanty Madge ain't here, too! Say, Tony, I learned a new word at Spur to-day. What's one o' these here morons they're talkin' about these days? Fella at Spur called me one, an' I didn't know whether to slap 'im on the wrist or not—an' that's what ye might call an embarrassin' situation."

Joshua laughed. "You're anything but a moron, Bill, so you should have slapped him. But get off and feed and water your stock while I throw some ham and eggs in the pan for you. We'll talk about morons later."

"Is it awful bad to be one, Tony?" Bill chuckled as he clambered down. "I thought this bird thought I was some kind of a Filipino. I didn't want to be that, either, but I didn't want to show my ignorance. Say, why didn't ye wait for me,

Tony?”

“I didn’t know you were in, or I would.”

“Yes—but I load from cars at the far end o’ town. I guess that’s why you missed me. They told me you was in and gone ag’in, and I lit out after ye, two hours behind, thinkin’ sure my six could overtake those two old chuckawallas o’ yours.”

“Be careful, Bill!” warned Madge. “These are my mules, remember.”

“Yes’m, I guess they are. But if ye’ll cast yer yellow eyes over these here marvels I’m drivin’ ye’ll admit that ‘chuckawallas’ is right.”

“My eyes are not yellow!” retorted Madge.

“They’re tagger eyes, that’s what they are—dangerous eyes. But quit pickin’ on me, Madge. I was tellin’ Tony that I hadn’t meant to ramble out till th’ followin’ mornin’, but when I heard he was on th’ road I says I’ll ketch ’im, an’ we’ll make the merry pilgrimage together. But I had a confoun’ breakdown th’ other side o’ Bobcat Point an’ it set me back. But I knew ye’d camp here, Tony, so I kep’ th’ shavetails ramblin’. An’ here we are, all *hi-yu skookum!*”

“But about them moron fellas, Tony?” Bill was busily engaged in unharnessing his mules while he rattled on, and Shanty Madge had gone to help him. “Wasn’t it morons that th’ U.S. soldiers fought in th’ Philippines?—those boys that swung th’ mean bolos an’ was plumb *cultus* in a scrap?”

“Not quite,” Joshua laughed. “The morons are worse than that, Bill.”

Bill stopped stock-still in the midst of leading his swing team to the watering trough, and the mules pressed past him, one on either side, until they were straining toward the trough at the ends of their lead ropes.

“I know what they are,” Bill declared with conviction. “They’re them birds in Utah that have a dozen *mujeres* apiece! I never thought o’ that till this confoun’ minute—seems. And here I ain’t got even one woman to love me. I sure oughta slapped that Ike! Guess I’ll hook ’im up an’ go back to Spur an’ ’tend to it.”

“Bill, if you don’t hurry up with those mules and close that crack in your face I’ll throw this grub in the fire and go to bed,” warned Joshua.

“Mules,” said Bill, “hear that? No *muck-a-muck* for us if we don’t quit our foolin’.” And he loosed the lead straps, whereupon the mules dispensed with his services entirely and rushed to the trough, to bury their velvet muzzles deep in the water and wash out the desert dust.

When Shanty Madge had finished helping California Bill with his teams she bade the men good night, and refused to allow Joshua to carry her bedding to the little nook she had chosen on the hillside. She tripped away carrying on her head a roll of blankets and a single mattress, which she had packed down on the unriden mule.

Joshua sat down with Bill to keep him company while he ate.

Bill took an enormous mouthful of ham, and nodded at Joshua's load of lumber, dimly outlined by the firelight.

"Quite a jag you got," he said, which is the Western way of describing a heavily laden wagon and is not designed to cast reflections on one's state of insobriety.

But before Joshua could agree with him Bill's intensely black eyebrows lifted themselves and a blank look crossed his face.

"By golly, that reminds me!" he cried. "I'd forgot all about my passenger till I said th' word 'jag.' He's on top o' my load playin' with th' angels—or he was when night come over th' desert. Mighta fell off, f'r all I know—he's lit from th' toenails to th' eyeballs an' way ports. Ole pal o' yours, Tony—this bird they call Th' Whimperer. He was at Spur, all het up like an engine, an' I gentled 'im down an' offered 'im a ride back to Ragtown. Shall I prod 'im off an' throw a feed into 'im? Guess he must be one o' these here morons, but he's got two legs an' don't pick up his *muck-a-muck* with his toes."

"You've got The Whimperer on that wagon?"

"If th' desert wind didn't blow 'im off."

"And he's drunk?"

"Drunk an' rarin' to make speech. Talked th' arm off me till th' breakdown th' other side o' Bobcat Point, then he went exhausted an' pressed hay f'r th' rest o' th' trip. An', say, Tony, he was tryin' to talk about you. Said you an' me was friends, an' he wanted me to make an appointment—seems—f'r him to meet ye an' smoke th' pipe o' peace. Says he's got somethin' to slip ye in th' way of information. But I take it he won't eat. He's got a bottle on his hip, an' he's hittin' it to drive th' sidewinders away whenever he's awake. Le's let 'im pound his ear till mornin'."

"I don't think I care to see him at all," mused Joshua. "He's heard of the money I got from Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, and probably wants to slip me a ream or two of whimpermeter for a touch."

"Say, you don't always talk English either, do you?" chuckled California Bill. "Seems like in this country every jasper's got a language of his own. But I'd see this pelican, Tony. I think he knows somethin'. Ye might find out who threw that thirty-thirty bullet into ye that time."

"Did he tell you anything about that?"

"No; but, as the fella says, he hinted darkly. But wait'll mornin'. Le's spend the rest of our interestin' conversation on the subject of morons before we hit th' hay."

Joshua laughed as he lighted his pipe at the glowing end of a twig from the outskirts of the hot ashes.

“Well,” he said, “do you know what a bromide is?”

“That ain’t what a fella takes when he’s tryin’ to sober up, is it?” asked Bill, with a devilish twinkle in his slate-blue eyes.

“You know I don’t mean that,” Joshua accused.

“Well, I guess I read about th’ kind o’ bromides you mean somewheres,” Bill admitted. “They say a lot that somebody’s already said, don’t they?”

“I never heard a more concise definition,” Joshua applauded. “Well, in an effort to be as concise myself—a moron is a bromide, only worse.”

Bill pondered deeply, his coal-black eyebrows drawn down, one stubby digit fingering the iron-gray hair at his temple.

“A moron,” Joshua amplified, “believes that prohibition prohibits. He believes what the advertisers of breakfast foods have to say about their products, and he makes his stomach believe it, too.”

Bill nodded understandingly.

“He believes that, if the politician he votes for is elected, he will get what he longed for when he cast his vote.”

Bill nodded again.

“And,” continued Joshua, “when he doesn’t get it, he believes he *is* getting it.”

California Bill allowed himself a chuckle.

“He believes that this country has free speech. He knows it has because he read an editorial to that effect in his morning paper. And on the front page of that paper he read of twenty men being sent to the penitentiary because they made remarks which, in effect, merely voiced their dissatisfaction with the accepted order of things and called for a change.”

“Whoa!” cried Bill. “That’s radicalism! I took some o’ those birds to th’ pen’ myself.”

“It is not necessarily radicalism,” Joshua denied. “It’s merely commonsense. We’re not talking politics, remember, Bill. We’re simply trying to dismember the patient moron for our own enlightenment.”

“Pump another cartridge into th’ bar’l,” offered Bill.

“A moron believes that the man who doesn’t own an automobile can’t afford one.

“If he owns a Remington typewriter, there is no other typewriter on the market worth twenty cents.

“And if his Remington becomes useless because of a fire, and his grandfather sends him an Underwood to soothe his soul, no typewriter on the market except the Underwood is worth twenty cents.”

"I know saddle tramps that are morons," interjected Bill. "But, say, Tony, I was jest kiddin' Shanty Madge to-night when I said what I did about her mules."

Joshua's gray eyes twinkled at this.

"The moron," he continued, "reads his newspaper from the first page to the last, but he'll usually tell you that he doesn't care very much for fiction.

"He believes that Christians follow the teachings of Christ.

"He doesn't realize that, if Christ came on earth again, you, maybe, would be called back to Chaparral County to take him to the penitentiary.

"When he writes a business letter he always begins: Yours of the 'steenth received and contents noted. In regard to same will say—

"Bill, I could continue all night dissecting the common, or garden, variety of moron. Then there's the highbrow moron to be dealt with, too. But I haven't time, and I think you know what a moron is, anyway. But I'll add just one more trait by which you may always know one when you meet one. A moron is convinced that he is the only person on earth who isn't a moron."

"What's the population of the United States?" asked Bill, after a period of thought.

"Something over a hundred million, I believe."

"Huh!" snorted Bill. "So many as that? But you and me, Tony, we're—"

"Look out, Bill! Be careful!"

Bill's pudgy hand darted to his mouth and covered it in that boyish gesture which so greatly amused his friend.

"Maybe I am one, after all," he said, when he dared remove his hand. "But how'd that bird down there to Spur get onto it?"

"What happened, Bill?" Joshua questioned him.

"Well, he's the boss o' th' supply deepo down at Spur, an's got th' job o' buyin' an' receivin' all th' stuff for Demarest, Spruce and Tillou, an' gettin' it started on its way to the camps. He's one o' these dapper little fellas, with a nice white collar on, an' a gold pencil to figger with, an' one o' these here slim cigarette holders about a foot long always between his teeth.

"What!' he says to me. 'D'ye mean to tell me that ye won't take two more sacks o' hams on that load?"

"Brother,' I says kindly, 'two sacks o' hams weighs four hundred pounds, and four hundred pounds is four hundred pounds too much. I won't take *one* more sack.'

"An' I thought you called yourself a mule skinner,' he says, with one o' these here movin' picture sneers.

“In a way,’ I says, ‘I am. These here mules,’ I says, ‘are willin’, pullin’ fools, an’ it’s been whispered that California Bill c’n handle ’em. I know a load when I see it. I got it now.’

“You’re nothin’ but a joke,’ he says. ‘Why, I myself know more about mules than you ever dreamed of. You’ll take two more sacks o’ hams or I’ll fire you.’

“Then I’m up an’ at ’im—seems—all spread out linguistically. ‘Neighbor,’ I says, ‘you didn’t hire me, an’ ye can’t fire me. Why, you couldn’t fire a cigarette. This here’s th’ most *hi-yu skookum* team bustin’ collar-stitchin’ between here an’ Ragtown, an’ I’m th’ most *hi-yu skookum* nursemaid to a mule that ever lost a currycomb. I was skinnin’ mules when yer maw was scoldin’ yer paw f’r not keepin’ his hand in th’ middle o’ yer back when he walked th’ floor with ye at night. You don’t know a mule from a mulley cow. If all th’ mules I’ve wrangled was to stand a mile away an’ kick in your direction, th’ wind from their heels would scare you into a cyclone cellar. Why, ye puny little dude, if ye was to get one whiff of a mule’s collar after a hard day’s pull ye’d get cholera morbus. If real mule skimmers like me was only gettin’ ten cents a day,’ I says, ‘you couldn’t get ten cents a month for skinnin’ peaches in a cannery. Go put on an apron an’ swat flies! You think a mule’s born with his tail shaved, don’t ye? If ye had a mule an’ lost ’im on th’ desert, ye’d go out an’ try to run down th’ first jackrabbit ye saw, thinkin’ he was him. If I was to cut a mule’s ears off,’ I says, ‘an’ tie a couple o’ them cigarette holders like you got on top his head, ye’d think he was a ji-raffé who’s maw had forgot to teach him how to squat behind. There,’ I says, ‘now you be good, or I’ll crawl up there an’ drag ye down an’ make ye kiss my off lead mule, then kill th’ mule before he kills me.’

“An’ as I drives loftily away he begins on me, with his pink little jowls shakin’ like a pup dyin’ of strychnine poisonin’, ‘You—you—you—!’

“An’ then I turns an’ looks ’im square in th’ eye an’ kinda pulls in on all six lines. And he finishes:

“You—you *moron!*”

“And, confound ’im, I hadn’t a word to say, ’cause I didn’t know what he’d called me. Le’s hit th’ hay, Tony—it’s gettin’ late.”

CHAPTER XXVII

“NUTTIN’ BUT DE TRUT”

With California Bill Fox leading—Shanty Madge beside him on the seat—the two wagons slowly made the grilling grade up the mountain toward Ragtown. Beside Cole of Spyglass Mountain rode one who would have fitted in nicely as “the horrible example” at a temperance lecture—The Whimperer.

His grotesque face was twisted with remorse and suffering this morning, and he looked as if he had been on the rack of torture. His artificial scar was livid, as always, and about it, as always, grew the scrub jungle of unsightly beard.

For a long time as Joshua’s four mules strained upward no word passed between him and his one-time jocker. The tramp’s bottle was not quite empty, but, a wise and experienced general in his constant war with booze, The Whimperer took the remaining contents in widely separated doses, for Ragtown was still many tiresome miles away. But finally, after a nerve-renewing dose, the John Yegg began to croak.

“Jack,” he said, “youse ’n’ me’ve had our little dif’rences, maybe, in de past, but we better let de dead bury dere dead—wot?”

“Go ahead,” invited Joshua. “Get it off your chest, Whimp.”

The tramp sighed wearily, took another dose, held the bottle before his crooked eyes and surveyed the lowered contents with a look of agony, and took the proverbial bull by its proverbial horns.

“Jack, it’s like dis here: I always liked youse, an’—”

“Lay off that stuff,” growled Joshua. “Shoot the piece!”

“Well den, it’s like dis here, as I said w’en youse interrupted me: Youse savvy Slim Wolfgang?”

“Yes, I know him.”

“Course youse do. Well, Jack, dis here big Slim Wolfgang he’s a no-good son-of-a-gun—no foolin’. W’en I foist met up wid dat plug I t’o’t he was all to de *bueno*, but nuttin’ doin’. Jack, dat boid is nuttin’ but a dirty crook.”

“Yes?”

“Well, dat’s dat, den. Now, Jack, I never stole yer look-see—”

“Who accused you?”

“Well—now—I t’o’t maybe, seein’ youse didn’t savvy who did glom ’er, dat maybe youse t’o’t I did.”

“Look here, Whimperer,” said Joshua sternly, “you get down to business or get off and walk. I know you stole my telescope, so that ends it. Now tell your story and quit beating about the bush. I’m in no humor to monkey with you this morning. If I make you get off and walk you’ll suffer all the tortures of the damned before you reach Ragtown. Now come through—and tell the truth—or hit the gravel.”

“Jack, youse wouldn’t do dat to an old pal like—”

“Old pal be damned! Come across, or off you go!”

The Whimperer pondered, reached for his bottle, thought better of it, and relaxed with a sigh of misery.

“Well, here she is, den,” he began. “An’ I’m givin’ it to youse straight, de whole trut’ an’ nuttin’ but de trut’—swelpmeGawd!

“Jack, I did swipe de look-see, an’ I peddled ’er for a hunnerd bucks.”

Cole of Spyglass Mountain groaned aloud.

“An’ dat’s how come it dis big Slim Wolfgang lost youse—see? I beat it an’ lost de bot’ o’ youse togedder—See?”

“What d’ye mean by that?”

“Well, dis Slim Wolfgang, I know um ever since he come from de kid-pen, back East somew’eres—w’ere de bot’ o’ youse was in stir togedder—see? Dat is, I meets um a little after dey sprung um, an’ he was on de road, a tramp like me. An’ I snared um f’r me road-kid, an’ him an’ me beat it a lot togedder.”

Then The Whimperer went on to tell, in his rambling, haphazard way, how Slim Wolfgang had trailed Joshua out of Hathaway, had chanced to meet him—The Whimperer—on the road, and had hired him to help in keeping watch on the amateur hobo. It had been quite easy thus to keep Joshua always under surveillance; and at last Joshua realized why it had been so difficult to evade The Whimperer.

“But he wouldn’t spring it wot it was all about,” the tramp complained. “An’ dough he had a roll dat woulda choked a horse, he wouldn’t pungle up enough. He jes’ kep’ promisin’ an’ promisin’ dat I’d get mine someday in a lump, an’ he wouldn’t spring de dope. So as t’ings didn’t look good to me, I swipes de look-see w’en youse tol’ me wot she was wort’—an’ I trun up de job. To dis day, Jack, I don’t savvy w’y Slim Wolfgang keeps on yer trail.”

“Well,” said Joshua, after long reflection, “how does it come that you and Slim are together again at Ragtown? Are you still working for him at watching me?”

“I am, Jack—dat’s de point. I was down in Louisiany in a jungle camp long after I’d ditched youse, and all of a sudden in comes dis here big Slim Wolfgang an’ grabs me by de t’roat. He pretty near choked de life outa me, and I’m gonta get um f’r dat one o’ dese here days. But dat’s neider here der dere. De big point is dat he says

he's got track o' youse ag'in, an' knows w'ere youse're at. An' he says he'll still gi'me a chanct to make dat big piece o' money if I'll go wid um to Ragtown, out in Cal, an' keep me eyes on youse. He don't wanta stick aroun' Ragtown—see? Back in Hat'away he's got a swell dame—see?—and nuttin' doin' f'r her in de Golden West. So Slim he wants de kale dat he'll get f'r keepin' his lamps on youse, but he don't wanta do de woik. Get me? So he hires me ag'in, an' slips me a piece o' jack.

“Well, we beats it West togedder on de cushions—see? An' we go to Ragtown. An' youse're woikin' f'r Demarest, Spruce an' Tillou. So Slim he's gonta leave me dere to lamp youse an' write um ever' now an' den w'edder youse're stickin' er not. An' he was gonta beat it back to his jane until he saw wot good pickin's dere was at Ragtown. Slim's a good stud-dealer, an' de railroad stiff's had a lotta jack. He didn't know it was gonta be like dat w'en we started from Louisiany. So he wires his jane wot a good field dere is at Ragtown f'r him an' a pretty, wise dame like she is, an' she gets hep to herself an' beats it out. She's one o' de dancehall goils at De Golden Eagle, w'ere Slim deals stud an' c'n keep his eye on her. Dey're grabbin' off de jack, de bot' of 'em—believe me! So he's dere pipin' youse off, an'—Well, he tied de can to me, de no-good son-of-a-gun! I'll get um someday, Jack—no foolin'! An' dere I was broke, an' him refusin' to pungle up any more jack. An' w'en I tried de skeleton dance at Ragtown to get me a little piece o' coin f'r meself, an' youse lamped me an' chased me t'rough Slim's tent, de no-good son-of-a-gun beat me up somet'in' fierce f'r woikin' me graft on de street an' gettin' caught. So I'm off um f'r life. He t'inks he's got me buffaloes, but I ain't scared of um—so I'm springin' wot I know on youse. An' dat's all, except dat I'm broke an' need a piece o' change. If youse'll slip me a hundred bucks, Joshua, I'll beat it outa de country. I was on me way w'en I was at Spur. But dere was a big cowpunch in dere blowin' to de gang, an' I gets cuckoo an' t'inks I'll make it back an' slip youse wot I know—an' maybe youse'll treat me right f'r ole-times' sake. Dere she is, Jack.”

“Now let me get all this straight,” mused Joshua. “In the first place, how did Slim Wolfgang get track of me again?”

“Dat I can't say—he wouldn't spring it.”

“Well, then, how did he get track of you in Louisiana?”

“Dat would be easy, Tony—”

“Don't call me that!”

“Well, seein's I'm wot youse might call a prominent character on de road, any ole-time yegg could tell Slim about w'ere to fin' me. An' he'd ast dis one an' dat one as he rambled along, an' pretty soon he'd meet up wid a yegg who could steer um right to me.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Joshua agreed. “But why does Slim Wolfgang want to keep in touch with me?”

“Didn’t I tell youse he wouldn’t tell me dat? But I’m tellin’ youse he’s gettin’ paid f’r it, Jack; an’ one o’ dese days, he tol’ me, he’s gonta get a big fat roll f’r wot he’s done. Dat’s wot I was supposed to wait for. He’d a beat me outa mine, I’m bettin’!”

“When?”

“I can’t tell youse dat.”

Joshua sat looking at the tails of his wheelers for a long time, then suddenly he burst out laughing. The thought that anybody on earth would pay anybody else to trail *him* over the country struck him as about the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. But The Whimperer’s story had the ring of truth.

“Did Slim Wolfgang shoot me?” Joshua fired at the yegg so suddenly that he jumped with surprise.

“Well—now—er—”

“Tell me!”

“Jack, I—”

“Spit it out, damn you, or I’ll—”

The fingers that threatened The Whimperer’s prickly throat had clasped a striking hammer for several months, and the bare brown arm back of them looked to the old tramp like a copper cylinder, bulged in two places by internal explosions.

“He—he done it, Jack. He tried to croak youse!”

“Were you along?”

“No. But I know he done it. He had a thoity-thoity rifle in his tent f’r a week before it happened, an’ den afterwards she wasn’t dere no more. He’d borried it to hunt deer wid, he said.”

“Why does he want to kill me?”

“So’s his job’ll be over an’ he c’n get de jack dat’s comin’ to um. It’s up to um to keep youse put, it looks like, till a coitain time. Den he’ll get de kale. Well, if youse’re croaked, youse’re put, ain’t youse? No foolin’! An’ Slim an’ his jane have got a bunch o’ coin on ’em now dat dey made at Ragtown rollin’ de suckers. De moll wants to beat it East an’ get herself some furs an’ di’mon’s an’ t’ings. An’ Slim an’ me’s on de outs—see?—so no one c’n watch youse but him. An’ he’s sick of his job. But now dat he’s tried to croak youse he’s scared to let any one else in on de deal. It’s one t’ing to hire a guy to lamp anudder one, an’ anudder t’ing to hire um to have anyt’ing to do wid murder. An’ anudder t’ing: Since youse got dat big jack from Demarest, Spruce an’ Tillou, he’s scared youse’ll be beatin’ it East yerself any day. He don’t savvy wot youse’re gonta do wid dat coin, an’ he’s worried.”

“The idea, then,” remarked Joshua, “seems to be to prevent me from going East.”

“Dat’s de way I dope her out, Jack.”

“Then I’ll be perverse and go East and find out what it’s all about,” Joshua declared.

“Take me wid youse, ol’-timer!” pleaded The Whimperer. “I c’n steer youse to Slim’s hangouts back dere, an’ maybe de bot’ of us put togedder c’n get de dope. I’m scared to hang aroun’ now dat I’ve sprung meself. Dat Slim Wolfgang’s a killer. Youse won’t squeal on me, will youse, Jack?”

“I’ll protect you,” Joshua promised. “And we’ll call it square between you and me regarding the theft of the telescope. But there it must end. I can’t afford to take you East.”

“Den slip me a little piece o’ jack, an’ I’ll hit de stage out o’ Ragtown to-morrow an’ take to de road again. Honest, Jack, I’m scared o’ dat plug!”

“I thought you told me that you weren’t.”

“Well I am an’ I ain’t—see? I fight in de open, meself. He’s a dago fighter, dat no-good son-of-a-gun! Dat’s w’y I’m scared of um—see? Get me, Jack?”

“Yes, I get you, Whimp. I’ve had you for many moons. Now have you told me all you know?”

“Dere’s jes’ one t’ing more,” replied the John Yegg. “But before I spring her, won’t youse promise to slip me—”

“I’ll give you ten bucks,” said Joshua, “and not one cent more. That’ll get you to Spur and give you two-fifty to go on the road with. You’ve traveled a thousand miles on less.”

“But, Jack—”

“Shut up! I know you! Not another penny. Take it or leave it—and I’ll make you tell me everything you know about this business whether you accept or decline.”

“Jack, youse’re crool!” the panhandler reproached.

“I’m worse than that,” Joshua told him, and extended a ten-dollar bill.

With a sigh of resignation the tramp clutched it in his talons.

“This is stage day,” Joshua reminded him. “The stage will pass us about ten o’clock, I imagine. Then you can swing off and get aboard.”

“But I’ll get de rats before I get to Spur,” wailed The Whimperer. “I gotta go on to Ragtown an’—”

“I’ve a pint flask under the seat cushion,” Joshua told him. “It’s yours when we sight the stage. Now get busy and tell me the whole of it.”

“Jack, gi’ me dat flask now an’—”

“Say, you talk and talk fast or—” Once more those long brown fingers writhed in and out, and The Whimperer began speaking rapidly.

“Well, dere ain’t much more to tell. But keep yer eye on dat boid dey call Lee Sweet, Jack—de cowpunch. Watch dat boid, I’m tellin’ youse. I seen Slim let dat guy get away with a stack o’ De Golden Eagle’s money apoipoise. I seen Slim’s whole card, an’ Slim knew as well as I did dat he had dis Lee Sweet beat. But he lets Sweet take de pot, an’ after dat dey’re t’ick as mud. Dat’s dat.

“An’ de only udder t’ing is dis here: Slim’s been tellin’ all over Ragtown dat youse was Number Fifty-six Thoity-five in a kid-pen back East, an’ tryin’ to make out youse’re a bad actor all aroun’—see? An’ ever’ time dis big Lee Sweet gets a snoot-full in De Silver Dollar he tells de worl’ he’s gonta get youse. Den Slim Wolfgang he grins. Dat’s all, Jack. Honest to Gawd! An’ f’r de sake of de good ole times de bot’ of us had togedder I hope youse win!”

“Thanks,” drawled Joshua in mock politeness.

Two hours later they sighted the stage from Ragtown to Spur winding about the hairpin curves above them. And half an hour later The Whimperer eagerly clutched the flask of snakebite remedy, and the weird old John Yegg boarded the stage and became only a bitter memory in the life of Cole of Spyglass Mountain.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“YOU’LL COME BACK TO SPYGLASS MOUNTAIN”

Winnie the Weeper was not the least attractive of the girls who were attached to The Golden Eagle at Ragtown for the purpose of separating the railroad stiff from their hard-earned money. She was dark-eyed and dark-haired and of a good figure. She danced well, and was able to put up a painted pout that made men part with their money and believe themselves in luck. When the pout failed, she had the gift of causing tears to spurt from her dark eyes, and then men longed to make her smile once more, and only money could make her smile. Hence “Winnie the Weeper” was the underworld “monaker” of Slim Wolfgang’s girl.

It was evening, three days after Cole of Spyglass Mountain had hauled his load of lumber to the homesteads and set to work with nails and hammer. The stage reached Ragtown, and Winnie left her place behind the chair of Slim Wolfgang in The Golden Eagle, where she had been watching a desultory game of stud between Slim and one of his cappers. The revel of the night was not yet on, and Slim had asked her—ordered her, rather—to see if any mail had come for them on the stage.

She left The Golden Eagle and passed along the street toward The Silver Dollar, a few doors distant. The darting glances of several stiff s lounging about the doorways followed her as she tripped along, singing softly. For The Weeper was a “dresser,” and she carried herself with pride. There was about her, also, an air of “something better,” even though she did chew gum too rapidly.

In five minutes she was back in The Golden Eagle and handing Slim a dirty letter.

Slim laid his cards on the table, and, without excusing himself to his dummy antagonist at stud, tore open the envelope and frowned in puzzlement at the contents.

Then he spoke shortly to his capper.

“Deal ’em out, Johnny,” he said. “I’ll send Nick in to cap for youse. C’mon, Win; I wanta show youse sumpin.”

Dutifully the girl followed him out, and they walked together to the tent through which Joshua Cole had chased The Whimperer.

Inside they sat down on the bed.

“Read dat, will youse?” offered the gambler, and angrily thrust the letter into

Winnie's hand.

She read as follows:

“SLIM WOLFGANG:

“SIR. i have quit you slim as your a no good sun of a gun an somday im going to get you for the roten way you treted me. I saw cole an told him all i know about you an the son of a gun was tight an would not give me anything much to beet it on. just the same slim he told me something that youd like to know mity well. You wont catch me because im gone from you old timer. But if you want to know what i got from cole you send twenty five dollars to me in the care of mother duffy at the oakland bar in sacramento. then ill slip you what i know, goodby you big stiff. ill get you somday.

“THE WHIMPERER.”

The envelope was postmarked “Spur, California,” and the date was the day before.

“Well, for the love of Mikel!” gasped Winnie the Weeper. “What’re you goin’ to do about it, Slim?”

Slim rested his cadaverous chin in one bony hand and meditatively ran the long nicotine-stained fingers of the other hand up and down over the six golden buttons on his billiard-top vest.

“Aw,” he husked finally, “he’s tryin’ to string me. Maybe he played stool pigeon to Cole, all right, but he don’t know nuttin’ to tell. I was too wise to let um know anyt’ing—see? But what would Cole be tellin’ him that would be any use to me, kid?”

“I don’t know,” mused the girl. “Looks to me like the big stiff’s got somethin’ to peddle, Slim. He didn’t make any promises—none o’ this big honest-to-God business. Just said ‘lay ’er down,’ like he meant business. I’d take a chance, Slim. You threw the fear of Christ into that tramp, and he wouldn’t dare double-cross you by holdin’ out on you after you’d sent the jack. He’ll remember how easy you located him before. And what’s twenty-five—to us?”

Slim Wolfgang’s thin sandy eyebrows drew lower, and his leering, gangster’s face was not good to see. “I gotta take a chance,” he decided finally. “So you get a money-order, kid, an’ do like dat dam’ —— says. He’s got me; an’, as youse said, wot’s twenty-five? Slip us a kiss, now, kid, an’ I’ll be gettin’ back to de game. Dey oughta be drifin’ in pretty soon. Oh, hell, I’d like to beat it outa here after next

payday!”

“Here, too,” sighed Winnie. “God, I got more jack than I ever saw before, an’ it’s goin’ to waste in this rotten hole. Say, if we was in N’ York, Slim—”

“Yes, I know—I’ve heard dat spiel before. But we ain’t dere, an’ we can’t go dere till dis business is off me han’s. Beat it, now, an’ send dat jack like De Whimperer says. An’ if he’s tryin’ to make a sucker outa me, by God he’d better ramble some!”

Ten days later Winnie the Weeper and Slim held between them a dirty scrap of paper, on which was penciled:

“cole told me he was going east to see what it was al about that i told him about.

“THE WHIMPERER.”

“Goin’ East, is he? Goin’ East, hey!” growled Slim, as the girl looked expectantly up into his pale-blue eyes. “Well, he’ll not go East, take it from me, kid! Now I know wot to do. An’ I’ll do it, too! But no East for us, Win, until spring—that settles that. I was thinkin’ maybe Tony was settled over dere on his claim an’ you an’ me could beat it as soon as winter set in an’ take a chance. But De Whimperer has slipt de beans—an’ now Tony’s t’inkin’ he’ll beat it East. Oh, wait’ll I get me mitts on De Whimperer!”

“You—you won’t kill Cole, then, Slim? That means you won’t, don’t it? Slim, I—I don’t like that kinda business. I may be a sportin’ girl and a crook, and all that, but I couldn’t stand to have you bump that guy off.”

“No, I won’t bump um,” Slim promised. “But if I don’t it means we gotta winter it out here in these dam’ mountains, Win. An’ stay clear up till the fifteent’ of June.”

“I guess I’d rather do that, Slim,” she told him, “than have you bump a guy off. But, God, I’m sick o’ this hick country!”

“All right, kiddo—youse’re de doctor. But Cole won’t go East—take dat from me! I know how to stop um!”

Shanty Madge was adorable in overalls and a carpenter’s apron with nail pockets in it. And on the right leg of her overalls was a stout band of self material, as the garment advertisers would say, in which to hang her hammer when she used a saw or other tool. The hammer hung pretty low and was bothersomely heavy, but Madge used the strap religiously. But she told Joshua in confidence that pins tasted better in the mouth than nails.

It is to be feared that the true reason for the repeatedly hammered thumbnail of Cole of Spyglass Mountain was not due to awkwardness but to the captivating companionship of his helper.

Fall was manifest in the air. Fleecy clouds hung over the mountains, and there was an exhilarating nip in the kiss of the wind from Stirrup Lake. Frost covered the ground of mornings, and Joshua was afraid to accept the dare of Shanty Madge to touch his tongue to the steel of the tools. Wild ducks were circling high over the lake, for the water grasses were full ripe now and drew mallards and canvasbacks and pintails from afar. Old Man Winter was not far distant, and they worked early and late to outmaneuver him.

They completed the cabin and the stable of the Mundys first. Then they went at Joshua's cabin at the foot of Spyglass Mountain. The work was kept back by Joshua's having to leave and haul more building materials, and on one trip in he found that his telescope had arrived by freight. The thousand pounds that it represented, when added to a load of lumber, made the lumber content of that load pretty light. But Cole of Spyglass Mountain was a boy with a new toy. Nothing would do but that he should uncrate his treasure and set it up on its pedestal in his half-completed cabin, which served very well as an observatory then because the roof was not yet on.

Madge was as enthusiastic as he was, and after a hard day's work with saw and hammer she was not too tired to spend hours of the night with Joshua looking at the heavenly bodies, crowing with delight.

It was a wonderful telescope. The tube was approximately ten feet long, and the pedestal was of iron. There was a clock attachment which automatically moved the instrument so that it would follow a stellar body across the sky without the attention of the operator. There was a finder, of course, and once the image was settled upon Joshua had nothing to do but give his every faculty to observation.

Winter was almost upon them by the time Joshua's cabin and stable were up. Then Joshua hauled lumber and metal roofing for his observatory. This he was obliged to leave at the foot of Spyglass Mountain while he worked at the continuation of his trail to the summit.

Madge had decided to put a team at work clearing the sagebrush—dragging it down with a length of railroad steel which she had used for like purposes on the grade. Then, too, there was the winter's wood to be cut and hauled. And before the spring drive of the Box-R cattle into the mountains, the homesteads must be fenced. It seemed that there were a million things that should be done at once in order to gain time, but Madge discarded all of them and helped Joshua build his trail.

No amount of argument on his part would change her mind. One look at the marvels of the skies through the new telescope seemed to have fevered her with the desire to get the materials for building the observatory to the top of Spyglass Mountain at the earliest possible date. So Joshua compromised with her, and they felled trees and hauled them to the cabins during the crisp mornings and hacked at the trail to the top of Spyglass Mountain during the mellow afternoons.

They made the trail no wider than necessary for a tandem team to pull a narrow sled up the steep side. The mountain rose so abruptly from the gentle slope above the lake that they were obliged to switch back and forth, make hairpin curves and buttonhook bends, and twist in and out about great gaunt rocks and clusters of scrubby piñon pines. Spyglass Mountain was perhaps a thousand feet above the level of the lake, and a bench mark that Joshua had discovered hidden away in the sage showed that the lake was about six thousand seven hundred and fifty feet above the sea. So the telescope, when installed for work on the summit, would be at an altitude of approximately seven thousand seven hundred and fifty feet. The mountain was bleak and rugged and dry, for it overlooked the desert and was under the influence of the desert rather than the moister country on the coast side of the range. It was a huge, steep pile of rocks and red-quartz outcroppings, with low piñons, sage, a few junipers, and an occasional yucca palm to tone down its grimness, and render its coloring contrasty when the sun so willed. But to Cole of Spyglass Mountain it was the most wonderful spot on earth!

Snow was flying before the trail had been completed, but this did not deter the workers. They were nearing the summit now, where the snow did not lie in drifts as it did down by the lake. Then, the high winds which arose drove it from the top and sides in fleecy puffs. This aided the work, but it worried Joshua. An observer cannot expect "good seeing" when the atmosphere is disturbed by gales. But the high winds, he had been told, were usually confined to the winter months in that locality, so the young astronomer was by turns elated and depressed.

Joshua had given up all thought of going East to try and solve the mystery of Felix Wolfgang's long-distance persecution. He had been impulsive when he informed The Whimperer that he would do so, knowing when he spoke that it would be folly for him to leave the mountains when so many things demanded his immediate attention. Besides, he would not have left Madge and her mother to prepare for the coming of a mountain winter with no man about to help them. Most of their neighbor homesteaders had left the country as soon as the skies showed blustery clouds and squalls began to scurry over the lake. And the three had only a speaking acquaintance with the few who had resolved to brave the winter through. He was

too busy, even, to give Felix Wolfgang much thought—too happy with Shanty Madge in daylight hours, and with the precious telescope, dimly outlined in a corner of the cabin, through moonlit nights.

Late one afternoon they finished the trail, laid down their picks and shovels, and stood side by side looking down on the wind-swept desert four thousand feet below them, stretching away in three directions, an awe-inspiring sight under the mystic spell of the fleeting winter afternoon.

“Isn’t it glorious!” Madge exclaimed. “I feel like a bird. Like an eagle. If I had wings that I could lift, and could soar away over that tantalizing yellow waste, away over those calico buttes far to the east that seem to be calling me, I—I— Well, I’d just lift ’em and soar, that’s all.”

“And where would you end?” asked Cole of Spyglass Mountain softly.

“I’d never end, I guess. I’d keep on soaring forever.”

“And never come back to Spyglass Mountain?”

“Well, when I wanted to rest and lay my plans for another soar, perhaps.”

“I’d be here waiting for you,” he told her significantly.

“Would you? Keeper of my home port of the skies? If I could soar away, east and west and north and south, I think I’d like to keep this pinnacle in mind. I would become confused, perhaps, and lose my bearings. Then I could turn and head for Spyglass Mountain again, which seems to me to overlook the earth and sky. And you’d be here to correct my course for me and point out where I had missed the way. Then I’d rearrange my ruffled feathers and try once more; and you’d watch me through your telescope until I’d be only a tiny speck a thousand miles away. Oh, this is silly, isn’t it?”

“Madge,” he said, and his tone trembled, “I want you never to forget what you’ve just said. It isn’t silly. If Spyglass Mountain turns out to be the ideal place for astronomical observations, I shall always be here—always, that is, as human beings speak of always in connection with their brief lives. You may soar away—something tells me that you will. But remember—I’ll always be here waiting for your return.

“Dear girl, you don’t want money—you don’t want life, as most folks speak of life. You were born for the outdoors, for the freedom that it offers. You have never tasted the artificialities of life in the cities, and therefore you think you want to. But if you go you’ll come back as straight as the crow flies—back to the mountains and the deserts and the places where quiet reigns. It’s born in you, and you can’t escape it. You’ll come back to Spyglass Mountain!”

“How do you know that, Joshua?”

“It’s easily explained: Never have I heard from you a murmur of discontent over

the solitude of these vast mountains. Like myself, you are one who can be alone for days at a time, with the bleak peaks about you or the mocking sandy wastes of the desert, and be content with only them and your thoughts for company. We are rare, Madge. Such an unanswering solitude as would drive many people insane, we thrive on. I say we are rare. I mean that a man and a woman who both possess that quality rarely meet each other and—and fall in love. That is—I mean, of course—Well, I love *you*; I've told you so. And you should forget everything else and let yourself love me. You can't afford to take chances by letting yourself love another man, who might take you to the cities, where you imagine you want to go. For as sure as spring follows winter Spyglass Mountain will call you back. And then—if *he* doesn't want to come?

“What if a night on the desert, with the moaning of the wind in the greasewood bushes and the half-mournful, half-mocking laugh of the coyote, strikes terror to his heart? What if the constant roar of a waterfall gets on his nerves instead of soothing him to sleep, as it would soothe you and me? And *you* must have these things. So one of you must sacrifice to the very core of your being—and that means a life of suffering and discontent for the one who is biggest of heart and gives in to the other. And that one, Shanty Madge, will be you.”

“And how do you know that, O sage?”

“Listen: Because those who are born to the open spaces, those who love the unanswering solitudes and are at peace with God and Mother Earth—they are always the ones who make the sacrifice. Because their souls are big like the mountains—their vision is wide like the desert—their courage is like the rocks—their hearts are kind and sheltering like the trees. Yes—like the trees! The great-hearted trees that shelter men for ages, and then go down before man's ax with one long groan of anguish, surrendering everything!”

With her bare head bowed, and the winter wind whipping her crinkly bronze-gold hair, the little gypo queen stood listening. And in her eyes, as she lifted them to his, a miragelike moisture gleamed. She took his hand.

“Let's go down, my poet-astronomer,” she said. “We must get a good sleep tonight and be up early. It will be a long, hard job to sled the lumber for our observatory to the top of Spyglass Mountain.”

CHAPTER XXIX

WINTER IN THE SAN ANTONES

The observatory was completed and the telescope sledded to the top of Spyglass Mountain and installed early in the month of January. Winter had set in in earnest, and there was six feet of snow on the gentle slopes about Stirrup Lake. But the homesteaders' new cabins were snug and tight; they had an abundance of fuel and provisions; so the mountain storms that danced up in fury from the lake and shook the structures to their scant foundations had few terrors for them.

Joshua was so successful in the building of his observatory, with its conical, revolving metal dome, that he wrote an article, entitled "A Home-made Observatory for \$300," and sent it to *The Universe*. He had carefully followed instructions in the author's article that he had among his notes, and had improved on the plans and specifications. It was a proud day when he rode home on Argo from Ragtown and showed Madge his check for twenty-five dollars from *The Universe*.

He had bought a second-hand typewriter, and of evenings, while the building of the observatory was under way, had applied himself to authorship with that tireless energy which already had carried him so far in his studies. And the following spring his article, "Speculations on the Physiology and Anatomy of the Inhabitants of Mars," which was published in *The American Astronomer*, brought him many letters from interested readers, and some of them were men well known in scientific circles. Joshua received only ten dollars for this contribution, but if his check had been for a thousand it could not have given him the pleasure that the letters did. The editors of the magazine commented at length upon the freshness of his work and asked to see more of it, with the result that they accepted, before the publication of his first paper, "Fissures or Canals?—A Study of the Surface Features of Mars," and "The Atmosphere of Mars." Then the editor of *The Journal of Astronomy* wrote to him and asked him to submit something. After the rejection of two of his articles, "Is Mars a Lifeless Planet?" was accepted; and a check for fifty dollars sent him galloping to Madge on Argo, waving the strip of blue paper like the banner of a conquering hero, as he saw her looking out the window.

Before "Is Mars a Lifeless Planet?" was in press Joshua received a telegram, days late because of the snowdrifts in the mountain gaps that had retarded the mail stage, asking for a companion article of about four thousand words telling who he was, where he had been educated, and describing his work in telescropy. At

Ragtown Joshua met California Bill, in from one of his freighting trips, when he received the belated message. California was the more enthusiastic of the two, for Joshua had the true student's reticence about blowing his own horn.

"Tell 'em all about it, Tony," urged Bill. "Lay it on thick. Lord, I wish I could write! I'd do it for ye, my son, an' I'd do 'er *hi-yu skookum!* An' don't forget to say that, out here, ye're known as Cole of Spyglass Mountain. That's yer trademark. I give it to ye, an', by golly, ye gotta use it! Go home an' tell 'em how th' war broke out."

So in a whimsical mood Joshua took his friend's advice. He made it quite clear that he had no degree, even explaining that he had never been to college. He lauded to the skies his boyhood friend, Beaver Clegg, and credited him with any success that he—Joshua—might have achieved. He told about his life in the House of Refuge, about his days as a tramp, about Ragtown and the new railroad, and how he had earned the money to buy his telescope and settle on a homestead. He hinted at the idea of the inhabitants of Mars trying to communicate with the earth through the medium of canals laid out in the form of a geometrical figure. He told of Spyglass Mountain and his observatory, and his difficulties in sledding the instrument to the summit. And last of all, to please California Bill, he mentioned that he was known in the community as Cole of Spyglass Mountain.

He gave his brief autobiography no title, and when it appeared in print, preceding his article "Is Mars a Lifeless Planet?" in the March issue of *The Journal of Astronomy*, California Bill's chest bulged out with pride; for the editor had entitled it "Cole of Spyglass Mountain."

The Scientist, a New York publication, was editorially opposed to the theory that Mars is inhabited, and they took occasion to draw Joshua over the live coals in their May issue. They admitted that his speculations were interesting, and that they were set forth with grace and power, but they laughed to scorn all of his ideas. They ridiculed his youth and inexperience, and made no bones about throwing in his teeth the fact that he had no reputation whatever as an astronomer and had the stamp of no institution's approval upon him. The writer was vituperative and insulting, but he did Joshua more good than harm for the reason that *The Scientific Weekly* took up the controversy in support of him, with the result that "Cole of Spyglass Mountain" became a well-known name among the devotees of science.

And thus it came about that when Joshua's great night arrived his name was fairly well established, and the scientific world was ready to weigh his words and give his conclusions serious thought.

By spring Ragtown was reading science. Joshua had become an object of mild

ridicule before his first article appeared. Then as the press-agent work of California Bill began spreading the news that Cole of Spyglass Mountain was in print, Ragtown awoke to the realization that they had a celebrity in their midst. He was looked at in awe as he rode in on Argo, with his silvered tapaderos flapping and his bridle-reins a-jingle, sometimes with Shanty Madge beside him on her black. And when winter broke Ragtown made pilgrimage to Spyglass Mountain to see the telescope and view the heavens through its powerful lenses.

But there were two who did not come—Lee Sweet, the cattleman, and Felix Wolfgang, the gambler. And it was known to Joshua that his old enemy of the House of Refuge was still at Ragtown, and that Lee Sweet rode up often from the desert and stayed for days, carousing in The Golden Eagle. Once Joshua came face to face with him in the post office. Sweet glowered at him, swung about on his heel, and dragged his spurs into the barroom.

As spring approached Joshua's work in the observatory was kept back by the high winds that prevailed, which caused such atmospherical disturbances as to make his patient vigils at the eye-piece a waste of time. To study Mars under these conditions was impossible, even though his telescope was a Brashear and an exceptionally fine instrument to boot. So when atmospheric conditions were at all favorable he devoted his attention to study of the surface of the moon, and to recording the rise and fall in the luminosity of certain variable stars whose exact minimum and maximum periods were not yet fully established. But his chief interest during this period of poor seeing was the search for vegetation on the floors of certain lunar craters, which had often been reported by well-known astronomers.

Patient vigil was also kept in the case of the marvelous craters of Alphonsus and Eratosthenes. On the floor of Eratosthenes, eight thousand feet below the level of the surrounding Sea of Showers, he at last caught a glimpse of what he believed to be the long-sought indications of vegetable growth. In the northern part of the crater-floor a peculiar spot became noticeable soon after the sunlight began to flood this area. Within fifty-six hours the spot had expanded in two winglike regions, and forty-eight hours afterward it had disappeared.

He reported these discoveries to the Milton University, to be recorded and published for the benefit of other students.

It was during this period that Joshua took up the study of optical physics. Beginning his studies with the few classical treatises he had among his books, he soon was wholly absorbed in the mysteries of lens-making, crystallography, stellar photography, the tele-microscope, and other modern developments along similar lines of research and experiment. So he ordered by mail copies of any works which

might have been published during the past three years by authorities on any of these phases of his study, leaving the matter of selection to the discretion of a well-known New York dealer in works of science. Also he bought a number of tools and a diverse assortment of materials for experimental purposes.

Although he had come into possession of a telescope of remarkable defining power, owing to the superior quality of its object glass, he realized that its light-getting power was unequal to the task of showing fine detail on so distant a body as Mars. So, with his new tools and material and his added knowledge to aid him, he set bravely to work to devise some means of increasing the power of his telescope by some kind of accessory apparatus, applied either to the object glass or to the eye-piece. Some such instrument already had been invented and was then in use for special research work on the stars. Why should he not be able to work out some device of equal or even greater efficiency for observation of the planets—especially Mars?

During the winter months, then, he acquired, with indefatigable application, all of the information available on the subject of his investigations. On this solid theoretical foundation he made experiment after experiment, seeking always to discover some type, quality, or combination of lenses, color screens, or other apparatus that would bring him nearer his goal. Some improvement was finally effected, but the advantage gained was not equal to his requirements. Though somewhat discouraged by the meager results, Joshua persevered, often going so far as to make attempts contrary to the principles laid down in the advanced textbooks he had read. In such efforts, however, it seemed that he always failed to advance his cause. But he realized that ultimate success lay in breaking new ground. No mere improvements on existing instruments could serve his purpose. He must explore new regions, devise a new method, just as so many tenacious pioneers had done before him.

To describe the many devices employed by him would form a tedious narrative, comprehensible only to a thoroughgoing student of optical physics. But before spring arrived he had succeeded in constructing an instrument which, attached to the eye-end of the telescope, projected a greatly enlarged image of Mars on an adjacent screen. Or by employment of a suitable color screen laid over his object lens, a camera system could be used, photographing the enlarged image, which then could be studied at leisure. This was a decided advantage, for clear images of the planet's surface, even with the newly devised accessory instrument, were obtainable only during brief moments of atmospheric quietude. Consequently his hopes soared high.

And now Joshua was ready for the momentous day in June, when he hoped to make the great discovery which would prove to the scientific world that there was

active, intelligent life on the planet Mars.

Shanty Madge had been his close companion throughout the winter months. Often of clear nights she climbed with him to the summit of Spyglass Mountain, where she sat by the little air-tight heater and read or sewed while he worked at his various problems. The operations of Montgomery and Applegate had ceased for the winter, and Jack Montgomery was out of the mountains, so that Madge saw nothing of him at all. Often she and Joshua rode horseback together, exploring the remote parts of the valley and its surrounding hills and cañons. Together they went on snowshoes to Ragtown for the mail, Joshua ahead and breaking trail, Madge keeping the pace with the customary vigor of her splendid youth.

Then the long winter broke, and the ice gave up its grip on the lake with explosive lamentations. The saltgrass showed a tinge of green, and tiny starlike flowers modestly showed their faces here and there. Then Shanty Madge hooked up a team and began plowing and building fence, with the keen spring wind on her Indian cheeks. And as the winds made astronomical observations next to useless, and since he was not required to do any work on his homestead for six months or more to come, Cole of Spyglass Mountain decided to go East and unravel the mystery that surrounded him. Also he wished to try and make up with his brother Lester, whom he still loved with that rare devotion that he was capable of. If Lester was not doing well, he hoped to persuade him to return with him to California and throw in his lot with him on the homestead.

But at this point Felix Wolfgang took a hand.

CHAPTER XXX

SLIM WOLFGANG PLANS

When Cole of Spyglass Mountain made no move to go East, following The Whimperer's warning, Slim Wolfgang's indignation rode high. Of course he imagined that the crafty old John Yegg had "played him for a sucker," and he recounted to Winnie the Weeper all of the terrible things that he meant to do to him if their paths should cross again. Then when his resentment threatened chronic indigestion Slim's girl overheard Joshua telling the postmaster that he would be leaving for the Atlantic seaboard sometime near the last of April.

Joshua and Shanty Madge had ridden in that evening for the mail and a few supplies. When they entered that part of The Silver Dollar which was devoted to the post office, Winnie the Weeper was standing in the archway between the store and post office and the barroom. Her dark eyes were fixed on Lee Sweet, the cattleman, who was at the bar in a state of imbecile intoxication. When opportunity offered, Winnie the Weeper had been keeping her eyes on Sweet a great deal of late, when he was not in The Golden Eagle in company with Slim. And thus it came about that she was near enough to overhear Joshua's remark.

She promptly glided away through the barroom, unseen by Madge and Joshua. She snarled at a drunken railroad stiff who grabbed playfully at her in the doorway, slipped out, and hurried down the street to The Golden Eagle.

Ragtown's liveliest hours were represented in The Golden Eagle. Dozens of men were crowding before the plain pine bar, as many more were dancing with the highly painted, short-skirted girls, and the gambling tables were not idle. In the far end of the place was a lunch counter, before which, on high stools, sat men and girls, and the odor of frying meat filled the room.

Again the girl evaded intoxicated admirers and pushed her way through the throng to the stud game. Here Slim Wolfgang officiated, with a green celluloid eyeshade pulled low on his forehead, his long, slender fingers deftly manipulating the pasteboards.

He frowned as Winnie leaned over his shoulder and whispered that she had news for him. He glanced at his watch. Then, stating that it was time for him to eat, he turned his chair over to an associate and followed the girl to the lunch counter.

They found two vacant stools and sat side by side, while Winnie repeated in low tones the conversation that she had overheard.

“Well,” said Slim with a sigh, “dat means we gotta get busy, kid. Tony Cole ain’t goin’ East, and dat’s dat. How’s Sweet to-night?”

“Lit to the eyeballs,” Winnie told him.

“Well, den, we’ll eat an’ drift outa here. I’ll go to me tent, an’ youse try an’ steer Sweet in dere as soon as youse can. Get me? We gotta do some talkin’.”

“But what’ll I tell ’im, Slim?”

“Tell um anyt’ing to snare um. Tell um I wanta see um a minute. It won’t do f’r me to be seen shuntin’ um aroun’. Youse gotta do it.”

Winnie’s order of pork chops had been set before her, and she ate nibblingly, silent, her eyes on her plate.

“Slim,” she said at last, “I think it’s about time you was slippin’ me the dope. I’m off this stuff o’ workin’ in the dark. You promised me there’d be somethin’ big in this deal for me, but you never told me what you was gonta do nor what it’s all about. You wouldn’t trust The Whimperer, and now he’s gone and left you. And you won’t trust me. And I think you’d ought to, Slim. Ain’t I always played square? Then why do you keep me outa the know? I wanta know what I’m up against before I go any farther.”

“Look here, kid,” Slim husked, with a frown of annoyance: “I ain’t de kind dat spills everyt’ing, even to my best girl. When it’s all over, an’ we got de jack, youse’ll know all about it. So what’s de use youse knowin’ now?”

“I want to, anyway; I don’t see why you don’t trust me, Slim.”

“It ain’t dat, Win. I do trust youse. But dat’s a way I got. I keep me mout’ shut—see? I guess I got dat way in de reform school—I know I did. We had a way dere o’ moochin’ ’round like a lotta mice an’ sayin’ nuttin’ about our business, ’cause we never savvied who was gonta squeal on us. So dat’s de way it is wid me, an’—”

“But I don’t work that way,” Winnie the Weeper interrupted. “If you’re gonta lay up with me, Slim, you gotta come across with everything. I don’t keep nothin’ from you, kid—and you gotta do the same with me. And I’m tellin’ you right here that I wanta know what all this funny business is about, or I won’t have anything more to do with it. That’s me, old kid! And you can take it or leave it!”

“Gettin’ funny, ain’t youse?”

“Well, you heard what I said. If you don’t trust me, how’m I gonta trust you? How do I know there’ll be anything in it for me, after I’ve gone along and done what you told me to? How do I know you won’t grab off the jack and leave me somewhere talkin’ to myself? No—nothin’ doin’. It’s time for a showdown.”

Slim idled with his knife, the frown still covering his brow. “Well,” he announced suddenly, “let’s finish eatin’ an’ den we’ll go to de tent an’ I’ll tell youse all about it.

Maybe you're right, kid, but I always like to keep me dope to meself."

"That's all right when you're workin' alone," Winnie conceded. "But when you've got a pal in on the deal with you, you oughta come clean. I'll admit I don't trust you—and that's been just the reason."

"Why, kid, I wouldn't toin youse down. Youse know youse're de only jane on de line dat's got me goat."

"That's what they all say," sniffed Winnie.

"Well, I'll prove it, den—I'll slip youse de dope."

"All right," Winnie said demurely, and her dark eyes sparkled over her conquest.

A little later they sat together in the tent, one on either side of the rickety table, with a candle flickering between them. Slim sat thoughtfully silent for a little, his brown-paper cigarette pasted with saliva to his lower lip and hanging lifelessly. His pale-blue eyes stared into space. The affected huskiness was gone from his voice when he began to speak, for, being a practiced habit, it deserted him in his more serious moments.

"Well, here she is," he started in, "an' I ain't keepin' nuttin' back. An' youse'll say it's good, w'en youse know dere's gonta be twenty-five t'ousan' to split between us. Does dat sound good, kid?"

"Uh-huh," murmured the girl, edging her chair closer to the table and resting her round, smooth chin in both hands. "Go on, Slim. Spill it."

"Well, it begun jes' a little w'ile after dey sprung me from de House of Refuge—see? I'm runnin' de pool tables in Carlo's Place, down on Nort' Street, in Hat'away. Youse savvy de dump?"

"Uh-huh—sure I do."

"Well, one afternoon a plug drifts in an' watches de games a little, den w'en I'm settin' up de balls after a couple o' guys gets t'rough playin', dis boid sidles over an' braces me. He asts me if I don't want a drink an' a lotta bunk like dat, an' I'm on right away he's got sumpin' on his chest. He's wearin' de rags—see?—an' he looks like money. So I drift wid um, an' we go to De White House Saloon an' set in a boot'.

"Well, finally he springs it dat he savvies who I am—see? An' he knows I jes' was sprung from de House of Refuge. An' he asts me if I ain't de guy dat Number Fifty-six thoity-five had a scrap wid dere. Dat's Tony, youse know—dat was his number. I tell um yes.

"Den he monkeys aroun' a little, not sayin' much of anyt'ing, an' finally he comes across wid de dope dat he's Tony's ole man. His name's John Cole—see?—an' I'll tell de worl' he's some interested in his kid!

“An’ finally we get down to business, an’ he springs de dope. An’ it’s like dis here:

“W’en Tony’s mudder croaked dey let Tony go home from de House of Refuge. An’ w’ile he was dere he meets an’ ole uncle he’s never seen before. He’s his mudder’s brudder—see? Dis ole boid’s got a lotta jack. An’ de family dat Tony’s mudder belonged to wouldn’t have nuttin’ to do wid her w’ile she’s alive because she hooked up wid dis Cole. He’s a sport an’ a gambler, it looks like, an’ dey’re off um f’r life. But w’en Tony’s mudder croaked dey all come to de funeral an’ was nice as pie. An’ dis ole uncle comes an’ takes a shine to Tony.

“But he’s a funny ole gink—half nuts, I got it—an’ he goes away all of a sudden, an’ don’t say nuttin’ to nobody. He was gonta get Tony outa de House of Refuge, an’ dis an’ dat an’ de udder t’ing, an’ jes’ raise hell generally. But he seems to ferget all about it, an’ beats it widout even tellin’ Tony good-by.

“Well, Tony goes back to de House of Refuge an’ fergets all about um, I guess. But before Tony gets sprung dis ole guy gets sick an’ t’inks he’s gonta croak. He’s got a lotta jack, an’ w’en he makes out his will he leaves a hundred an’ fifty thou’ to Tony, an’ Tony was to get it w’en he got to be twenty-one.

“We had an ole nut in de House of Refuge named Beaver Clegg. He’s de boid dat put dis star-gazin’ racket in Tony’s head. Him an’ Tony was t’ick as mud all de time Tony was dere, before Clegg bumped off. Well, it seems dis ole Clegg had went to dis ole Peter Henry Florence—dat was de name of Tony’s uncle—an’ tol’ um wot a fine boid dis big Tony was. Tol’ um he was studyin’ dis big astronomy, or wotever youse call it, an’ tol’ um Tony was gonta make a good one some day. An’ he hands de ole uncle a lotta bunk like dat, an’ de ole plug falls for it w’en Clegg tells us Tony’ll need money to keep up dis star-gazin’ w’en dey spring um from de kid-pen. An’ de ole man makes a will leavin’ Tony a hundred an’ fifty thousan’ cold, but he can’t get it till he’s twenty-one. An’ dey say dey’ll keep it dark from Tony f’r fear he’ll lay back an’ rest pretty till he gets his mitts on dat coin. An’ if Tony dies before he’s twenty-one, de jack goes to de younger brudder dat dey calls Lester. He done dat because he’s sorry he’d treated his sister like he’d done all dose years, an’ wanted to do sumpin’ for her kids.

“Well, somehow Tony an’ Lester’s dad gets onta de deal. He hates Tony, an’ knows if Tony gets de jack he won’t see a cent of it. But de kid brudder is diff’rent. Ole Man Cole knows he c’n win’ Lester aroun’ his finger an’ take de coin away from um, like he done wid his mudder. So he tells Lester about it, an’ tells um to give Tony de merry ha-ha w’en dey spring um. An’ de ole man plans to put Tony outa business someway until Lester c’n get de jack.

“An’ so Tony’s jes’ come out w’en Ole Man Cole comes to me, an’ Lester’s give um de cold shoulder. An’ Tony tells Lester he’s goin’ West dat very night. Tony ain’t of age yet, an’ Ole Man Cole wants to know w’ere he is every moment o’ de time; so Tony’s gotta get lost someway, or else somebody’s gotta bump um off.

“Well, Ole Man Cole ain’t any too keen f’r bumpin’ off his own kid, but I guess he’d woik umself up to it if de woist come to de woist, ’cause he was ’way in de hole from playin’ de ponies an’ chasin’ ’round wid wil’ women. But everyt’ing looks jake w’en Tony says he’s gonta beat it West. Jes’ de same, Ole Man Cole wants somebody on his trail until he’s of age, to see dat he don’t flop up in Hat’away again an’ spill de beans. So he says he’s hoid about me in de reports he got from de House of Refuge—dey tol’ about Tony an’ me’s scrap an’ all—an’ he’s looked me up since dey sprung me an’ savvies I’m a crook. An’ he says I’m jes’ de guy to keep after Tony an’ see dat he don’t come back to Hat’away, an’ he’ll gi’me five thou’ to see dat Tony don’t show up until after he’s twenty-one.

“Well, w’en dere’s a hundred an’ fifty thousan’ comin’ to *him*, youse c’n bet yer sweet life he can’t talk to Slim Wolfgang about any five thousan’. So we go down in a clinch, an’ w’en we come up he’s offered me fifteen thousan’ if I’ll guarantee to keep Tony away. An’ we settle on dat basis, an’ he slips me a piece o’ jack in advance an’ tells me Tony’s beatin’ it dat night, an’ for me to get after um right away.

“So I get into me road clothes an’ shadow Tony from his brudder’s room w’en he starts out wid dat dam’-fool telescope over his shoulder. De nut! An’ I gets De Whimperer to help me w’en I meets um on de road, an’ we gets along well until dat bum spills de beans by swipin’ Tony’s telescope an’ beatin’ it. An’ den I lose Tony on account o’ dat, an’ I beat it back to Hat’away.

“An’ Ole Man Cole is mighty sore, an’ says he won’t pungle up anudder cent—’cause he ain’t got it, for one t’ing,—until it toins out dat Tony don’t come back before he’s twenty-one.

“Den one day de old uncle comes to Hat’away an’ fin’s out dat Tony’s been sprung an’ hit de trail. An’ it’s only a few days before Tony’s twenty-first birthday—see? An’ Ole Man Cole’s all swelled up, t’inkin’ dat now Lester’ll get de jack—w’ich means dat *he’ll* get it umself finally—an’ den de ole uncle gives um de udder barrel. He says he’s goin’ to his lawyers an’ change de will so dat it gives Tony de jack if he’s found before Lester’s twenty-first birthday. If not, den de jack goes to Lester, like de foist will read.

“Well, Ole Man Cole’s scared stiff again dat Tony’ll show up some day before Lester’s twenty-one. An’ de guys dat he owes money to are after um hot an’ heavy. An’ neider of us savvies w’ere Tony is. An’ den old Peter Henry Florence he

croaks, an' everyt'ing's in de han's of his executors. An' den one day Lester gets a letter from Tony tellin' um dat he's in Ragtown, out here in Cal, an' askin' um to send his books an' t'ings to um by express.

"So now Ole Man Cole an' me know w'ere Tony is, an' everyt'ing's jake again, 'cause ole Florence is dead an' de will can't be changed. An' I make Cole promise to cough up twenty-five thousan' if I'll go to Ragtown an' see dat Tony stays dere. So I look up De Whimperer an' we beat it out. An'—well, Tony's still here, an' his brudder's twenty-first birt'day is de fifteent' of next June. We gotta stay till den, kid, or we won't get de jack. An' now Tony's t'inkin' he'll go back to Hat'away, is he? Well, he won't—take it from me! Nuttin' doin', if I have to—Well, youse savvy wot happened once, Win, w'en youse got to beefin' about stayin' in Ragtown any longer."

"Slim, did you shoot Tony to—to kill him, so that we could go East?" asked Winnie the Weeper in a low, strained voice.

"Well, youse're claimin' I don't love youse, ain't youse? Youse wanted to go East, an' dere wasn't any udder way dat I could beat it wid youse, was dere? Dat's love, ain't it, kid? I don't wanta croak a guy any more dan youse do. But I wasn't gonta lose dat big money if I could help it. Anyway, de dam' fool didn't croak, so I hadta talk youse into stickin' again by promisin' youse half o' dis big money w'en I got it. An' youse fell for it—an' now youse've got all de dope. But Tony's goin' East, he says, an' in two mont's de time'll be up an' he'll lose de money. Lord, I was scared w'en he begun to have t'ings printed in dese here nut magazines. I t'ought sure ole Peter Henry's lawyers would see his name an' fin' out w'ere he was. But dey didn't—I guess nobody but nuts reads dem magazines. But if Tony's name ever gets in de newspoipers—good night!"

"And how're you gonta keep him here till the fifteenth of June?" asked Winnie. "What's to keep 'im from beatin' it the last o' this month, like he said he was gonta do?"

"I got a frien' dat's gonta do dat little t'ing for me," Slim assured her. "Go make goo-goo eyes at Lee Sweet an' steer um in here, Win. He's de boid dat'll do our woik for us. I been pretty good to um ever since I knew he was sore at Tony on account o' dat big homestead racket. I been tellin' um all about Tony's bein' in de House of Refuge, an' a bad acter an' all—but a coward—see? An' he gets to t'inkin', every time he gets drunk, dat it's his dooty to de community to run Tony out. I'll tell um dat if he puts de skids under Tony, de rest o' de homesteaders will get scared an' beat it. Lee's got a bunch o' cowpunchers dat'll get a big kick outa tryin' to t'row a scare into Tony—dey're a wil' bunch. Tony won't scare, but dey don't

know dat. Get me? Let de udder fella woik f'r youse, kid, ever' time youse get a chance."

"But we don't want Tony run out," protested the girl. "Then he'd sure go East, wouldn't he?"

"Say, youse don't get de big idea at all, kid. Youse don't know Tony Cole like I do. Jes' start to run dat boid anywhere an' watch um stick! De harder youse fight dat boid, de harder he fights back. An' he's stuck on dat homestead an' his ole fool mountain, ain't he? If he lets Sweet run um out, he loses de land, don't he? Let Sweet get after um once an' try to give um de run, an' watch dat Tony stick an' fight um! Somebody may get croaked, but it won't be me! Now get me right, kid—I ain't got no use for dis here Tony Cole. But dere's jes' one t'ing I'll say for um—he's a fightin' fool."

"Slim," said the girl, "I got an idea that'll let us go East right now, and make more money besides. Double-cross Cole's father and tell Tony all about it—but first make Tony promise to give you fifty thousand, and—"

"An' youse've got anudder guess comin', Win. De Whimperer woulda done jes' dat, if I'd tol' um all I knew. D'youse see, now, w'y I keep me mout' shut?"

"But you—"

"Listen, kid," the gambler interrupted, "I wouldn't let Fifty-six thoity-five get dat jack for *half*. I hate um like a terrier hates a rat—an' now's me chance to get um! Get me, kid?"

CHAPTER XXXI

BULLETS FROM SPYGLASS MOUNTAIN

If Joshua Cole had not fully decided on his trip East while the seeing was poor on Spyglass Mountain, what Shanty Madge told him when he talked over his plan with her made an added reason for going.

She rode to his cabin door one morning, crinkly bronze-gold hair outstanding in the breeze, chromatic cheeks aglow. Joshua was busy with his books, but Madge was one disturbance always to be tolerated.

“Hello, kid astronomer,” she greeted him. “Get your nose out of that book and come out here and talk to me.”

He obeyed the preëmpatory command, glad as a dog that answers its mistress’ call.

“Not working this morning?”

“No, I’m sick of work. Get Argo and let’s go for a ride.”

Joshua decided that he too was sick of work, and followed Madge to the lakeside with his saddle on his back.

Despite the capricious mood that the girl had assumed, it seemed to Joshua that she had something serious on her mind this morning. She had nothing at all to say while he threw his saddle on the gray’s back and cinched it. She was silent, too, after he had mounted and they were galloping around the lake toward G-string.

“Let’s slow ’em down and find out what’s troubling you,” he suggested finally.

She reined in promptly, and their ponies followed the water’s edge at the cowpony walking-trot.

“You’ve really made up your mind to go East?” she asked, after a brief continuance of her silence.

“I don’t know when I’ll have a better opportunity,” he replied. “The seeing on the mountain is rotten because of these high spring winds. I have lots of time to get at the work on my claim. I’ve got money—later maybe I’ll not have. I’m mighty curious to solve the mystery that seems to surround me. And I want to see my brother and bring him back, if he’s not doing well and wants to come. Many good excuses for going right now. I’ll stay only a couple of weeks, or three maybe, and be back in plenty of time for the big night in June. I’ll just turn Argo loose to pick up his living about the lake. You’ll slant an eye at him occasionally, won’t you?”

For nearly half a minute Shanty Madge was mute. Then, not looking at her

companion, she said:

“But I can’t look out for Argo for you. I—I’m afraid Ma and I won’t be here.”

“Won’t be here?”

“Yes—we’ve decided to go to Los Angeles for a time. One of the homesteaders, Mr. Smiley—I guess you’ve met him—will be glad to hire the mules for his spring work. So we—so Ma and I thought we’d go.”

“But I thought you were so anxious to get ahead with your plowing!”

“There’s lots of time. I’ll not seed anything this year, anyway. And you must remember that *you’ve* done nothing much but build a cabin on *your* claim.”

“That part’s all right,” Joshua conceded. “But knowing your keenness to be up and doing, I’m a little surprised at the suddenness of this idea. What *is* the big idea, anyway, Madge?”

“Well,” she answered, “Ma and I were in these mountains long before you were, and I at least have not been out once since we came. I thought that while you were away would be a good time to go.”

Joshua glowed within. Her words implied that if he were not there she would be lonesome.

“And besides, Ma and I want to buy some things.”

“I can haul anything special that you want from Spur,” he suggested. He had suddenly remembered that Jack Montgomery was still in Los Angeles.

“You could carry in under your arm what Ma and I want to get,” she informed him. “And besides, a man could never buy them—and you wouldn’t find them at Spur. You don’t know much about women, poet-astronomer. We get more fun out of buying things, or merely just pawing over them on the counters, and getting all fussed up with indecision over what we’d better choose, than any man can imagine. And then usually we buy the wrong thing and have to exchange it—and get more thrills.”

Another silence fell. Throughout its duration Madge looked across the sunny waters of the lake. Then she suddenly turned her reddish-brown eyes on Joshua and told the truth.

“I had a letter from Mary Montgomery last mail day. She has invited us down. She’s Jack’s only sister and doesn’t care for camp life. But we like her, and she likes us. And—and we’ve decided to accept her invitation.”

“Oh,” breathed Joshua. And after a lengthy pause: “Is—is Jack going to be in camp this spring?”

“Not very much, Mary wrote. He’s no keener for camp life than she is. He lives with his mother and sister in a swell apartment in the city.”

“A swell apartment, huh? Madge, I don’t like that word swell. I don’t know that I ever heard you use it before. It sounds like—Well, you reminded me of a restaurant cashier after a night of joy-riding—that’s all.”

“Precious lot you know about joy-riding and restaurant cashiers! You read that in some story.”

Joshua’s heart was filled with bitterness, but it did not show in his tolerant dark-gray eyes as he studied her averted face.

“Well, I can’t hold you,” he said at last. “When are you going?”

“To-morrow—on the stage.”

“Oh, to-morrow!”

“Yes. We—I hadn’t much chance to tell you before to-day.”

“No—not much”—from Joshua, absently. A space of silence, then: “Let’s let ’em out a little.”

As they galloped along knee to knee Joshua’s dullness continued to grow. Had Madge showed him the letter from Mary Montgomery, or told him of its contents earlier, he would not have suffered such forebodings. He had been to the post office with her on the foregoing mail day. She had read the letter before mounting the black for the ride back home. She had not even told him who the letter was from. He even would not have felt miserable over the fact that it was the Montgomerys who had invited her and that she was to be under the same roof with Jack down there, had she made the announcement in her usual buoyant way. But she had been secretive, and his were the pangs that the jealous lover suffers mutely.

They swung away from the road as it swept up to the little mining community of G-string. Piñon slopes, gentle at first, that followed one another in graduated scallops until they became a series of steep ridges, led the way to Spyglass Mountain. Over and about these the riders traced a course, traveling parallel to the route that they had come, but a mile inland from the lake. This was a round that they frequently made because of the diversity of the scenery offered. Here and there they crossed tiny hidden grassy spots, where only bunchgrass grew, unsuccored by any moisture save that which remained from the winter snows. Now they rode ridges and looked down cañons that were amazingly steep and grim, which sprawled eventually to the yellow desert nearly three-quarters of a mile below them. Sagebrush slopes, rubble slides, piñon groves, yucca-studded levels; an eminence where they paused their ponies and gazed for many minutes over an endless sweep of dark-green forest to the west; another summit which gave view of the mocking yellow desert stretching to the north and south, and bounded on the east by hazy pink buttes that seemed to float a quarter of their height above the earth; up and down, over rocky hills and into

wedge-shaped cañons, until a steep slope before them became a flung-out apron that invited them to climb Spyglass Mountain, towering above its neighbor peaks—all this was offered them on that round by the Master of that untarnished land.

And as they reached the hem of the apron and looked up into the grim old lady's face they saw a body of horsemen winding about among clumps of sage and rocky obstacles.

They were Lee Sweet and four of his cowhands; and they stopped their horses on a shelf that overlooked the cabins of the Mundys and Joshua Cole, and sat looking down the mountain's side.

Then one of them dismounted. There was no mistaking the gigantic body, the half-moon of ropelike whiskers, the black Columbia-shape Stetson, or the green-and-purple plaid of the flannel shirt. Lee Sweet stood by his horse's side a moment or two, apparently talking, and then a rifle, butt up, crept above the horse's neck as Sweet pulled it from its scabbard.

"Let's try to hide," said Joshua calmly. "We're about to learn something, I think."

There was no cover close. Indeed, it seemed remarkable that the horsemen above had not seen Madge and Joshua, but apparently they had not. The two swung about and sought the obscurity of a clump of yuccas perhaps a hundred feet away, but before they reached it they heard the bark of a rifle, and the echoes went galloping off on the other side of Spyglass Mountain.

They looked back. Lee Sweet was sitting flat on the ground, his left elbow resting on his knee, the rifle aimed down the mountainside. Then the two rounded the yucca clump and left their saddles, to steal back through the trees and watch. And as they looked out Sweet's rifle spoke again.

The vaqueros who accompanied him had moved their ponies farther back from the shelf, leading their employer's animal. Only Sweet remained, and now Joshua and Madge saw that a scant screen of sagebrush probably hid him from any one who might be below. Again there came a thin puff of smoke, and a third bullet went whistling to the lowlands.

Shanty Madge's face was white, but she had said nothing since the discovery of the cowmen. Cole of Spyglass Mountain leaned against the rough trunk of a yucca, his neck craned around it. Madge saw the spasmodic inflation and deflation of his thin Grecian nostrils, and his gray-blue eyes were intense. But in them was no sign of fear or hatred. His thin, long-fingered hand against the yucca palm was as steady as if it were caressing the tube of the telescope on Spyglass Mountain. And the wraith of a smile, tolerant, whimsical, had settled upon his lips.

"Sweet knows," he at last observed in his ordinary tones, "that the chances are

fifty to one I'm not in my cabin. He can see that Argo is not on his picket rope down by the lake. He also must have noted that your horse is gone. He knows we ride together a lot. He's just putting a few bullet holes through my cabin roof to warn me, I imagine. What a big, overgrown, innocent child he is! I wonder if he's drunk—California Bill says he's mild as a rabbit when he's sober.”

“But suppose you were in your cabin,” said Madge, her tones rather tense. “That would be a little serious, wouldn't it?”

“Well, if he hit me it would be.”

“It seems to me you're pretty calm about this, Joshua. Here you have me as a witness that Sweet fired three times—There's another shot! You and I have seen Sweet fire four shots in the direction of your cabin. He has threatened to run you out of the mountains. What will you do if, when we get back, you find bullet holes in your roof?”

“What would *you* do?” asked Joshua, smiling at her.

“I'd have him arrested for attempt to kill.”

“But I know he's not trying to kill me. He's almost sure I'm not there. He even may have seen you and me ride away this morning, and was waiting until he was sure we were far in the hills before putting on this little act.”

“Well, isn't it a grave misdemeanor, to say the least?”

“Rather, I should say.”

“Well, then! Aren't you going to do anything about it?”

“Yes, I think I shall,” Joshua chuckled. “I think I'll tell California Bill on him.”

“Joshua Cole,” said Madge, with lips drawn straight, “is it possible that you are a coward?”

Joshua seemed to deliberate over his answer. “No,” he told her seriously, “I don't believe I am, Madge. Why? Do you think I'm one?”

“When you were shot,” she reminded him, “you made no move whatever to find out who waylaid you. You allowed that tramp, The Whimperer, to bully you and steal your most priceless treasure. And when you found him at Ragtown you let him go scot-free. You know in your heart as well as I do that Slim Wolfgang shot you—and he's at large. It seems to me that you're entirely too easy-going—a little bit *too* long-suffering. I've never seen you mad. I've never heard you cuss a horse or a mule—or even speak an impetuous word to them. Sometimes I admire your restraint; but just now I am beginning to wonder if—Well, I'm wondering whether you have any masculine traits at all—if you have any pep in you, which is so necessary to holding one's own in this world—so necessary to success.”

He regarded her gravely, the distant rifleman for the time forgotten.

“Yes, I have masculine traits,” he assured her. “For one thing, I love you devotedly. But, Madge, a student hasn’t time to fight. Misunderstandings, petty wranglings—such things—interrupt his studies. How could I concentrate if I had always on my mind some puny difficulty with my fellowman, which in the end amounts to nothing? My astronomy is the big thing in my life. Everything must give way before that—everything must be sacrificed to that. I must, and will, give up everything else for that.”

“Would you give up me?”

“I’ve already done so, haven’t I, dear?” he asked softly. “If I had accepted Demarest’s offer after I stopped the slide, you would be my wife to-day. I knew what I was doing when I refused. And now you’re going to Los Angeles, to be close to a man who loves you and can give you what you think you want. Yet I refuse to neglect my studies and throw myself into the work on my homestead, which might convince you that I am at least willing to try to earn for you what you want. Yes, Madge, I’ve already given you up as a sacrifice to the stars. It has to be—I must fulfill my destiny.”

“Fiddlesticks!”

Joshua Cole started to laugh, but checked himself as he remembered the bewhiskered rifleman on the rocky shelf, who for some reason had withheld his fire.

“Fiddlesticks, eh?”—and he smiled broadly. “Yes, fiddlesticks, Madge. Fiddlesticks for you, because you don’t mean what you say; you refuse to listen to your heart. And fiddlesticks for me, because I know I haven’t given you up except for now and the immediate future. Go to Los Angeles. I’m willing that you should go. It may be for the best—even if—even if you should marry Jack. But remember what I told you up there when we finished the building of the trail. You’ll come back to Spyglass Mountain.”

Sweet’s rifle rang out again, and then he walked from the shelf, mounted his horse, and the little cavalcade filed away in the direction they had come.

“I may as well tell you now, Joshua,” said Madge, just a trace of haughtiness in her voice, “that I may *not* come back. I’ll come back to the homestead, of course. But I mean I may not come back to Spyglass Mountain in the meaning that we have given that phrase.”

In reply Joshua only gave her his whimsical smile, and she never knew how troubled was his soul.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NIGHT OF JUNE FIFTEENTH

Elizabeth Mundy and her daughter had gone to the city on “the inside” of the range. Joshua Cole moved about his little cabin with a listless air when not wrapped up in his studies. Five days had passed since he waved good-by to Madge as the six-horse stage took up the long trip from Ragtown to the desert town of Spur. Joshua was not going East. He had trailed down from the summit of Spyglass Mountain one evening to find a vigorous fire blazing at one corner of his cabin, and had heard the thud of hoofs galloping off into the dusk. Five buckets of water from the near-by well had saved his cabin and his precious books and papers, but the owner now realized that Sweet meant business and he dared not leave the country. Even as Felix Wolfgang had planned.

The first time that Joshua rode to Ragtown for the mail after Madge’s departure he encountered California Bill. The two seated themselves in a remote corner of The Silver Dollar, and Joshua told of the bullet holes in his cabin roof, of one shattered window, of the fire of pitchy pine splinters laid by horsemen who had galloped away into the dusk, and of the rifleman on a shelf of Spyglass Mountain.

“And now,” he finished, “what’s your advice, old Bill? I’ll respect it—even act on it—as I would the advice of no other man I know.”

“Pin the medal here, Tony,” chuckled Bill, tapping his broad breast with a stubby forefinger. “Pin ’er here, an’ listen to words o’ wisdom.”

“Shoot!”

“Do nothin’ but stick and watch yer prop’ty, an’ leave th’ rest to that interestin’, quaint, an’ exclusive character known as California Bill.”

“But, Bill, I don’t want to foist my troubles on you. I’ll do the doing. I merely want advice.”

“An’ ye’ve got ’er, son—ye’ve got ’er. I’m th’ only man in these here mountains that c’n handle this here deal. Funny—but I am, seems. So it’s up to me to handle her. I know Lee Sweet like I know my off lead mule, an’ it’s a toss-up whichun’s the ornriest o’ th’ two. Lee’s th’ stubbornest, but th’ mule’s ears are th’ longest. Th’ mule’s meaner than Lee Sweet, but Lee Sweet he thinks he’s th’ meanest. However, he thinks wrong. I’m s’prised at Lee. Ye see, I know ’im so well. ’Tain’t like Lee a-tall to act thataway. So, knowin’ that, I draw certain conclusions, based on certain things I’ve witnessed here of late. So keep ridin’ wide an’ pretty, Tony, an’ don’t

strangle th' biscuit—an' leave th' rest to me. How's Shanty Madge makin' out these days?"

Thus abruptly did California Bill close the matter of Sweet's persecution, intimating that he would attend to everything and relieve Joshua of all worry.

"Why, didn't you know?" Joshua returned. "She and her mother have gone on the inside for a few weeks—to visit the Montgomerys."

"To visit th' Montgomerys, eh?"—and the keen slate eyes of the old freighter studied Joshua from under their dense black *cheval-de-frise*. "Jack Montgomery in th' mountains these days?"

"No, he's still in the city."

California intermittently separated and spread his thick fingers on the table before him, watching the operation thoughtfully.

"Did ye ever ask Madge to marry ye, Tony?" he asked suddenly.

Joshua's face flamed red. "I—I—Come to think of it, I don't believe I ever did, Bill."

Bill snorted softly and ceased his finger exercise to absently toy with one of the fluffy little white rabbit tails that puffed out above the lobe of each of his ears.

"You're a hell of a lady's man," he observed disgustedly. "Say, Tony, if ye let that dude of a Jack Montgomery get Shanty Madge away from ye, I'll—I'll—I'm off ye f'r life, that's all! Maybe ye savvy Mars, but ye don't know anything about Venus. Ye're loco in th' head when it comes to the *mujeres*."

"I've let Madge see what I am," Joshua said. "If she wants me, she—Well, it's up to her."

"Up to her *my eye*! Ye gotta crowd 'em, *amigo*—ye gotta crowd 'em right up ag'in th' fence. They like it."

"How do you know they do? You're a great one to talk."

"Oh, I've had my little spells o' wranglin' with 'em. I'll bet ye a strip o' whang leather Jack Montgomery's crowded her."

"He's asked her to marry him, if that's what you mean."

"And she ain't done it yet, has she? No, she ain't. An' why? 'Cause she's waitin' for you to buck up an' show a little savvy. Say, Tony, ye make me sick as a drenched mule."

"I've tried to be a little dignified in the matter," Joshua defended.

"I'll tell th' cockeyed world ye have!" scoffed California Bill. "Dignified! God! Who ever heard o' love bein' dignified? Say, that's th' best one I ever heard. Nobody on earth but you could have sprung that, Tony. If there's anything on earth that *ain't* dignified, it's love. A man c'n get drunk an' fall in a mud puddle, an' get up

an' walk off dignified. A pallbearer might stub his toe an' sprawl 'round till even the corpse laughed, but he'd be dignified 'longside a real he-man in love. Say, ye're a reg'lar howl!"

"It's strange," mused Joshua, a little stiffly, "that you failed to call my attention to all this until Madge was out of the mountains."

"Hell's afire, man!—I thought it was all settled between you two long ago! I never dreamed ye was such a sucker!"

"She longs for money," said Joshua. "She halfway wants me to give up my astronomy, and I can't do that."

"Money my foot! What'd she buy with it? Mules? She longs for love, and all she wants ye to give up is a little love-talk."

Joshua looked doubtfully at Bill, then down at the table and blushed furiously.

"I've already called her dear twice," he made announcement, "and once I—I put my arm around her."

California Bill roared and pounded the table with his heavy fist. "*Muy bueno!*" he applauded. "*Hi-yu skookum!* He called her dear twice! Oh, Lord! And once he put his arm around her—seems! Sufferin' snakes, Tony, don't ye know how funny ye are? Ye're funny just like a toad—who don't know he's funny a-tall!"

But Bill changed his tactics when he saw the brooding look in Joshua's eyes.

"I'll tell ye what ye do," he said, laying a stubby hand on his friend's shoulder. "You write Madge right away an' let her know it's turned out ye dassent go East; an' if I'm not mistaken she'll be lopin' back soon's she's bought her trinkets. An' then if ye don't start a riot with her—get right down to business an' make he-man love to her, th' fightin', faunchin', rarin', won't-take-no-for-an-answer kind—why, then ye deserve to lose her. Now go on home an' write to her so's ye c'n get yer letter off to-morrow. I'm plumb disgusted with ye—seems. Go on—an' leave Lee Sweet to a man that savvies men *and* women. Wait a minute! . . . I'll buy th' drinks before ye go."

California Bill continued to sit at the table long after Joshua had ridden off on his dapple gray. He took a stiff drink of whisky now and then for the good of his soul, and rolled many brown-paper cigarettes. He kept his sharp eyes on the ever-growing crowd before the bar, until Lee Sweet, a little the worse for drink, staggered in with three of his punchers behind him. Then Bill left the place and went to The Golden Eagle.

In The Golden Eagle he lounged at the bar for a time, talking with acquaintances, then found a table and sat alone. His shrewd eyes roved frequently to Slim

Wolfgang, presiding over the stud game, his green-celluloid eyeshield drawn low over his eyes, his coat off, displaying the sleeves of a garish silk shirt, his billiard-cloth vest and golden buttons making him as conspicuous as a parrot in a cage of hawks.

Bill saw Slim's girl when she danced with some heavy-footed construction stiff, watched her while she hung over Slim's chair, or ogled some one to buy her a drink for the good of the house and her own percentage.

California was thinking deeply. Old man-hunter that he was, he was capable of putting two and two together, and was not a stranger to the delicate art of deduction. Long ago he had decided that no mere freak of chance had brought The Whimperer and Slim Wolfgang to the country where Joshua Cole was working. And now that Lee Sweet had begun heckling the new homesteader, Bill was deeply interested in the close companionship he had of late observed between Wolfgang, Sweet, and the girl called Winnie the Weeper. Here was a mystery to be solved, and Bill meant to solve it.

But he was unfortunate that night in that neither Winnie the Weeper nor Slim Wolfgang made any move to join Lee Sweet. And not once did the cattleman enter The Golden Eagle. So Bill gave up his quest at midnight and went to bed, for he must be up early and on his way to Spur to continue his part in supplying the seemingly insatiable wants of Demarest, Spruce and Tillou.

After that night, every time that California Bill made Ragtown he watched for an opportunity to solve the mystery of Felix Wolfgang's sojourn there. He hoped to discover the reason by stealing up on the gambler's tent when he and Winnie and Sweet were holding a conference. He had rightly decided that Sweet was merely a tool in the hands of the parasitical pair, that they were egging him on to harass Joshua in order to serve their own mysterious ends. Sweet he did not fear, for he considered him incapable of any serious crime, a big, blustering, self-important boy who merely needed a spanking.

Then it occurred to Bill that he was on the wrong tack altogether, and he cursed himself for an idiot. If Winnie and Wolfgang were working against Joshua through Lee Sweet, Bill would learn nothing by listening in on a conversation among the three. He must forget Sweet for the time being, and make an effort to spy on the gambler and his girl when they were alone.

So he took to loitering about the town until he saw Winnie and Slim leave The Golden Eagle, when he would steal up in the darkness and stand silent at the back of their tent, with only the thin canvas between him and them. Three times he did this, but he heard nothing to his advantage. And these three times carried the actors in this

little mountain drama well into the month of June, for each of Bill's trips to Spur occupied eight days.

Bill was learning nothing from his stealthy spying. He had not once encountered Joshua during the month and a half that followed Joshua's tale of Sweet's activities. So he did not know whether Sweet had done anything more against him or not. Sweet was busy with the cattle now, for the spring drive into the mountains was on. Many herds had already been brought in and were scattered over the lush meadows, now rank with succulent feed. Sweet and the greater portion of his vaqueros were on the desert rounding up the stragglers over a range that extended for ninety miles. California Bill was about discouraged over the result of his efforts to help his friend when, on the night of the fifteenth of June, he stood silent at the back of Wolfgang's tent and overheard conversation and certain other sounds that made him cup a thick hand behind his ear.

Because it was evident from what he heard that Slim Wolfgang and Winnie the Weeper were packing their trunks in readiness to take the stage for Spur next morning. And Slim asked Winnie if she remembered what her ticket from New York to California had cost.

This was sufficient to cause California Bill to clear for action. He had found out nothing, and now this precious pair were on their way East in the morning. There was only one thing to be done before it was too late. Bill stooped and softly began to pull the stakes from the ground at one corner of the tent. A little later he gently lifted one canvas wall, gave his body a quick flip, and was inside.

The girl sucked in a scream, turned chalk-white, and stared at him. Slim Wolfgang wheeled from a trunk that he was strapping, made a crawling dive for the table, and wheeled again, half crouched, a Colt revolver leveled at California Bill.

"Well, wot d'youse want in here?" he snarled.

"Son," said Bill, "don't point that there thing at me. Put 'er on th' table. I wanta talk to ye a bit."

"Talk den, an' make 'er snappy! Wot d'youse want o' me?"

"Lay th' smoke-iron on th' table, son," Bill ordered again. "What's th' use o' yer flourishin' 'er? Ye wouldn't dast shoot California Bill. They'd hang ye, come mornin'. Be nice now—*an'* sensible."

All the time that he was speaking California Bill had been walking deliberately toward the gambler. His hands, hanging at his sides, held no gun. Winnie the Weeper shrank away from him as he neared her, backed to the bed, and sat down weakly, her trembling legs unable to hold her any longer. The slate-gray eyes of the old freighter were fixed on the pale-blue eyes of Felix Wolfgang, and in them was no

unkindly light. But they held a fixity, an unwavering, fearless, purposeful look that kept the gambler in a statuesque attitude, undecided, deep down in his heart afraid and hopeless. Slim had fought many battles, with weapons and without, but always with tramps or gangsters who feared him because of his cunning and his deadly methods. Never before had an enemy walked straight up to him, unarmed, and completely ignoring the menace of his gun. It was new to Slim, and the cold fear gripped him that, even if he should shoot, this calm, unconcerned old Westerner would in the end come out the winner. And Slim had much at stake. He did not know that those hypnotic slate eyes of California Bill had brought many a braver man than he was to surrender—that Bill was a fatalist, and had faced many a threatening gun as he now faced this one, convinced that when his time came to die he would simply die, and that would be the end of it.

“Wu-wot d’youse want, I’m astin’ youse?” Slim quavered, as Bill stood within arm’s-length of him; and he was surprised at the break in his voice and its lack of plug-ugly huskiness.

“Why, that there gun, first,” replied California Bill; and before Slim knew what had taken place the revolver had been twisted from his hand and dropped into the freighter’s pocket—but Slim’s wrist still ached.

“There—now that’s a heap better,” Bill said soothingly. “Now le’s set on th’ bed—you an’ me an’ yer *muchacha*—an’ ye’re gonta tell me all about why ye’re here, an’ what ye got ag’in my friend, Cole of Spyglass Mountain.”

“I—”

“Will,” complacently finished Bill, and his powerful fingers suddenly grasped Slim’s already aching wrist.

Those stubby digits, thick as corncobs, closed down slowly like a vise closing on a piece of wood.

“I c’n break ’er, son—jest as easy. Now gentle down an’ come to th’ bed with me. We’ll all set together, me in th’ middle, holdin’ onto both o’ ye friendly like; an’ we’ll talk about Tony an’ yer trip out West.”

Winnie the Weeper half rose at this, and glanced about, ready to dart out of the tent before Bill could drag her *maquereau* to the bedside.

“Look, ma’am,” said Bill; and he flipped his right hand downward as does a man who has had his hand in mud and rids himself of it. And nestled in the palm of it the girl saw a stubby .32 automatic pistol, which theretofore had hung inside Bill’s sleeve, attached to a rubber band that was bound about his elbow.

“I’m tellin’ ye frankly,” he drawled, “that yer man couldn’t ’a’ shot me when I was walkin’ on ’im a minute back. I coulda flipped this gun, dropped, and bored ’im

while his bullet was goin' over my head. I coulda read in his eye th' instant he was gonta pull trigger—but that look didn't come there. I hate to brag, but this here case is different. I'm workin' for th' best friend I got. Set down, ma'am—tha-a-a-at's right. Now, son—”

And he led the unprotesting gambler to the bed, back upon which the girl had already sunk and was weeping softly, and sat himself down between them, with a hand gripping the wrist of each.

“Now we're all *hi-yu skookum*,” he remarked jocularly. “Let's have th' yarn from one end to t'other, an' le's don't make no mistakes.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

HORSEMEN IN THE NIGHT

Meanwhile Cole of Spyglass Mountain of days had worked at fencing his claim or studying, and of nights had kept vigil at the eyepiece of his telescope, lost to this earth, his mind and soul transported to other worlds all bright and peaceful.

Once as he walked up the trail to the observatory a bullet had whizzed close to his head, followed by the distant bark of a heavy firearm. And when Sweet's vaqueros had driven the first of the cattle into the mountains the herd had stampeded Argo, at graze on his rope beside the lake, and Joshua had scoured the country a week before he found him. The gray had pulled his pin and raced away in a frenzy of fright as the cowpunchers, with deliberate intent, drove the cows upon him, yelling and firing into the air.

These things worried Joshua, for it seemed next to impossible for him to fight back. He could not have overtaken the mounted cowboys on foot and fought it out with them; and afterward he was unable to tell who had been responsible because he knew none of Sweet's men. Had he carried a gun when fired upon as he climbed Spyglass Mountain he would have been helpless to use it, since he had gained no sight of the man who had shot toward him.

All this gave him a feeling of utter helplessness and dejection. He harmed no man, wished no man ill. All he wanted was to be allowed to go placidly on his way through life, devoted to his studies, unobtrusive, simple, kindly, and deep in his own affairs. Fight he would if the fight came into the open, but he was unable to make it thus. He was destined to be on the offensive so long as Sweet saw fit to worry him, unless he went direct to Sweet and had it out with him, face to face. And this he had about decided to do when Madge's letter came.

Madge had known when she left the country that he had given up his Eastern trip because of Sweet's firing on his cabin from the shelf on Spyglass Mountain. So he had not written her, as California Bill had advised. She had gone on the twenty-seventh of April. Not a word had he received from her in all those days, and often he had found his mind wandering from the abstruse problems on his home-made desk to her, down there in the city in "a swell apartment." Then came her letter, on the fourteenth of June; and if his heart had been heavy before it turned to a lump of clay as his moist eyes read her message:

“MY DEAR POET-ASTRONOMER:

“Many matters have prevented me from writing until now. We’ve been so busy, and have had so much fun, that I am sure, if you knew the half of it, you would forgive me. I’ve been living, Joshua—living as I never lived before. Dances, automobile rides, yachting off San Pedro and Coronado Beach, and parties—parties—parties! And my new clothes, Joshua! Oh, if you could only see me! Nothing expensive, of course—that is out of the question. But they’re so pretty, and everybody flatters me so that I’m afraid my head is a little turned.

“But all this means nothing to you, wrapped up as you are in bigger things. I had to start this letter some way, though, and work up to what I have to say. Joshua, it is going to hurt you—what I have to tell you now. And I hate to hurt you. But it is all for the best, I suppose, as Ma always told me when I was a little girl.

“I know it will be better for you that I am going to marry Jack Montgomery. You and I never could be happy together, dear boy, for the simple reason that you are too far above me—too big for me in more ways than one. I am frivolous—more frivolous than I knew throughout all the years on the railroad grade. It took Los Angeles, with its brilliant throngs, dazzling hotels, and everything that has given me pleasure to teach me the shallowness of my nature.

“So, Joshua, I want you to forget me as unworthy of you. You are a dreamer, with an unpractical mind far above the sordid things that I find so interesting. You are young and will soon forget me when you become a great astronomer, which I am sure will happen some day. And then you can find a girl who appreciates you. I am too shallow to do that.

“We haven’t decided what to do with the homestead yet. Ma wants to go back the worst way, but of course Jack wouldn’t approve of my returning for keeps, so, as I said, we are still undecided just what to do. But, please, please, Joshua, forgive me and try to forget me, for really I am not worth your notice.

“I don’t just know whether I love Jack or not, just between you and me, and I shouldn’t be writing this to you about the man I mean to marry. But I have written it, and I hate to scratch things out, and am too lazy to begin my letter over again. So I have written that I don’t know whether I’m in love with him or not, and I’ll let it stand. Sometimes I think I am, he’s so kind and considerate and—oh, so sort of buoyant and happy-go-

lucky, you know. And everybody likes him here. And he's really brilliant, Joshua. But all that aside, he can offer me what I want in life, and I'm selfishly going to take it. Very few girls marry for love these days. A couple who are congenial can learn to like each other almost like love, and that's what most couples who are successful in marriage are doing nowadays.

"So this is good-by, Joshua, and you don't know how it hurts me to write it. It will hurt you, too, I know, but if you devote yourself to your work—which I know you will do—you soon will be laughing at yourself for ever thinking that you could tolerate Shanty Madge as a wife. Good-by, then, my poet-astronomer. And please forgive me. You know that I never, never encouraged you in the least. I knew better. I knew I was unworthy of you. Don't you understand? Write me a good long letter and wish me well. How I wish I could be there on Spyglass Mountain when the big night comes in June!

"Ma wants to be remembered to you, and says tell you she, at least, will see you soon, provided you don't go East before the eighteenth—which I know you won't. Well, good-by again, dear Joshua. But I'm merely running around in circles. I've said all that I have to say, and how I dreaded it. Good-by, then, dear Joshua—and all the luck in the world. Oh, how I hate myself! And, still it's all for the best, I fully believe.

"Contritely,

"MADGE."

In a dazed manner Joshua looked about his little cabin, as if half-expecting to find Madge hiding somewhere there, ready to step out and laughingly tell him it was all a dream. But he saw only the dear, familiar objects of his daily life—the walls lined with huge tough envelopes ten inches by a foot in size, four tiers high, and filled to overflowing with notes and clippings; his typewriter; his much-marked books; his astronomical photographs above the notes; the several benches covered with more notes still unfiled; and in the other half of the room his cot, the stove, and the table where he prepared his food and ate it. Slowly he lowered his head and rested his chin on his breast, then crossed his arms before him on his work and laid his head upon them. He was tired, it seemed—only tired. And his eyes ached. He had worked too hard that day.

And there, shortly after midnight, he fell asleep and slept till morning called him to the woodpile and the daily routine again.

He ate a little breakfast, and settled down at his desk once more. But the printed words blurred before his eyes, and his mind wandered from subjects that theretofore had held him spellbound. He arose and went outdoors, walked for hours along the lake, moved Argo's picket pin, then returned to the cabin and chopped more wood. In this he took a fierce delight, chopping, chopping, chopping all day long, with only a little rest at noon.

At evening, just as the sun sank behind Saddle Mountain and the gorgeous afterglow began to paint the waters of the lake in impossible hues, he remembered something and rested on the helve of his double-bitted ax. His mind had been wandering back to his boyhood, to Silvanus Madmallet, his mother and father, to Shanty Madge as he had seen her in the skating rink and afterward in the gypo camp—and then it was that he remembered Madge was about the age of his brother Lester, and with a start recalled the date. It was the fifteenth of June, Lester's birthday—and he would be twenty-one.

How had he remembered it in his stunned condition? For stunned he seemed to be, stunned and bewitched by an unfamiliar dullness. Why, thinking of Madge's girlhood had recalled it to his mind, of course. How stupid of him to ask himself such questions, he who always reasoned logically, from cause to effect, as a scientist should. He wondered how Lester was getting on? Why hadn't he answered the several letters that he had written him?

Well, no matter. Lester was like all the rest—indifferent to him and what befell him. He was hungry. He would cook a bite and climb the trail to the observatory—for, family outcast though he was, ex-inmate of a boys' reformatory where he had been imprisoned unjustly, tramp, hounded by Lee Sweet, rejected by the girl he loved, he still had a mistress who was always true to him, who always rewarded his devotion; and the shrine where he worshiped her was on the lofty summit of Spyglass Mountain. And she could and would transport him to another world where, so far as man could see, everything was steeped in brilliant white serenity. They might hammer Joshua Cole to earth, but Cole of Spyglass Mountain was consecrated to Science, and her he would serve to the bitter end. And the great night was almost at hand. All throughout the recent opposition of Mars to the earth he had trained his refractor on that planet and sat immovable, watching for the slightest indication of what he longed to see. Mars was out of opposition now, and in three nights more he would be nearer to the earth than at any time since Joshua took up the study of astronomy. Yes, he must eat a little to fortify himself against hours of ceaseless concentration.

He ate hurriedly, forcing himself to swallow food that he actually eschewed, then

with his camera and other apparatus set out upon the trail.

Slowly he climbed, winding in and out among the giant rocks that studded the mountainside. Night had fallen when he reached the summit and stood, breathing hard, looking down on the desert, across which the shadow of the mountains swiftly spread a black enveloping poncho. The spring winds had ceased, and a stillness hung in the air that to many would have proved depressing. High on the pinnacle of this remote mountain he stood, and for once he felt very much alone, like Hagar must have felt when she was driven into the wilderness. But Hagar had her Ishmael!

For a time he watched the desert as it was blotted out before him. Then he turned and slowly entered the observatory.

He lighted a coal-oil lamp, and climbed up on his ladder to open the slit in the conical roof. Down again, he placed the lamp so that it would be behind him during his observation. By pulling a cord he moved the revolving roof until the refractor was pointing through the slit. Then he moved the ladder behind the eye-piece and climbed high upon it, for Mars was not far above the horizon. He placed his eye to the finder and moved the delicately adjusted instrument until he found the image. Next he clambered down and started the driving clock which caused the telescope to follow the object in its course across the sky for two hours and a half. He climbed the ladder again and took his seat, with his head only a few feet from the roof, and, as the eye-piece was already in focus, he began searching the surface of the planet for the region central to Uranus, Nilokeras, and Ganges, moving the instrument slowly.

And there he sat through the unbroken quietude of several hours, his steady, far-seeing right eye fixed on the glowing surface of the distant ball of soft white fire. The atmosphere was remarkably clear to-night, and the planet at times threw off a glow that heightened its brilliancy and dazzled his eye, and then the glow would subside and well-known markings would stand out clearly for an instant. But he gained not even a fleeting glimpse of the figure that he fancied he had seen before, and upon which he had based his hopes of writing his name indelibly on the scientific roster.

How long he had been on watch through the eternal stillness of Spyglass Mountain he did not know, when of a sudden he heard the thud of hoofs outside the observatory. He felt a quick stab of apprehension. He was unarmed. Was it Sweet?

But a familiar voice now called:

“Hey! Tony! Are ye in there? This is California Bill!”

“Yes!” answered Joshua, with a feeling of vast relief. “What on earth are you doing up here this time o’ night?”

“I’ll show ye in a minute,” answered Bill; and then Joshua heard him speak in a

lower tone to some one else.

Joshua climbed down from his ladder, loath to leave the eye-piece of the refractor, and opened the door. In came a man whose little pale-blue eyes darted a glance of supreme hatred at him, and then were lowered instantly. California Bill brought up the rear.

“Hello, Cole of Spyglass Mountain,” was his greeting. “I’ve brung a—a *thing* to see ye to-night, an’ it’s got a tale to tell. Kick them boxes over here so’s we c’n all set down together. Slim Wolfgang he’s gonta talk.”

Deeply mystified, Joshua obeyed and distributed the boxes over the unfloored ground.

“Set down, Slim,” softly ordered California Bill. “You, too, Tony. I’ll take this’n’, right next th’ door. Now, Tony, get ready for the hardest jolt that ever hit ye. I’ll hand it to ye first, an’ Slim here c’n tell ye th’ rest afterwards. This man, Tony—this thing, I mean—has helped to rob ye of a fortune amountin’ to a hundred and fifty thousan’ dollars. If we’d ’a’ known about it less’n a week ago we coulda saved ’er for ye. But to-night’s th’ last night f’r ye to claim it. An’ we’re ’way out in California, on top o’ Spyglass Mountain, while yer money’s back on th’ Atlantic, three thousan’ miles away. That’s th’ devilish end o’ th’ thing. Now Slim Wolfgang’s gonta tell ye th’ first of it. Start yer voice, Wolfgang.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHEN THE MOMENT CAME

And so under the commanding eyes of California Bill the sordid story was told again—the story of a father's avarice and his hatred for his firstborn, the story of a brother's treachery, the story of the fortune that Cole of Spyglass Mountain had lost that very night.

Joshua sat white-faced and listened, while Mars traveled on its endless orbit, with the faithful telescope, unheeded by its master, slowly following it like a human finger.

Bill rose as the story reached an end. Slim Wolfgang sat, with head bowed forward, his long fingers interfretted and working nervously. Bill laid a hand along the shoulder of the astronomer, and the stubby fingers patted Joshua's coat.

"It's hell," he said—"plumb hell! But it can't be helped, and we're gonta take it like a man. Ain't we, Tony? Maybe it ain't too late. Maybe ye c'n do somethin' to prove fraud an' get th' money after all. You'n' me'll talk that over when we've disposed of th' body. Now le's go out an' keep this bird inside, while we figger out th' most horrible way to torture 'im."

Joshua rose in the same daze that had wandered with him all that day. He laughed shortly as the door closed behind him. Then he laughed louder and louder, and the tears streamed down his face.

"When do I wake up?" he cried at last, still laughing hysterically. "This isn't true, Bill. It's all a dream. I know it. So many things couldn't happen to a fellow all at once."

Bill patted his shoulder again. "She's true, son—dam' true," he told him.

Then Bill shook him as he renewed his laughter—shook him until the breath had left him, and he sat down weakly on a piñon stump.

"Thing is," said Bill, "what'll we do with Wolfgang?"

For a long time Joshua was silent, as gradually the realization of what had taken place crept into his befuddled mind.

"What can we do?" he asked simply.

"That's up to you," Bill told him. "Whatever you say goes with me. I'd turn my back, I guess, while ye cut his throat."

For fully five minutes not another word passed between the two. Then Joshua rose to his feet with a long sigh.

“I’ve thought it all out, Bill,” he announced, “and there’s nothing that I can do. I’ll simply let him go—that’s all. I’ll tell you, Bill: When a fellow has for years devoted his soul to study of the fundamental things of life, everything else seems puny. Look through that refractor for an hour and you’ll get the feeling, too. When you begin to realize the vastness of the universe, and know that beyond the one in which we live lie countless other universes as stupendous or even more stupendous than this one, you—you begin to realize that you are like a tiny straw in the wind—that your little difficulties, disappointments and fruitless struggles on this insignificant ball of stones and earth are not worthy of a moment’s thought. Slim Wolfgang has been the means of robbing me of the girl I love. If I had fallen heir to that money—Well, you remember what I told you about Madge. And now I have nothing left but my work. I’ll wrap myself up in it soul and body—and forget. So I have no time to bother about Slim Wolfgang. Open the door and let him go.”

“But, Tony—”

“You don’t understand, Bill. I can never make you understand. So you must just take my word for it that to revenge myself on Wolfgang would give me no satisfaction at all. I have not fully realized until to-night that I have not been truly devoted to my science. I have allowed other interests to claim a part of my time and my thoughts. And all this has come upon me at once to prove the old adage that Science is a jealous mistress, and will brook no rivals. I have learned my lesson. I can’t have money; I can’t even have relatives; I can’t have any other work to claim my time; I can’t have love. And if all these things must be denied me because I have consecrated myself to Science, what time have I for the petty satisfaction a man would get from revenging himself on an insignificant fellow stumbler on this insignificant earth? No, Bill—I’ve lived in other worlds too much to descend to that. Open the door and let Slim Wolfgang be on his way.”

“Tony, I’m ord’narily a peaceful man myself,” Bill responded. “You know that ’thout me tellin’ ye. But to-night I’m mad. To-night I don’t know what I couldn’t do to that pimp in there. An’—”

“But you haven’t been looking at Mars for perhaps three hours,” Joshua reminded him. “Bill, you can never understand. Let him out, and let him get on his horse and go. But you stay a little. I’m kind of lonesome, I find. You’ll enjoy looking at Mars just now, for he’s very close to the earth. Look for ten minutes, then maybe you’ll understand me better. Maybe I’m a visionary fool, but Mars will help you to decide on that. And—and I’d like to talk with you a little after he’s gone.”

California Bill rose briskly to his feet. “You’re th’ doctor,” he said. “An’ I’ve always found ye sensible.” He opened the door. “Come out here, Wolfgang,” he

ordered. “Ye get only a dishonorable discharge from these here mountains that ye been stinkin’ up too long.”

Wolfgang came out hesitatingly, and Bill led forward the borrowed horse that he had ridden.

Bill stood beside him as he set a foot in the stirrup to mount, and then he ordered:

“Don’t move, fella. Keep that position till I think a minute.”

The gambler did as he was bidden, for his wrist still ached.

Then suddenly Bill drew back his right foot for a vigorous kick—a kick of supreme contempt, about the greatest insult the West can offer. He lowered the foot, drew it back again. And then once more both feet were stationary on the ground.

“No,” he said thoughtfully, “ye’re right, Tony. What’s th’ use? Go on, Slim! Get on that *caballo* an’ beat it fast as ye c’n ramble. Keep goin’ an’ goin’ an’ goin’, an’ never come West ag’in. Tony an’ me, we’re goin’ in an’ look at Mars. We’re men, we are—we’re big. We got no time to fool with you. Beat it, fella, before I change my mind an’ kick th’ stuffin’ outa ye jes’ f’r luck.”

For several minutes the two friends listened in silence to the click of Wolfgang’s mount as it stumbled down the rocky trail. Then all was still again, and they turned and entered the observatory.

“Tony,” Bill began.

But Joshua interrupted: “Not a word about the money, Bill, please. I want to forget it altogether. I *must* forget it.”

“I was gonta talk about Lee Sweet and Madge,” the freighter explained. “Lee Sweet, as Wolfgang told ye, he’s only tryin’ to scare ye into desertin’ yer claim. He ain’t any murderer. But when he gets drunk he may do somethin’ he don’t aim to; so I’m gonta get after ’im right away an’ let ’im know what a fool this gambler made o’ ’im. An’ tell ’im we’re onto ’im, an’ if he don’t be good we’ll spank ’im. I’m gonta take a few days off—I know a fella that’ll take the team for me—an’ go hunt Lee Sweet up. I know about where to locate ’im up th’ range, where he’s still roundin’ up stragglers an’ cows that’ve drifted into the mountains farther south. I want ye to be feelin’ fine for th’ night o’ th’ eighteenth, Tony, an’ have no worries on yer mind. ’Cause I got th’ feelin’, from what ye’ve told me, ye’re gonta be steppin’ high that night, an’ ye’re gonta nail ole Mars to th’ tree. So don’t fret about Lee Sweet. I’m goin’ after ’im, an’ see that he ain’t here to bother ye between now an’ then. And now about Madge. Don’t ye think for a minute—”

“Here—read this,” offered Joshua, and passed him Madge’s letter.

Bill put on his old steel-rimmed spectacles and leaned toward the light. He read

the letter through twice, then handed it back.

“Well, le’s have a squint at ole Mars,” he suggested, “an’ then I’ll be on my way. I’ll get a saddle hoss to-morrow an’ ride Sweet down, an’—”

“But what do you think about Madge’s letter?” Joshua asked.

“I think somebody else needs spankin’,” said California Bill. “An’ it’s up to me to ’tend to that—seems. What do I do? Climb that confoun’ ladder?”

California Bill had not been in the saddle more than a few hours for several years. He was a prey to misgivings when he rode out of Ragtown the following morning on his way to Box-R Ranch. He reached the ranch shortly after dinner-time, and was told, as he had expected, that Sweet was to the south hunting drifters. So he set off over the desert, following the foothills, hoping to come upon the cattleman before nightfall.

In the middle of the afternoon he came upon a small herd being driven to the foot of the G-string road, but Sweet was not among the men who drove them. They knew that he was working farther to the south, but could not tell Bill just where to find him. So he changed position in the saddle and loped away once more, and by night had reached Gonzales Wells without having seen another living soul.

There was a station at the wells where desert travelers were housed and fed, and Bill dragged himself to a hard couch in the loft that night. Next morning he was undecided, but, having come so far, he determined to keep on. Surely he would meet up with Sweet that day. But noon overtook him before he had ridden to Seven Palms, another station, and he had not seen Sweet.

Here, however, he learned that in all likelihood Sweet had gone into the mountains with such cows as had been rounded up in that locality. It was possible, he was told, for Sweet to drive the stragglers along the ridges to the vicinity of Ragtown without coming down to the desert. This, it was suggested, was what he might do, in the hope of picking up on his way any drifting stock that had already sought the green meadows of the highlands. And Bill was advised to retrace his course rather than try the mountains over trails with which he was not familiar.

With the morose feeling that he had once more failed to aid his friend and protégé, the old freighter, saddle-weary and disappointed, rode back. He rode hard, for fear that Sweet would reach Ragtown over the mountain route ahead of him, get drunk, and worry Joshua at what Bill firmly believed to be the biggest moment in the young astronomer’s life. He reached Box-R Ranch in the course of time, and, not daring to rest, set out that same night for the summit.

So stiff he could scarce climb from the saddle, he drew rein before The Silver

Dollar near midnight, to find the regular revel in full swing. A little questioning soon brought to light the information that Lee Sweet had reached Ragtown early in the afternoon with three of his vaqueros, had got gloriously drunk, and had ridden off, whooping and firing into the air, not twenty minutes before Bill's arrival. Bill changed horses and dragged his tired body into the saddle again. And fearing the worst—for it was the eighteenth of June—he raced around the lake to Joshua's homestead and clattered into the trail that led to the summit of Spyglass Mountain.

The eighteenth of June—with Mars riding the heavens only forty-two million miles away! Only forty-two million!—yet by the end of August the distance would be increased to sixty-six million miles!

Midnight—with Cole of Spyglass Mountain seated high up on his ladder, his far-seeing blue-gray eye glued to the powerful five-hundred-diameter eye-piece of his telescope. Unnoticeably the refractor followed the planet in its endless flight. The driving clock purred softly, the only sound on Spyglass Mountain, for the night was still as death itself—cold and still and fraught with an uncanny tensi-ty.

Shanty Madge was forgotten. John Cole and Lester Cole and the legacy left by Peter Henry Florence were forgotten. Lee Sweet and his boisterous vaqueros were forgotten. For Cole of Spyglass Mountain nothing existed in the universe save romantic Mars, riding the sky on his mysterious rounds.

For hours he had watched, but there came no sign. The glowing planet looked as it had always looked when close to the earth. Once he imagined he saw a threadlike tracery, but it instantly was gone, and a heavy sigh escaped him. The strain was stultifying, and few observers could have withstood the ordeal that Cole withstood that night.

With another heavy sigh he withdrew his eye from the eye-piece to rest it, and glanced at the little alarm clock on the opposite wall. He could barely see its yellow face in the dim light cast by the coal-oil lamp, but he blinked his eyes several times, closed them tightly, opened them again, and noted that it was ten minutes after twelve.

He waited a moment, then placed his eye to the eye-piece once more.

And then he sucked in his breath in wonder. The atmosphere had grown suddenly clearer, it seemed, or else the rest had benefited his eyesight. A low cry burst from his lips. For there before him, very faint but unmistakable, stood the hairlike lines of the figure he had longed for years to see again.

Was he insane? Had he looked too long? Was his mind wrought up to such a pitch that it was grasping at an optical illusion?

His camera and the color screen! That would prove whether or not his eyesight had betrayed him. Almost beside himself with eagerness, he clattered down the ladder, got his camera and the screen, and clambered to the top again.

Then a shot rang out, and he heard the thud of a bullet as it struck the metal dome.

Lee Sweet again! Or some of his men! No matter. No time now to think of them!

Again came a shot and a thud above him. The rifleman was shooting high in an effort to frighten him, thinking him on the floor and safe from harm. Well, he was not on the floor. He was high up in the dome, in the direct line of the bullets. Let them fire! What mattered it? He had seen the configuration on Mars which was to make him famous. That, or he had lost his reason. What mattered it? Let them shoot!

There came a fusillade of shots, and the dome rattled. Again and again it was repeated, and all the time Cole of Spyglass Mountain was setting up his camera and adjusting the color screen to photograph the strange hairlike figure he had seen.

He stepped one side on the ladder, at last ready to press the bulb. Another shower of bullets rattled against the dome, followed by a single shot and a lusty yell. Then before he could press the bulb everything went black, and Cole of Spyglass Mountain swayed and tumbled down the ladder, dragging his camera after him.

About three weeks later a maid presented herself before Madge Mundy in the Montgomerys' apartment in Los Angeles.

"There's a man to see you at the door, miss," she announced. "He has no card, and he won't come in. He says he's from Ragtown and has an important message for you."

"I'll see him," said Madge, a strange feeling of faintness coming over her.

At the door she found California Bill, holding in his short hand an open-face silver watch of large proportions.

"Hello, Shanty Madge," he greeted her. "I come to tell ye that Tony's gettin' pretty low. He's in th' hospital at Ragtown, an' I hadta go clean to Spur to get a decent doctor. He's pretty well shot up in the upper works, an' he won't fight back—seems. After Lee Sweet shot 'im—"

"After what?" Madge's head was swimming and her hand grasped the door-frame.

"Yes'm—after that ornery beef critter shot 'im he went out f'r a time, an' then he come back a-ravin' about what he'd seen on Mars. An' nothin' would do but I had to go to Spur that night an' send a telegram to Milton University. I done it, o' course

—seein’ his well-bein’ depended on it. Ye see, Lee an’ some o’ his buckeroos was all lit up an’ jes’ aimin’ to scare Tony. An’ they shot high, thinkin’ Tony was on th’ ground. But Tony’s up on his ladder squintin’ at ole Mars. An’ now Lee’s th’ scarest man in all that country. I’ll read ye what Tony told me to write, so’s I could turn it over to th’ operator at Spur.”

Madge gazed at the old freighter while he fumbled in his pocket and finally produced a piece of dirty paper. He placed his steel-rimmed glasses on his nose and read haltingly:

“DR. HIRAM A. BUCK,
Director Observatory,
Milton University,
Elmfield, Massachusetts.

“Observed at thirteenth hour thirteenth minute June eighteenth with eight-inch refractor singular geometrical configuration on Mars. Latitude seventy degrees; longitude plus twenty degrees. Central to Uranus, Nilokeras, and Ganges. Appeared to be circle with straight line south and tangent to circumference. Very faint. Please wire my expense if larger instruments confirm reality of object.”

Bill looked up into the reddish-brown eyes of the little gypo queen, who stood bent forward, lips parted and dry.

“That’s what I sent,” Bill went on, “an’ Tony seemed to be gettin’ better for a spell. He wouldn’t hear o’ me comin’ down here to th’ city to see you, so I hadta stay beside ’im. Then one day come a reply, an’ I got a copy o’ that here to show ye, too.”

He produced a strip of paper, from which he read:

“Configuration mentioned not observed from this station. Later reports will follow.

“BUCK.”

“An’ then eight days went by, with Tony fussin’ an’ fussin’ an’ fussin’ all th’ time, an’ then come this.”

Again Bill read from the same source:

“In further reference configuration seen by you June eighteenth no reports received from other stations.

“An’ after that,” continued Bill, “Tony he give up th’ fight. Ye see,” he added with piteous earnestness, “Tony he got shot before he could take a picture, an’ he ain’t got any proof. An’ he’s out of his head now, ravin’ mad, an’ sayin’ over an’ over again:

“You’ll come back to Spyglass Mountain, Madge, ’cause ye’re big like th’ great-hearted trees. Yes, you’ll come back to Spyglass Mountain, dear.”

“An’ th’ doc says,” Bill concluded, “that Tony won’t pull through if ye don’t come back. He’s dyin’—seems—don’t care to live. I got one o’ them buckin’ broncho taxi-things down in th’ street, rarin’ an’ snortin’ to go, Madge. Train leaves f’r Spur in forty minutes by this here ole watch o’ mine. Connects with th’ stage to Ragtown. I’ll trot down an’ throw a little *muck-a-muck* into me while ye’re puttin’ on yer hat an’ things. Be waitin’ f’r ye on th’ sidewalk, Madge.”

Another week had passed. In the little pine hospital at Ragtown Cole of Spyglass Mountain lay on a neat white bed, and a girl with bronze-gold hair bent over him. Dr. J. Miles Stanhope moved about shakily, drunk as usual, but with kindness written all over his features. Also the doctor from Spur was there; and at one side sat California Bill.

The silent, bandaged figure moved on the bed and softly moaned. The doctor from Spur nodded to Madge, who bent down lower and began once more the words which she had repeated a hundred times since she reached the hospital. And as had been the case each time before, the hot tears wet her cheeks.

“I’ve come back, Joshua! Joshua—it’s Madge speaking to you. Oh, Joshua, I’ve come back to you! It’s Madge—Shanty Madge. Listen, Joshua—I’ve come back to you. Shanty Madge is back! I’ve come back to Spyglass Mountain!”

And now, for the first time in all those tense days, the dark gray eyes opened wide and stared up into the Spanish-topaz eyes above them. Then, shaking like an aspen, Shanty Madge bent low and whispered:

“I’ve come back to you, Joshua—back to Spyglass Mountain!”

A moment longer the puzzled gray-blue eyes studied the wet face of the girl, and the blended pink and tan of the Pocahontas cheeks brought recognition. Madge bent lower still and kissed the broad smooth forehead. A childlike smile crossed Joshua’s clean-cut lips.

“Then,” said his voice, very faint, “I’ll—I guess I’ll get well, after all.”

Five days later the stage from Spur arrived, and Bill left Madge and Joshua, now fully conscious and on the mend—according to the doctor—while he went to the

post office for the mail. He hurried back presently, a sheaf of yellow envelopes in his hand.

“Only th’ first-class mail’s distributed,” he announced. “An’ looky what I got! Telegrams, Tony—telegrams by the dozen! Read ’em. Somethin’s broke!”

Eagerly Joshua grasped the first and tore it open, to read in absolute amazement:

“Congratulations from Dr. Ernest G. Pratt, of Tabor University.

“ERNEST G. PRATT.”

“What’s this? What’s this?” cried Bill.

But Joshua was tearing another envelope.

“SANBORN, OHIO.

“Greatest discovery in many years. Please accept my hearty congratulations.

“DR. JOHN F. QUINCY, M. S.”

And the next:

“It gives me great pleasure to offer my sincere congratulations and thanks for your recent contribution to the knowledge of the world.

“PROFESSOR HARVEY G. MILLS.”

“Why, what’s it all about?” cried Joshua, a pink glow in his hollow cheeks.

But before any one could puzzle out an answer Dr. J. Miles Stanhope burst in, his cheeks purple with excitement, and thrust before the group a belated Sunday paper. And there in headlines that crossed the page, Joshua read as if in a rapturous dream:

CELEBRATED SCIENTIST VINDICATES ALLEGED
FAKE ASTRONOMER
DR. EMANUEL SCHLOTT, GERMAN TELESCOPIST
CABLES MILTON UNIVERSITY

HAS PHOTOGRAPHED FIGURE UNKNOWN
AMERICAN OBSERVER SAW ON JUNE EIGHTEENTH

SO DIM SCHLOTT FAILED TO SEE IT ON PLATE UNTIL
TUCKED-AWAY ARTICLE IN AMERICAN NEWS-

PAPER THREE WEEKS OLD CALLS TO
ATTENTION

SCIENTIFIC WORLD IS ASKING BREATHLESSLY: IS
MARS A LIVING PLANET?

FIRST TO REPORT DISCOVERY,
COLE OF SPYGLASS MOUNTAIN FAMOUS IN A NIGHT

“Oh, Joshua,” cried Madge, “it’s true! It’s true! It’s true! Oh, my dear—I’m happier than you are. I know I am! It means more to us than all the money in the world!”

“There!” muttered California Bill. “What’d I tell ye all along? Confound ’em, why don’t they watch? What’s th’ use of ’em havin’ telescopes if they’re gonta go to sleep at th’ switch? Damn ’em, anyway! I knew it all along. C’mon outa here, Doc!”

And, muttering crossly to himself, he stalked out and left behind two silent figures, whose tear-streaked faces were pressed together, with the paper propped up before them on the bed.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

[The end of *Cole of Spyglass Mountain* by Arthur Preston Hankins]