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THE POSTOFFICE

—AT—

SAINT'S REST.

[BY KATE HEATH.]

What it must be to be in politics! Oh, politics, politics! What a righteous sham and what an honest pretension you are!

It was Angie Moore's father who ambled up to the very "fancy" bar of the Blackhawk Hotel just before the legislative election of some years back.

"You see, Jim," it had been urged, "you're a family man more'n the rest of us, and it's more fit and proper you should go. Just show him your hand, and tell him the hull population here'll back you, Jim. Speak up and tell him your feelin's, and say if he don't respect 'em Saint's Rest'll be down on him at the polls like h—l."

And Jim Moore had come sixty-five miles of right hard riding from Saint's Rest to Harding's Hill to put in his plea. The ends of his long hair were burned dry and wiry by the sun, and the yellow dust lay in the rim of his hat and upon his broad bent shoulders, and had gathered in every fold and crease of his clothing and every wrinkle of his face. The roads were deep with dust in summer as they were with mire in winter. He had a certain hesitation about him, a little dropping of the lower lip, a wandering, seeking look in his eyes, a flitting of the hand across the mouth occasionally, that bespoke the floating thread of shiftlessness in his nature, the ends of which he was ever urging himself to gather home. Perhaps this was why he had never been able to have stronger influence over his willful daughter Angie, whose eyes and temper flashed together, and who ruled his tumble down house and five wild younger children as they pleased.

"Mark, father," said Angie "speak him fair, but hold on to him like a bulldog. Don't take no for an answer, no matter how he puts it," and then she flashed back into the kitchen, and with the palm of her hand hushed a tumult in its first beginnings, and her father rode away somewhat stunned by the responsibility thrust upon him.

When he entered the barroom at the Blackhawk he was not so much struck with its elegance as he was with his own odd and incongruous presence. He saw his sun-burned hair and skin, the dust on his clothes, his aimless, lounging step, and realized how far he was beyond his accustomed element. There was an air of quiet snap about the room, as though the burst of champagne without its pop permeated the atmosphere. Men with the air of knowing what's what and just when to do it sat round, unbending and relaxing themselves as having but just now finished arduous business; but it was eager relaxation, and like the innocence of lemonade that has a stick in it. A group of three in the center of the place were engaged in suave and smiling conversation, but a subtle sharpness pervaded among them that seemed to the newcomer like the flash of knives.

"It's politics," murmured Jim, and stepping over to the bar he said to the resplendent animal caged behind it, "I want to see a party of the name of Johnson."

"Our candidate!" was the triumphant exclamation in reply. "Brown puts up at the Golden Eagle. Mr. Johnson is proud to receive his constituents. Just in from—"

"Saint's Rest," answered Jim promptly.

"Come to advise Mr. Johnson of your place solid for him, I make no doubt. Here, Jack, I say. Our friend Mr. —— ahem!—just in from Saint's Rest, comes with a pledge to Mr. Johnson. Show him up, why can't you?"

One man out of the group of three advanced, and with quite an air of old acquaintance shook the visitor warmly by the hand, smiled at him from ear to ear, and with great ease of manner and much cordiality introduced the stranger to himself. He made himself so much at home with Jim Moore that the latter warmed all through as having had a swallow of spirits.

"My name is Racket," said the new acquaintance, "and as Mr. Johnson is a friend of mine, he will see you on my introduction. Did you happen to have any little business with him—any business of importance?"

"Yes," was the slow reply, "I came all the way from Saint's Rest over yender since mornin', a purpose to hold business with him. That rayther looks like important business, don't it?" It seemed to him Mr. Racket was making almost too close inquiry.

Mr. Racket smiled a great deal to cover up the rebuke, and grew still more cordial. "Ah! yes, yes; hum, hum," he said. "Fact is, Johnson is very busy; very deep in politics is Johnson; parties coming in by dozens to claim his leisure; immense popularity; no doubt in the world of his election. Obliged, you know to have a friend on the outside or he never could get through the day. Part of his business, you know, must go through me."

It was such a broad hint that even Jim Moore took it, and he said squarely, "See here, Mr. Racket, I came over to see Johnson; but if that's not to be, if you're a friend of his say so plain enough, and I can go home again."

"Oh, now, now, Moore—in fact, I may even call you Jim—of course, if you must see my man, you must; but if you could just give me a little suspicion, now, of your errand, so that I might, as it were, lead him up to it." He clapped his hand upon Moore's dusty shoulder, and held him at arm's length while he looked admiringly into his face.

"No," said Moore, the "mule" in him rising, "I came to talk with Johnson, I must hev no or yes from him, or go back without any answer. It might count him something, and again it might not."

"Oh, certainly, certainly! I'll see you through the interview, and put in a good word for you at the start; but you must handle Johnson carefully. He's easy to hurt."

And so having foiled the "middle man," Jim Moore was allowed to see the principal. It had been agreed at the Rest that Moore had bottom enough to carry the matter through, and, as before said, being a good deal of a family man, he was quite a proper representative. Perhaps Angie Moore had a bit of her strong nature from her uneasy, lounging father, after all.

It was quite a relation that Mr. Racket had to give the group in the Blackhawk bar-room, after Jim Moore had ridden away.

"I'm damned," said Mr. Racket, "if it wasn't a postoffice he was after up to Saint's Rest. What in thunder they want a postoffice on the outside of the world for, the people who live there probably know. Perhaps they get a letter once a year, all told. And if that old duffer didn't say in so many words to Johnson: 'Mr. Johnson, if you'll promise us a postoffice, the Rest'll go for you solid, and there's sixty votes of us, countin' in the ten miles square we'll beat up to find 'em. Otherwise we're agin you, and I hev my instructions to offer the solid Rest to Mr. Brown, the other man.'"

"He wasn't afraid of honest square talk and Johnson couldn't bluff him off nor keep him from saying his say, neither. It was an out and out case of give and take, and Johnson was obliged to come it strong in plain language when he answered. Lord! a Postoffice! Why, for sixty votes they might have had a bank for the asking.] They paid no regard, however, to the delicacy of *my* position," and the speaker smiled grimly as half appreciating the joke of not being recognized. "He fell an easy victim, though, to that stranger and his little game," concluded Mr. Racket.

So it was that a Postoffice was, in time, established at Saint's Rest, for the sixty votes had been duly [illegible] or Johnson, and that gentleman being elected by a majority of fifty, felt grateful enough to remember his promise and exert himself toward the desired end. It was a slight matter enough, but there was in reality no reason for a Postoffice, Saint's Rest being the heavenly appellation of a cluster of not more than twenty houses on the bank of a river which was sluggish and shallow in summer, but a river indeed in winter, swollen and angry and often dangerous to travel, if travel ever came that way. The little village was an old mining camp, and heavily weighted now with the deadness that settles in time upon all old mining camps. It seemed to sleep and dream in the hollow down by the river bank. The few men made garden or orchard, or wandered off with pick and pan, in dull hope to go through the semblance of prospecting, as if from habit. The fewer women washed clothes, wore their little gossip threadbare, and bore children patiently. There had been talk about keeping a school for the children, but nothing was done about it till the subject was brought near to mind one day by Jim Moore's daughter, Angie.

Angie Moore had in her half-defiant flashing-eyed way called upon the mothers of families and stated her plans. She was 16 years old, and she could read and write. She meant to send for a few books, and pick up a little learning in other things by herself; and she would teach all she knew to the children. She wanted money, though she didn't look for any great sum total. From house to house she went, with nearly the same words on her lips, the same bitterness creeping on her tongue, the same energy driving along her manner, as though the lash had been behind it.

The women advised her, but in spite of it all felt that she, not they, was patron. The matter was talked over busily, and finally two or three men went over to a deserted cabin on the first knoll, made a few repairs, such as putting new leather hinges to the door, and Angie Moore set up her school there. Without a map, or chart, or an improved text-book; without much age, and with less knowledge and experience, the "Saint's Rest Institoot," as some one facetiously dubbed it, began its work. The scholars all called the teacher Angie, but in less than a month she was known as Miss Angie, even to her own five brothers. In her unshrinking, defiant way she managed it all somehow, and no one ever guessed the inspiration that lay behind her pluck.

It was one spring day at four o'clock in the afternoon, and the last boy had darted from the schoolhouse and ran with a halloa to be free down the hillside. The little schoolmistress, slender, lithe and dark-complexioned, looked bravely about her, as if to hang her superfluous courage upon the walls, and then without a moment of warning her black eyes gave way, a gray wave seemed to surge across her face, her thin red lips writhed and a long dry sob burst from them, and then she sank down upon the step and hid her face in her arms. The something new and strange that had come into the little woman's life seemed sometimes to expand and burst within her heart with a dull, dull ache, and oh, such a pain. It was the old, old lesson of loving she had learned. Is there ever a woman who has not known its sweet thorn? As Angie knelt there a whole black world shut down upon her eyelids and a weight of care settled on her shoulders. In that one blank moment she felt that she would have liked to toss her life away and rest from fighting the days, and planning her hot brain, in a long, cool oblivion. Her fevered and nerveless fingers drooped upon the rough boards, and a moan that was born of exhaustion, though not of the body, struggled along the line of her dark, slender throat, and died away just beyond her lips.

"Why, Angie, Angie," said a voice in her ear, "I've been waiting a whole minute for you to look up, and yet there you sit, all flung in a heap like a little hint at despair." Before she had time to lift her head, her transformation was a perfect one. "Ah! Van!" she cried, with a low thrill of ecstacy cadencing through her tone. The black world weighting her took wings, rose in air and left her blithe, rippling with sunshine and filled with unheard of tones and harmonies. "I don't care," she flashed to herself daringly; "I shall have this hour of happiness if there is never another one," and then with a pretty nestling motion of her shoulders she said aloud, trying to appear impatient and vexed while her very voice was a carol, "It has been such a long time since you came before."

For answer, the new-comer with one step made her station his own, and the very soul of the girl shone in her eyes as he took her face in his hands and kissed her. "Do you think I staid away, Angie," he asked, "because the rocks and the trees and the old cabin over there were pleasanter to look at than you?" He kissed her as he would have taken a long draught of pure water after travel, returning to the pure crystal of the cup again and again. Her one rarest loveliness, he had told her often, was that her lips were so innocent and new—they were not old with kisses. Anomaly it was, but his attraction to her was his experience and knowledge of good and evil, the air about him of having seen and known. When she told him so, he had laughed a little hard and reckless laugh, and she had felt the strange chill of something rising between them, had shuddered at it and beaten it down, only to have it rise again in its horror some other day. He was the one man she had ever seen with the world's perfume hanging upon his manner, and what was to her that grand beyond of delight, the city, reached out its familiar hands to him and spoke through his mouth. He was like a beautiful, wondrous picture, such as she had never seen, or like a grand and penetrating burst of music, such as she had never heard, Angie said to herself as she thought of him when he was away.

There was something about this girl, blossomed into womanhood before her time, that was like a magnet to the wandering bit of rust off life of man the city had cast away toward the lovely evergreen hills. The moment Van Hall, rascal, card-player, cheat, saw her, his fingers stung as though he had touched her. Now and then a woman will have such an influence. If it happens to be a good woman, praise God; if a bad one, give the victim over to his fate.

Angie's companion sat down by her gently on the step of the school-house, and his glance roved about within the little room.

"Tell me, little one," he said, "why you ever began this business. It was a happy chance, at any rate for me, that brought you so far away from the dwellings down yonder, or I should never have known you. What should I have done off here without you?"

Something in his tone was like an assault upon her pride, and somewhat of the bitterness of the moment before returned to her. "What have I done but help you pass your lonely hours—hours which will, nay which must, soon be gone?" Her voice trembled, half with unshed tears and half with the force that vibrated within her as she answered in trouble and yearning and determination. "It was the only chance I saw before me to be doing something which should set me a little farther ahead. Why was I ever born in my circumstances, or why was I not born content with them? I wish I could answer myself that. Day after day I can't be still and must be up and doing, and by keeping busy to quiet myself. I think I should gnaw my nails to the quick, and fret my soul to fragments, even as I still do, if I could not grasp at something out of reach. Just look about you and see what small things I do, and yet I am driven to them."

"Angie, you are as far above me, I think sometimes, as the serene and shining star I look at through the chink in the old cabin over yonder," was the reply in a deep tone. "I have no such desire as that, and this moment I haven't another thing in this world to wish for than just you and this soft breeze laden with the scent of the pines, as it is." He drew her closer to him as he spoke, and neither saw the pair of startled eyes gazing at them from the flowering buckeye a hundred yards away.

"I have felt a wish to be better, though, for your sake," he continued. "I haven't been a good man, Angie. It has never occurred to me till now that it was worth while to fight against my natural bent of mind, but ever since I first spoke to you in the path that day I've had a sort of an instinct toward something better than I am."

"But you will be a good man, dear?" she said earnestly, scarce understanding, save as a far off shadow, what a vice or a crime might be.

"Yes, I will try," he answered humbly. "Holding your hand, it seems an easy thing, and I feel as if I might succeed. If you were my wife, Angie, as, God willing, some day you shall be, little love, perhaps your influence might so wrap round me that it would be like an armor against temptation. I almost think it would be so. I never dreamed, sweetheart, I could love a woman one-half so much."

A vision sprang before her eyes fair as dawn, of herself as wife; and she saw herself walking down the years in a halo of rose and the glory of her crowned life. There is a path love makes for itself along which the flowers spring, and it leads into a sunset as beauteous as the sunrise from which it walks, spanning between like the one bow of heaven. Upon its way Angie saw herself, and her very heart wept tears of blood for joy. The love we have here, deep, and long, and wide, and true though it be sometimes, is just the shadow cast before of the great hereafter, where alone is the perfect, rounded love of our longing. We can only dream of it here—but Angie was in the heart of that dream.

"But I do not understand," she said, by and by, "what you mean by it all. Why are you worse than I, or than others? How is it you are bad? Nay, dear love, not any is perfect, and you scourge yourself but as the rest of us. I am cross with the boys at home and with the children at school, and with myself most of all. I am filled with the evil spirit of discontent, and a something that seems like unhappy ambition. And so I put the lash upon myself, too, and I will not believe you any otherwise."

"Alas! my little love," he answered half laughing and part in earnest, "my devil is greater far than that. But since you have taken so much on trust—who I am, what I am, and whence I am—for God's sake take the rest on trust, too. It is your faith that makes me well again."

He took her face, grown shy and blushing, in his hands again, and said good-by, for indeed he loved her dearly, and Angie watched him away with eyes shining full to the brim, and then she turned to the rude little school-room and flitted rapidly here and there to bring it into order.

The man, a handsome, careless fellow, and just dare-devil enough to make it an even chance as to whether temptation gets the best of him in a tussle or not, strode up the hill whistling a little love tune gone astray out of an opera. A laugh played like a will-o'-the wisp in his face, and his long white hand caught at a branch above his head when he passed under, which his fingers stripped of leaves as he went.

Suddenly he came upon a pair of staring eyes that met him boldly and steadily. "Don't you do her hurt!" said a voice strained and hoarse, yet high in the throat, as scarce under control through passion. "I've watched and watched, week in and week out, and I know every time you've met her. Don't you do her hurt—bad might come of it for you."

"Well, well," was the light and somewhat contemptuous reply, "I'm glad you've shown your hand, my fine fellow. And pray, who may you be?"

"Sep Wright," was the answer, given short and sullen, while the white, set face grew whiter and a blue and livid look circled about the mouth.

"Do you often do this sort of thing?" the other man went on coolly. "I'm afraid at this distance you haven't been able to hear very well, though you've had a very fair view of proceedings."

"I put myself out of earshot a purpose; but I watched," said the high, strained voice. "I'll watch again. I'll see every move you make, every time you meet her. If you should meet her inside one of these mountains I'd be there to see no harm didn't happen to her. I know how you're hiding in Patterson's old cabin yonder, and I ain't quite spelled out the deviltry that sent you here, not yet; but I'm studying on it and I'll get it. Say you'll let Angie Moore alone and keep the promise, and you may hide where you will as long as you will."

The tall strong man laughed, and leaning forward he touched the small weak one tantalizingly on the cheek with the end of the live oak twig he had stripped of its leaves. With a choking sound in his throat, in a moment the weak man had thrown himself against the strong one, battling at him with a strength strange to another moment, striking out with clenched fists and seeming as if he would have torn him with his teeth. The tall man pushed him easily to arm's length. "What, the devil!" he said coolly, yet somewhat angrily, and while rage seemed to blind the other he cut the white face a dozen times across with sharp blows of the live-oak twig, laying on a red welt at every stroke, then shaking his opponent to the ground he went his way over the hill.

In an agony of anger and defeat the eavesdropper writhed on the ground in the lengthening shadow of the buckeye bush. His blue-veined hands clutched the pebbles and red dirt, and for some minutes he made no attempt to rise. After a moment he lay quite still; so still that a lizard came up over a stone and peered at him with darting eyes. By-and-by he dragged himself together and slowly stood, revealing in the effort one useless foot that hung limp and dead upon the ground. The welts upon his face were rapidly turning to blue marks as with a manzanita cane he went down the hill toward the school-house.

The little mistress was gone and a lonesome silence was upon the place, but the cripple went up to the door, pushed it upon its leather hinges and entered. His eyes rested hungrily upon the rude platform at the end of the room, and hastening toward it he fell on his knees before it and rested his hot and smarting face on the spot where the young teacher's imperious feet often stamped in impatience.

"Oh! Angie, Angie!" he murmured, while the tears dropped and he kissed the spot reverently.

That night Angie Moore rounded and turned a little ball of thought, then sent it rolling.

Father Jim was placidly smoking his pipe as he sat from habit in the corner of the chimney, which now was bare and empty, but in winter evenings glowed with heat and light. Young Jim crawled at full length asleep on the hearth, and a warm, faint odor as of sleep and childhood guided the nostril to the open door of an inner room where the children still younger lay in slumber.

The little schoolmistress sat at a small table with her elbows upon it and her head on her hands, apparently studying a slate upon which she had worked out a problem. She eyed a stray number off in a corner by himself with a steady, intent gaze for some minutes, then she sighed a bit to herself, a little tremulous quiver of a sigh that was given for the love she had received and bestowed, and then she turned abruptly in her chair, her mind having traveled miles and miles of thought.

"Father," she said, "can't we have a postoffice here at Saint's Rest?"

"Well, dear," began and ended her father comfortably.

"Because," she continued, "I need one. I want to be writing here, there and everywhere, and I want to get letters. How am I ever to get them when the nearest postoffice is sixty-five miles away over to Harding's Hill?"

"Who'd be writing to you, Angie?" was the calm reply, yet with something argumentative about it.

"Why, father, now; lots of people, to be sure. I'd be glad to write to mother's people if I could. You've said you had a brother somewhere, and perhaps I'd be able to look him up again for you, and ever so many possibilities might cluster round a postoffice." How a woman will turn and twist to gain her point without giving her true object!

"Well, dear," was Jim Moore's closing reply; but for all that Angie had set the ball rolling. She gave it another toss next day.

It seemed as if the long hot afternoon never would draw along to its close. The twin Mulligans wept tears of misery over the page in geography they had begun upon a month ago, the oldest scholar was puzzling over the problem the mistress herself had worked out but the night before, and the youngest had topped over and fairly gone to sleep upon his bench. But the final moment did come at last and Angie was left to herself. They were all alike now, dreary days that were not blissful ones, and urged to do it by the something that forbade her, Angie started up the hill instead of down it, in the very faint but rosy hope that she might meet some one coming.

She came upon a figure lying on the ground with a cane by its side, and after one instant of recoil she saw it was Sep Wright, and that he had been asleep, but that her step, light and slow though it was, had waked him. He came to a sitting posture, and his smile of pleasure died after its first half of existence. He remembered the marks on his face and shamed and flushed at memory of them.

"Why, Sep!" exclaimed Angie, directly, as he knew she would. "What ails your face?"

He struggled to keep his eyes free of hot water, and the man in him shamed again at his own shame. "Come and sit down here, Angie, and I'll tell you the truth about it," he said with hot resolve.

She advanced at once and sat down a little way from him without suspicion. Sep looked at her, and something filled his throat as he thought how she would feel when she knew what he was about to tell her. It was a grievous thing that she should hold dear that strange man, hiding himself like a secret; but would it not be a greater grief to wound her to the heart?

"Oh, Lord! I can't," he said, with a groan, and he turned his striped face away that she might not see the quiver running over it. In that one minute of time he offered himself up for a sacrifice, and determined that he would stand between her and any sorrow that might come.

"Yes, you can tell Sep Wright," she answered quietly, and something like a dart ran through her. "Yes, you will tell. They're marks left by blows from a switch, that I can see; but who made them?" Her words did not hesitate to lay themselves upon the raw; but a woman can see no courage in a man who has been beaten. She loves a hero—but he must be a conquering hero—and she stirs unconsciously at the approach of a whipped fighter. To come off best in a fight is almost better than being a peaceable man.

Then Sep Wright took up his manhood and laid it in the dust before her. He saw how she must despise him, but he would bear that rather than make her suffer.

"I can't tell you, Angie," he said, reluctantly, "and I won't tell you either. I'll have my brawls if I've a mind, and I'll keep 'em to myself if I can."

"And do you mean to say, Sep, that you stood and took a beating, as a dog would from its master? I'd have—"

"My God, Angie," he cried, "I'd have killed him if I could! But what are cripples for in this world? Just to be spit upon and taunted and beaten at will; and in the very nature of things, physical strength must overpower their weakness, though they be willing to die to be victor."

"Poor Sep," she said, her eyes twinkling with tears. "It was cruel of me to press you to this point. Let us say no more, though I'm sure yours was the right side."

"I believe it was," he answered softly, while a smile crept to his lips; then an embarrassing silence fell between them, and the lizard came from under the rock to reconnoiter, and a locust that had been clacking in a shrill monotone stopped, as though his works had run down.

In a moment, feminine wise, Angie [illegible]nged into the pause, shaking herself free [illegible] strange embarrassment in which Sep's poor love was revealed to her.

"There's something I want to get done"—she began, slowly.

"I'll do it, Angie; I'll do it for you," said Sep, eagerly.

"Well, I hope you can; but I don't know about it. You see, here I am trying to get ahead, and I can't get ahead. I don't mind saying to you, Sep, that I've got $50. I made it myself since I started school. Now, I want to buy books with it—yes, books with it all."

"Books with it all!" echoed Sep, in astonishment.

"I'm going to write to lots of people, too, Sep," she continued, gravely. "I was planning it all out with father last night. There's his folks, and mother's folks, and other folks."

"Yes, I follow you; 'specially other folks."

"Why do you say that?" she asked sharply.

"Just to be following you; that's all. But I don't see the end yet."

"Well, then, here 'tis," she said, concluding triumphantly, as with a coup d'etat. "I want a Postoffice here. I want to have papers and send for books, if I want 'em, and letters, too."

"'Specially letters," he echoed again.

A full hour Angie and Sep sat elaborating her plan, and then she left him hurriedly to get supper for father Jim and the boys. He watched her out of sight; then, without warning, he threw his hands over his head with a woful gesture.

"She wants letters from *him*," he said, "and she asks *me* to get her a Postoffice. I don't see how I can do it. It will be like taking his beating again to find means for his letters to reach her."

But when Sep Wright limped away he had "fought the good fight" again, and conquered himself; but oh! it seems a fight wasted when no soul sees the victory!

"Yes, Angie, dear," he whispered to himself humbly, "I'd crawl over the stones from here to yonder to bring you a letter even from him—though I'd rather pizen him—if I thought 'twould please you!"

No one knew exactly who had suggested the idea, but it became generally known that Angie Moore thought Saint's Rest needed a Postoffice. There was a generous enthusiasm about Angie Moore throughout the neighborhood, probably because she was the only inhabitant in whom a spark of energy struck fire, and when it was insinuated, by whom nobody thought to mention, that she felt this step was necessary, arrangements were bungingly completed with tardy haste, and Providence and politics both favoring, the point was made.

Nobody guessed of the final meetings on the step of the little school-house; of the man who gathered the girl teacher in his arms—the man with the stain on him. Nobody knew of the secret kisses, of the sob and the heartbreak that came at the agony of a good-by; nobody thought Angie Moore could soften to a sweetheart.

What! No one at all? Ah! but Sep Wright guessed and knew, and every kiss stung his own mouth, and clung like a curse there, fastened close to his breath. At his post, day after day, he kept watch and ward over Angie, while his heart gnawed and fretted his passion like teeth tearing at a finger-nail—bleeding into the quick.

"To keep her from harm! To keep my dear from harm!" he said to himself restlessly, day after day, though he scarce confessed the thought to his own conscience. And when that last parting came, he was pale and ill; so nervous and worn that, as he watched the two people below him, he could have screamed and shouted, now with laughter and now with execration, like a madman.

When Jim Moore returned from his successful journey to Harding's Hill he hung his head in shame before his daughter Angie.

"Oh, yes, father; but the books, the books!" she said impatiently, a half dozen times.

"Well, dear," he finally answered, trying to look under her gaze. "I scarce know how it's happened, myself, for I've not the books you wanted bought over yonder; but the money went in the twinkling of an eye, as I may say." He was ashamed as any man may be before the woman he has wronged, and that woman his own daughter.

"Oh, father!" she said entreatingly, and growing pale as she realized her loss.

"You see, Angie," he continued, trying to make the way of it plain, "it was a game so simple and easy like, that I was sure I saw through the trick. The feller was a stranger to 'em all, and I'd a fit him, Angie, but they all said the thing had beat me fair and square, and I couldn't stand against 'em all. It's my first and last wrastle with tricks, dear."

"But it's my money that has paid for your experience," she said bitterly, "and I can never get so much as that together again. I earned it, too, with such hard work, and it took me half a year." She disappeared into her own little room, there to look her disappointment in the face and stare it down. When supper time came she was still in retirement; and afraid to disturb her, the father, who had made such a dire lapse, set what cold victuals he could find before his five ravenous male younglings, and having herded them to their repose, sat down, his conscience yet on the rack.

It was a long hour of quiet till Angie came forth, without a look toward her father, and, putting her candle down on the table, took up her arithmetic, slate and pencil, in preparation for her accustomed study.

Her father cleared his throat, and to his own ears the sound was so loud it seemed as though the mountain must have fallen in half. "Well, dear?" he said, timidly.

"Say no more, father," she answered, and each understood without further words that grace was asked and given.

The subject of the postal delivery was a mighty one, and a public meeting was called of at least twenty men to deliberate upon it. Sep Wright was there, and as he came limping in with his crutch, each man acknowledged, without forming the thought, that Sep had had something to do about this matter. There was but one manner in which to bring the mail from Harding's Mill, and that was by horse. One man and another declined the honor, for it was to be a weekly trip—up one day, down the next, and hard riding both ways. By common consent and quite as a matter of course, the name of Angie Moore had received confirmation as Postmistress by the awful powers that be in high places, and she had taken the new position as her due, without a thought of thanks; but it seemed, when near the close of the public meeting, as though no man could be found to make the trips.

It was at the last extremity that a voice, rather thin and slight, like the body it owned, made itself heard, and Sep Wright arose, white yet with the fight that was continually waging within him. It was a great struggle, and himself had been forced on his knees by the thing he strove with. He was standing, with the help of his crutch, when all eyes looked toward him.

"I'll carry the mail if no one else will," he said. One dissuaded him kindly with, "No, boy; you're not strong enough," and another and another told him so in other words, but he kept to his offer firmly, and there being none other, the thankless task was finally given him.

It is strange how, beaten again and again in a fair conflict, the inward enemy will rise as though, like Antæus, he had gathered new strength from his fall. As Sep Wright week after week rode at a gallop over the hills carrying the mail, the bitterness of his love rode with him. But he took into confidence the pine forest sloping down the mountains; the pure, clear, cold stream shining and gurgling in sympathy; the clouds that enfolded him in mist upon the mountain top; the swaying grass that swept aside to let him pass—and the bond with Nature is one she never fails on her side to keep.

Over and over there was a temptation, but every week the sanctity of the United States mail was still preserved. Every week, as he shook his bag, the carrier heard a lonely letter shake within it like the kernel in a nut, and for the sake of that letter and its answer he made the sixty-five miles each way. The hand of the little Postmistress thrust the knife through him. It trembled with such an eagerness when he returned, it could scarce get the key of the bag in its lock; it searched about within the emptiness for the enveloped treasure with such degrees of hope and despair; and then that little hand caressed the precious letter as though with lips that dripped with kisses. Every week Sep said silently he never could bring her another letter, yet every week he brought her one, and for three months as red as a rose was she for the letter that came.

Then she became troubled, and by and by grave and scared, and after that so pale and large-eyed, Sep groaned over her till his soul beat within him like wings. He would have made it all straight for her if he could; he would have added her sorrow to his own had it been possible; as it was he would ride every week for her like life and death, and bring the letters he hated, though the mountains clustered about his path as many as the stones in number.

Once there was no letter. My God! what a white face she turned toward the carrier when he said, cheerily, to prepare her for disappointment, "An empty bag to-day, Angie. The mail has been delayed somewhere." She blanched to her very lips and struck her hand against her breast several times, and the long, still breath she drew reached down as if to hush a wild grief far below the depth of tears. "I've got folks, Angie," he said, trying to turn her thoughts away. Between every word he was whispering, "My darling! my darling!" and he scarce knew, but the words escaped him. "I've got folks, and since there's a United States mail on purpose for letters, why mightn't I write to 'em? I do believe I will just to keep the mail business lively."

He failed to interest her, however, for she motioned him hastily away with her back toward him. He could see she was shaking with suppressed sobs, and he hung his head and rode his tired horse away to stable. She never gave a thought to him, he said, nor cared that he underwent such toil and hardship for her. But he was wrong; she did, and she hung her head in shame at the advantage she took of his love.

"I don't know as [illegible] try any writing after all," he murmured. "Probably 'taint no use anyhow, but I'd most thought I would. However, if Angie don't care, I don't know as I do."

Meantime the little school on the hill was thriving. The mothers said it was wonderful how their children learned, and with some awe they whispered that Angie Moore, somehow, seemed to make brains to order for her scholars. The truth was that the little schoolmistress was fevered and restless, and longed for a fatigue that would benumb her. If she could only stop remembering for a day she hoped she might have calmer blood, and with strong determination she nerved herself to be the diamond drill which should finally make a way through this mountain of rock.

"Not only must I never receive another letter," she cried out passionately to herself, "but I must get to the point of never wishing for one!"

Yet every mail day she saw Sep ride away, and she would have hung his horse's neck with garlands of her tears if that would have made a letter lie in waiting at Harding's Hill. And when she saw him riding home, she put her hand on her leaping heart to hold it down. She saw the pale face of the young rider grow paler, as the long rides told on him, and she would have given everything but her hope to bid him stay, but for the life of her she could not.

"Just one more time, Sep," she whispered silently each day. "Just one more, and I surely can give it up. But perhaps there's one to-day, and if there is I must have it or die." So, week after week, she saw him go and she saw him come, and said, under her breath, she was killing him. But when she heard the little murmur through Saint's Rest that the Postoffice was no use to anybody, she broke it like a thread, while in spirit she beat her breast to hush her own resistance.

Once as Sep started with his empty bag—he carried his bag empty as well as returned with it so—she looked up into his face humbly, then dropped her eyes, and carried his hand to her lips.

"Don't you be afraid, Angie," he said, huskily; "I'll keep it up till you make sign to stop. It's a better death to die in your service than ever I expected," and then he dashed away upon his fruitless errand.

"Shall I tell her? Great God! shall I tell her?" he asked, in a wild whisper, as he rode off at a gallop. Yet it seemed to him he shouted, and though the days were shrinking and shivering out of the dawn with cold, he took off his hat to wipe the drops from his forehead. Visions of stalking giants rode by his side now always, and swift shadows with oak switches lurked and sprung, even at noon, from out the cold and shining air. The year was growing old, and the icicles were gathering in the sky, but, for all the lone rider knew, it was the month of June. "If ever there comes a time," he seemed to think, among the whirls of his dizzying brain, "when I can tell her what I know, and make her sure it's not told for my own sake, then I will tell her. Oh! my darling!" and on he rode, while the mountains seemed to lean toward each other and whisper and shiver. It was all for the heart of a girl, but nobles feel pangs and delights of the same love.

One night commenced the great thaw. The heads of mountains, like ghosts in white veils, had lifted above other heads, snow-crowned and snow-covered, and now they wept in rivers of tears. Streams as cold as a dead heart swept off their cheeks and gathered the waters as they went. As if with a hundred hands, they tore the rocks, and dirt, and young trees, and branches, and leaped as they went, shouting away, and finally opening into the canyon with a boom and a reverberation as steady as the echoes that dog a conscience. Where they met a broader and deeper current they shot their muddy waters and detritus far within its hurrying bosom, and then there were eddies, and whirls, and spasms of water which loudly hinted at danger to whoever walked abroad.

The little river that floated, as pretty as a ribbon in the wind, by Saint's Rest, fed now by a hundred shouting mouths, was wide and deep and thunderous. It rolled and ground great rocks upon its bed, and floated drift wood and the debris of the mountains, and about it there hung the allurement and horror of a great power. It had become a thing to shun and shudder at, though it was a fascination to the gaze. It began to rain then in pitiless, beating dashes of storm, like winding-sheets. Oh! it was a time to say one's prayers, and stay in doors to keep the very skin from soaking. The steep sides of the high slopes seemed to quiver and moan, and then far up a great rush was heard, and a wide streak, barren and dark red, lay like a scar upon the face of the lofty land where the earth had slipped away. Slighter gashes were cut here and there, and Saint's Rest seemed to huddle and gather itself together in fear of the dangers that compassed it.

A large dead tree came lumbering down the swollen river, rolling and bumping and turning and catching and floating again, battering into the shore here, and sweeping slowly with the current as it was drawn toward the centre. But the bed being broader and shallower at the ford just by the town, the strength of the current was weakened in accordance with its width, and the fallen tree lurched hither and thither, thrown now to this side, now to that, finally butting into the landing, its dead arms catching and holding to the clump of low brush, the bank and the river bed below. Here it lay, uprearing its broken and rotton roots toward the stream, like twisted and fantastic arms of a devil-fish, a hundred ripples breaking away from it, and faint, insufficient eddies sucking it without avail. Now and then it lurched, as if striving again toward the central force of the current, but just by a little force it lacked of success; and so, like a hacked and conquered monster, the land held it by an insecure hold.

In spite of the cold Sep Wright was hot and clammy. He was dull of brain and of eye as well, but he seemed to have a duality of sense. He could see a familiar scene before he reached it, and the real sound came like an echo after the first that yet was clear as a bell. His fingers had so delicate a touch they shrank from any roughness, and yet when he grasped one hand with the other each had a dead numb feeling crawling along it. He wondered in a dull way at it all, yet did not care to trouble in trying to explain matters to himself. He must get back, get back, he told himself constantly; yet still at Harding's Hill held away from his horse two nights and a day, gazing vacantly at the storm.

"Yes," he said, and his own voice sounded far away, "I know there's a letter."

The post clerk stared; there certainly at last was another letter to Saint's Rest after this long interval, but how should Sep Wright know before he was told?

The year had grown to Christmas day, and early in its sad morning Sep was away into the danger with a light head and a heavy heart. He refused to listen any longer to urgent advice and cast it behind him, letting his horse away into a galop as the storm struck him. Harding's Hill gave last good-by of him, and returned to its store-keeping, its gaming and tavern-keeping and stagnation of teams.

Mid-day found Sep warily keeping his way along what had been his path, and night closed its eye upon him wandering yet upon the track. Midnight scarce knew where to look for him, for he knew not himself where he was, but he was muttering and muttering some few words over and over. By and by he laughed and set himself to find their meaning: "I'm bound. I'm going to tell now. I'm going to Angie if it's through fire and water all the way. 'Twas *him* did 'em both. The villain, the villain! Oh, my darling!"

So long was that last cry it held itself till morning broke, and to his great amaze he stood with it upon his lips, close to the bank of a wide river to cross.

He blindly struck his cruel spurs into the trembling flanks of the horse that had faithfully borne him past many dangers, but with a snort of fear the animal started back from the flood. The news ran from house to house through Saint's Rest that Sep Wright was on the opposite bank coming home with the mail bag, and pale and frightened the people rushed forth to warn him from his death. The women and children cried and waved their hands, and some went on their knees and said a prayer as the wearied horse went up and down the bank urged still to make the effort by his rider. "He's mad! Sep is mad" said one of the men hoarsely, and then a woman screamed as the horse, desperate under his command, plunged into the swollen water from a point in full view of the river.

A silence that seemed louder than wind and rain and rushing river fell upon the cluster of people, and every eye was forced to turn toward man and horse, worn and weary before the battle, fighting with the waters. It was a struggle for life, and the horse bravely held his own, but when the current seized him in its might it tossed him, helpless, from his feet and swept him down the stream. His rider had dropped the rein and, fallen forward, lay grasping the neck with both arms, whether dead or alive no man could tell.

It was then, as it was seen all in a flash of time how fast they were sweeping down the stream, a girl with eyes opened to their shining full, set her firm lips together, and before a hand could be stretched toward her, put foot fearlessly upon the dead tree longing to be afloat and away, and ran along its slippery and rotten trunk. It was a deed so daring, and so wrapped about with death, that no one could have done it carefully and lived. The old tree danced up and down and half rolled, and the river dragged it a little harder, but kept by all the gods at once it held. Thank the one great God, it held!

Hunting rapidly among the old roots, the girl's hand finally found a stout one, and, trusting to it, she fixed a secure footing and watched the horse's head. Now it escaped a rock lodged almost in its way; now some drift from the mountains seemed to turn it from its course, and on it came, given over to the clutch of the current, sweeping on to death and destruction. The girl's luminous eye never wavered, and just as horse and man came abreast of her she leaned out over the turbid seethe and called in a shrill, womanish treble that pierced the sullen roar of water, "Come up, Jack; get up, sir; holloa, Jack; now, Jack!"

Almost exhausted, the horse gathered all his strength at the sound of a human voice, and put forth one mighty effort to free himself from his icy bonds. 'Tis a wonderful tale to tell, but he cut the current in twain and swept in toward land under shelter of the old tree, which turned the rush and gave him still water to swim in. Turning weaker and weaker, they would yet have been lost, but the girl ran again along the toppling log encouraging the faint animal with the sound of her voice, and when shallower water was reached she boldly sprang into it, and seizing the drooping rein led the way to land. Quick to respond to the force of her spring, the great trunk sunk lower for a moment, then uplifted by the water, slowly heaved like a breath, its dead branches unclenched their hands, and silently it drifted away with the current that caught it in an instant's time.

More wondrous still the tale I tell, horse and rider lived—*lived*, I say, spite of the thousand dangers that had beset them. Oh! they were willing hands that ministered to both, and soft hearts that made men weep over the task, but never had any before seen such a face as Angie Moore's. It was fair and calm, yet shining and joyful as the face of an angel.

"My sins are all washed away," she said, smiling, to one of the women.

"Sure, sure, you never had any sins," answered the woman, falling back a little, as from something too grand and noble for her to approach.

Sep Wright had a long season of illness and prostration. He was delicate, boy and man, by nature, and a cripple beside; and it was one of the accidents of Providence that he survived what would have killed a strong man.

His wandering wits were slowly finding their way back again, when he began to puzzle at seeing Angie wherever he looked. He called her to him finally and looked her over.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "but you're just a shape formed out of a tree or a rock. Over there on the mountains *he* stepped from every bush I met, and walked along with me, striking me across the face with his switch again, and mocking."

Her face reddened, for in his wanderings he had told the insult of the oaken switch, but she replied, softly and happily, "I am really Angie Moore, Sep. I'm taking care of you—father and the boys and me; and you're at our house, and this is my room. School's let out."

He turned his face away from her, and moved his head uneasily on his pillow. "It seems to me I remember, there was a letter—I s'pose I must have lost it."

"No," she answered, "it was saved, but it was wet through, and I dried it carefully by the fire."

"I must tell you; I ought to, and it's what I lived through everything to tell. You can't think it's selfishness now makes me tell it, when I put myself at stake to bring you that letter, can you? I don't think anything now of how he beat me in his cowardly strength; it seems a small thing beside the great things that have happened. But I couldn't bear to trust you with one who was so cruel. Beside that, Angie, with his promise to you yet warm on his lips, he set up a swindling trick on his way to the city, and as it happened drew your own father into the game. He left Harding's Hill with your six months' earnings in his pocket, and ah! Angie, *that's* what became of the $50 you meant to buy books with!"

"I knew it," she answered quietly, "I knew it three months ago. Father and I had our talk out about it, and when he gave me the whole history of it and the look of the man who robbed him I knew very well. I wrote a letter begging for no answer if my suspicion was true, but praying for immediate reply if we were wrong. No answer came, Sep; and I—I would have given so much for one." Her eyes were filled with tears at recollection of the desolate, burning, longing emptiness that had crowded so many weeks.

"Well, Angie," Sep said, "I don't count that last trip made in vain when I've brought you a letter at last. But don't marry him, Angie; he's a cold, cruel man in his heart."

"If you'd just let me tell you about it, Sep. I've never had anyone to be confidential with in all my life," she said, pleadingly. "When he went away he was to be a new man. He was here for having been a bad man, but I can't realize what a bad man is exactly; and oh! Sep, he was just as apt to win a girl's love as if he had been a good man. He wrote me that he had gone wrong just once, for one five minutes, since he left me, and that was at the place where he first took stage from here. He said he did not know what devil possessed him then, but the thing was so easy he couldn't help it. The old man," and she blushed red as crimson, "was so simple-minded and so easy to be cheated, he couldn't resist him. Then father told me his story, and behold! it was my father that had been cheated, and my money that had been stolen. A cold horror filled me when the fact was plain. Cheat my father? take my money? and I marry him? Oh, never! His past life had been forgiven by his friends; his family had recognized him again; he was honestly a better man; he had resisted a hundred temptations, but even he was stunned into silence, and never dared write me again, when he knew that one sin was done against me and mine. But love does not die at will, and I hungered and thirsted for just another line from him, and I put you, Sep, the best friend I ever had, in the balance against that one line."

The tears were dropping silently over her cheeks as she flamed almost into a passion of fierceness, and added, "But I would never have written him a letter in answer, and somehow when I stood a month ago on that old log, with the river dizzying and leaping around me, and I leaning out over that hurrying, dreadful water, the love went I know not where, and I said to myself in that moment of danger I was free as a bird and happier than if I had wings."

"Angie," said the sick man, and his voice trembled as a man's will at such a moment, "I'm a cripple and I never was anybody, but I could make you happier, dear, than that other man."

"Oh! Sep, don't!" she exclaimed, as he drew the hand on his pillow down to his lips.

"You and me were boy and girl together, Angie; and ever since mother died, and you were so good to her and to me, I've loved you so well, and I'd never have grudged that man his happiness if he could have made yours, too, dear," he urged.

"It's too soon," she objected, "and a woman can't jump from one love to the next as from one stepping-stone to the other." But for all that, an air that was half of mourning, half of coquetry disturbed the poise of her head.

"You can't jump too soon, when I've waited and waited with all that longing shut within me you felt when you pined away as Postmistress of Saint's Rest."

"Wait half a year," she objected, shrinking into a pretty shyness.

"I will not wait five minutes," he replied, his earnestness making him master, and then as he took the sacred lip touch from her, he whispered, "Oh! my darling!"

"You'll never read the letter I brought, dear," he said anxiously, a moment later.

"Not unless you give me leave," she answered lightly, "Pecause 'tis for you."

"For me? for me? An answer to the inquiry I sent at hazard so long ago?" he asked in amaze. "Then it's good news, good news," and breaking the letter's seal, he gave a joyous and hearty hurrah. "It's from mother's folks," he said by-and-by "answering my question as to her share of the money her bachelor uncle was to have left her when he died. It's mine now, Angie, it's mine!"

"It's ours!" she echoed, taking immediate possession as a woman will. "It's ours; and I will hire a teacher for my little school, and I will have books and every nice thing I have longed for, and—and—travel, Sep; and I will always take care of Father Jim and the boys, Sep."

"Yes, dear," he replied contentedly and resignedly, as a man will sometimes before marriage. And so ended the history, with all the action that clung about it, of the Postoffice at Saint's Rest, for it died that Christmas Day when Sep Wright carried his last mail.

The ambition that had made Angie's life a misery was afterward swallowed up in domestic bliss, and the yearning energy that had proved her above her surroundings was satisfied in new scenes among Sep's "folks." Not every ambition ends so happily; not every hungry energy finds food to take the sharp edge from its appetite!

SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS HOUSES.

GEORGE A. DAVIS,

Dealer in Agricultural Implements, Corner Market and Front Streets, S. F.

Mr. Davis occupies the corner building of the Spreckles block, on the corner of Market and Front, and has a large and varied stock of agricultural implements now well known throughout the coast country. His connections are with the very best Eastern houses, and his machinery is made especially for the work on this coast—all fully warranted by both Mr. Davis and the maker. On account of the increasing demand for these implements, his premises have been recently enlarged and improved, elegant and convenient offices fitted up, additional storage arranged, and the stock largely increased by recent arrivals of latest patterns. In farm wagons and carriages the stock is made up from the celebrated Fish Brothers' manufacture, and consists of heavy and light wagons, open and top spring wagons with extension top, four springs or side bar, patent or plain wheels, patent equalizer, Holmes' patent self-oiling thimble skein, and all the very latest improvements, made especially for coast trade. In plows, the "Garden City Clipper" line is fully represented, including the "California Scotch Clipper," "Chilled" plows, several sizes, sulky, gang and single plows, with "brake" arrangement for lifting the plow out of the ground by horse-power, and an attachment known as the "Tule Plow Bottom," an excellent thing for work in "raw" lands.

Special attention is called to the "Furst & Bradley" chilled iron bottoms, which can be attached to the "Garden City Gang Plows." The change can be made with no trouble or waste of time; all that is necessary is to loosen two bolts, take off the steel bottom, and use the chilled bottom in the place of it. A gang plow can be obtained with either steel or chilled bottom, or both, as farmers may desire.

In horse rakes, the "Furst & Bradley" hand and self-dump, strong, durable and simple, easily operated, cast-steel spring, tempered teeth, dumps by friction bands, has twenty double coil teeth, each independent of the other. In cultivators there are combined riding and walking cultivators, double and single shovel, suitable for summer fallow, corn, vineyard or garden work, adjustable for all widths and every desirable depth of cut. In harrows the "Friedeman" and "Scotch" and others, besides the celebrated "La Dow" jointed pulverizing harrow, three sizes—two, three, and four horses; cuts, six, ten and fifteen feet wide. It is extensively used on the coast, and the demand constantly increases. It must be seen to be appreciated.

In the harvesting machinery, the "Deering Twine Binder" takes the lead. The sale of these machines during the past season has proven that they are a success, cutting and binding the grain with twine and giving no trouble in the field.

The "Weyrich Header" is also in stock, and so well known that we need not mention its good qualities. It has a very large sale, and gives entire satisfaction. The "Wheeler & Melick" line of threshers are represented, including "Wheeler's improved vibrator, thresher and cleaner," which was first made in 1851, and has been improved and perfected.

This line of railway threshers and powers is worthy of consideration, especially by the owners of small or medium-sized farms, who need to be economical in handling their crops.

These small machines are in use all over the world among the farmers with small or medium-sized tracts, and are popular for their great saving qualities.

Mr. Davis represents six of the leading manufacturers of agricultural implements in the United States. He is by far the largest importer upon the Pacific coast in his line of goods. By actual inspection of his freight account we learn that he obtained 116 car loads of wagons, plows, headers, harrows, etc., last year, between January 1st and December 1st. We do not suppose there is any one house which begins to compare with him in this large receipt of his specialties. He may not make so many pretensions, or as glaring a show as some other houses, but when one comes to figure up his annual sales, it is found that he is in reality the principal wholesaler of agricultural implements in San Francisco. He makes a specialty of ordering in car-load lots to the interior merchants, and, as he acts as agent for the manufacturers he represents, he is able to offer them as low figures as other importers pay for the same class of goods. The manufacturers, through him, give the dealers the difference in price which other agricultural implement importers add as their profit. Such being the fact, farmers and ranchers will find it making considerable difference in their favor to buy of those interior merchants who thus obtain their implements, rather than of those who only purchase in small quantities from other San Francisco merchants, and thus save this double tax, or dealer's profit, as well as the additional freight and drayage charges.