

The Furnace of Gold

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ically; "but I reckon we shall have to get along with these."

Beth looked the two mounts over critically. They seemed to be equally matched as to general characteristics, since neither appeared either strong or plump. She said, "Shall we ride very far?"

"No, oh no, just a pleasant little jog," replied the horseman. "They call it forty miles to Goldite by the ridge; but it isn't an inch over thirty."

Thirty miles—over the mountains—with an unknown man and her maid! Beth suppressed a gasp of despair and astonishment, not to mention trepidation, by making an effort that verged upon the heroic.

"But we—we can never arrive in Goldite tonight!" she said. "We can't expect to, can we?"

"It takes more than that to kill these broncos," Van cheerfully assured her. "I can only guarantee that the horses will make it—by sunset."

Beth flushed. He evidently entertained a poor notion of her horsemanship. Her pride was aroused. She would show him something—at least that no horse could make this journey without her! "Thank you," she said, and advancing to the roan she addressed herself to Dave. "Will you please help me up? Mr. Van can help my maid."

Dave grinned and performed his offices as best he could, which was strongly, if not with grace. Van shook a threatening fist behind his captive's back. He had meant to take this honor to himself.

Fairly tossing the greatly delighted little Elsa to the seat on the bay, he mounted his own sturdy animal and immediately started for the cañon below, leaving Beth and her maid to trail behind.

The girl's heart all but failed her. Whither were they going, and toward what fate? What would be the outcome of a journey like this, undertaken so blindly with no chance for resistance? The horseman had stubbornly refused a reply to her question; he was calmly riding off before them now with the utmost indifference in his manner. There was nothing to do but to follow and resign herself to—the Lord alone knew what. The little roan mare, indeed, required no urging; she was tugging at the bit to be off. With one last look of helplessness at the station and Dave, who somehow bore the hint of a fatherly air, she charged her nerves with all possible resolution and rode on after the leader.

Elsa permitted her bronco to trudge at the tail of the column. She dared to cast one shy, disconcerting little glance at Dave—and he suddenly felt that he would burst into flame and consume himself utterly to ashes.

THE great cañon yawned prodigiously where its rock gates stood open to grant the party admission to the sanctum of the hills. Sheer granite walls, austere and frowning, rose in sculptured immensity on either side; but the trail under foot was scored between some scattered wild peach shrubs, interspersed with occasional bright green clumps of manzanita. The air was redolent of warmth and fragrance that might with fitness have advertised the presence in the hills of some glorified goddess of love,—some lofty, exalted, invisible goddess, guarded by her mountain snows, yet still too languorous and voluptuous to pass without at least trailing on the summery air the breath that exhaled from her being. It was all a delight, despite vague alarms, and the promise ahead was inviting.

Van continued straight onward, with never so much as a turn of his head to the horses in the rear. He seemed to have quite forgotten the two half-frightened women in his wake. Beth had ample opportunity for again observing his look of strength and grace. However, she found her attention much divided between tumultuous joy in the mountain grandeur, bathed in the marvelously life exciting air, and concern for the outcome of the day. If a faint suggestion of pique at the manner in which the horseman ignored her presence crept subconsciously into all her meditations, she did not confess it to herself.

Elsa's horrid little habit of accepting anything and everything with the most irresponsible complacency, rendered the situation aggravating. It was so utterly impossible to discuss with such a being even such of the morning's developments as the relationship of mistress and maid might otherwise have permitted.

A mile beyond the mouth of the cañon the slight ascent was ended, the chasm widened, rough slopes succeeded the granite walls, and a charming little valley, emerald green and dotted with groups of quaking aspen trees, stretched far toward the wooded mountain barriers looming hugely ahead. It was like a dainty hill surrounded lake of grass, abundantly supplied with little islands.

The sheer enchantment of it, bathed as it was in sun gold, and sheltered by prodigious, snow capped summits, so intensely white against the intensity of azure, aroused some mad new ecstasy in all Beth's being. She could almost have done something wild, she knew not what, and all the alarm subsided from her thoughts. As if in answer to her tumult of joy, Van spurred his pinto into a gallop. Instantly responding to her lit of the reins, Beth's roan went romping easily forward. The bay at the rear, with Elsa, followed rhythmically, pounding out a measure on the turf.

A COMPARATIVELY short session of this more rapid locomotion sufficed for the transit of the cove; that is, of the wide-open portion. The trail then dived out of sight in a

cove where pine trees were neighbors of the aspens. Van disappeared, though hardly more than fifty feet ahead. Through low hanging boughs, that she needs must push aside, Beth followed blindly on, decidedly piqued by the wholly ungallant indifference to her fate of the horseman leading the way.

She caught but a glimpse of him now and again in the density of the growth. How strange it was to be following thus, meekly, helplessly perforce with some sort of confidence, in the charge of this unknown mountain man, to—whatsoever he might elect! The utterly absurd part of it all was, there was nothing else to do—and it was pleasant!

At length they emerged from the shady halls of trees, to find themselves confronted by the wall of mountains. Already Van was riding up the slope, where larger pines, tall thickets of green chinkapin, and ledges of rock compelled the trail to many devious windings. Once more the horseman was whistling, his Toreador refrain. He did not look back at his charges. That he was watching them both, from the tail of his eye, was a fact that Beth felt—and resented.

The steepness of the trail increased. At times the meager pathway disappeared entirely. It lay along rocks that gave no sign of the hoofs that had previously rung metallic clinks on the granite. How the man in the lead discerned it here was a matter Beth could not comprehend. Some half-confessed mood of admiration, already astray in her nature for the horseman and his way, increased as he breasted the ascent. How thoroughly at home, how much a part of it all, he appeared, as he rode on his pony!

Two hours of steady climbing, with her mare oblique beneath her weight, and Beth felt an awe in her being. It was wonderful, it was almost terrible, the fathomless silence, the altitudes, this heretofore unexperienced intimacy with the mountains' very nakedness. It was strange altogether, and impressive, the vast unfolding of the world below, the frequency with which the pathway skirted some dark precipice—and the apparent unconcern of the man ahead, now so absolutely master! And still that soul-inviting exhilaration of the air aroused those ecstasies within her spirit that she had not known were there.

THEY were nearing the summit of the pass. It was still a thousand feet below the snow. To the left, a mighty chasm trenched the adamant, its bottom lowered away to depths of mysterious blue. Its side, above which the three stout ponies picked their way, was a jagged set of terraces, over the brink of which the descents were perpendicular.

Rising as if to bar the way, the crowning terrace apparently ended the trail against all further advance. Here Van finally halted, dismounted, and waited for his charges.

Beth rode up uncertainly, her brown eyes closely scrutinizing his face. It appeared as if they had come to the end of everything, the place for leaping off into downward space.

"Let me see if the cinches are tight," said the horseman quietly, and he looked to the girth of her saddle.

It was found to be in satisfactory condition. The girth on the bay he tightened, carelessly pushing Elsa's foot and the stirrup aside for the purpose.

His own horse now showed unmistakable signs of weariness. He had traveled some twenty-odd miles to arrive at Dave's before undertaking this present bit of hardship. Since then Van had pushed him to the limit of his strength and speed, in the effort to reach Goldite with the smallest possible delay.

If a sober expression of sympathy came for a second into the horseman's steady eyes, as he glanced to where his pony was standing, it quickly gave way to something more inscrutable as he looked up at Beth, in advancing once more to the fore.

"Both of you give them the reins," he instructed quietly. "Just drop them down. Let the broncos pick the trail." He paused, then added as if on second thought, "Shut your eyes if you find you're getting dizzy."

Beth turned slightly pale, in anticipation of some ordeal, undoubtedly imminent, but the look in her eyes was one of splendid courage. She might feel that they were all at the gate of something awful, but her nature rose to meet it. She said nothing; she simply obeyed directions and looked with new emotions on the somewhat drooping mare to whom her own safety was entrusted.

Van was once more in his saddle. He started, and the ponies behind resumed their faithful plodding at his heels.

A FEW rods ahead they encountered a change, and Beth could scarcely repress a gasp of surprise and apprehension. The trail was laid upon the merest granite shelf, above that terrible chasm. She was terrified, frankly. The man and pony in the lead were cut with startling sharpness against the gray of the rock—the calico coloring, the muscular intensity, the bending of the man to every motion—as they balanced with terrifying slenderness above the pit of death.

For a moment the girl thought nothing of herself and of how she too must pass that awful brink; for all her concern was focused on the man. Then she realized what she must do, was doing, as her roan mare followed on. She was almost on it herself!

Her hand flew down to the reins to halt the pony, involuntarily. A wild thought of turning and fleeing from this shelf of destruction launched itself upon her mind. It was folly, a thing impossible! There was nothing to do but go on. She halted her impulse to attempt the



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