

lost her way, she said. Other conversation followed.

Now not even at his zenith had Miles ever become other than he was. As he himself well knew, he was only semieducated. His speech had always been, and was still, of the plain, homely Middle West, regarded as so typical and unattractive by the average Britisher or Bostonian. His appearance, after four years' predominant companionship with the dawn, the twilight, the plains, and his livestock, was no whit more poetical than that of any other member of his present profession. Miss Payton quickly perceived his class. She had followed up only an ordinary cowboy! He was not over-talkative. But he gave the necessary directions with courteous simplicity, even though she had to relinquish the idea she had first entertained that he might be a "gentleman." Probably he had heard the Rodolfo aria on some cattle foraging excursion down in Mexico, where, as she understood, they sometimes had grand opera in some of their larger cities.

There was, however, no gainsaying the fact that he had a nice singing voice, and Miss Payton found herself rather liking him for some reason. If he was not a gentleman, he was equally far from the diametric opposite. Miss Payton was particularly fond of reading character, temperament, environment, from the physiognomy. His face showed decent instincts. On her ride back home she entertained some vague notion of recommending him to her uncle for salaried employment. He would be just the man to look after the famous registered Payton cattle. On second thought she relinquished the notion. After all, these cowboys were very independent sometimes. She had asked the fellow pointblank about the ownership of the ranch on which she found him. He had replied, simply enough, that it was his own. That being the case, only a high salary would probably tempt him, and her uncle, for all his millions or possibly because of them, was just a little tight fisted.

Miss Payton's code was fortunately subject to certain purely personal elasticities. In some subtle way she convinced herself, coldly and logically, that she might as well give herself an interest in life by riding in the direction of Rodolfo's aria again. The distance from her uncle's bungalow mansion was about fifteen miles. There was no harm and less danger, provided she went in broad daylight. The gap between her own social station and the young man's reduced the idea to the level of charitable condescension. It would be safe and legitimate to take an interest in him; like those women in the Russian novels, who rode amiably round over their own and their neighbors' estates.

WITHIN a fortnight, therefore, she managed to encounter Miles, engaged in the task of salting down his many score head of cattle. She rode up to him quite frankly. In the ensuing long and sincere conversation she managed to extract from him the useful advice she had seemed to be after concerning the best manipulation of blooded Holsteins. Along these lines they talked technically enough. But Miss Payton's heightened color and sparkling eye rather increased her personal attractiveness, always and admittedly of high caliber.

To the outward eye indeed she was all that is wholesome, comely, and desirable in the exaction of the average man. If there lurked about the cut of her thinnish lips, the tilt of her chin, something suggesting remote tawdriness, combining the cruder forms of pride and hauteur with the sometimes complementary qualities of vanity, egotism, and self indulgence, Miles was far too elemental, or too inexperienced, to note it. For four years now he had dwelt apart from mankind. He had slept soundly, cherished neither vague nor unhealthy regrets, and been contented enough. He was living out a necessary, or highly advisable, chapter of his life. To him his isolation had meant nothing more nor less than just that. If there had been any yearning, it had been subconscious. Possibly the profoundest indication of a real depth of loneliness unsuspected by himself was the immediate effect of Miss Payton's intrusion into it.

For she fell into the habit of taking the direction of his ranch oftener than any other. She rarely dismounted, and then only to stand holding her bridle; but she invariably stopped to chat. Miles let the whole wonder of it steal softly over him. The blue of his eyes had deepened with the solitude of the plains. He thought her flawlessly beautiful.

Something retrospective in him had, too, an appreciation for the studied detail. He took in the up-to-date-ness of her grace, the freshness of her complexion, the wrought shimmer of her hair. At first she confined her conversation to ranch topics, with the manifest idea of keeping at his level; but one day she told him all about the Metropolitan Opera in New York, all about her uncle's stockholdership in that institution. And then

Miles realized to how great degree she was the real swell he had, from the first, suspected her of being.

BY the way," she remarked, "once or twice I have come upon you singing—singing really good things, you know. Where in the world did you pick them up?"

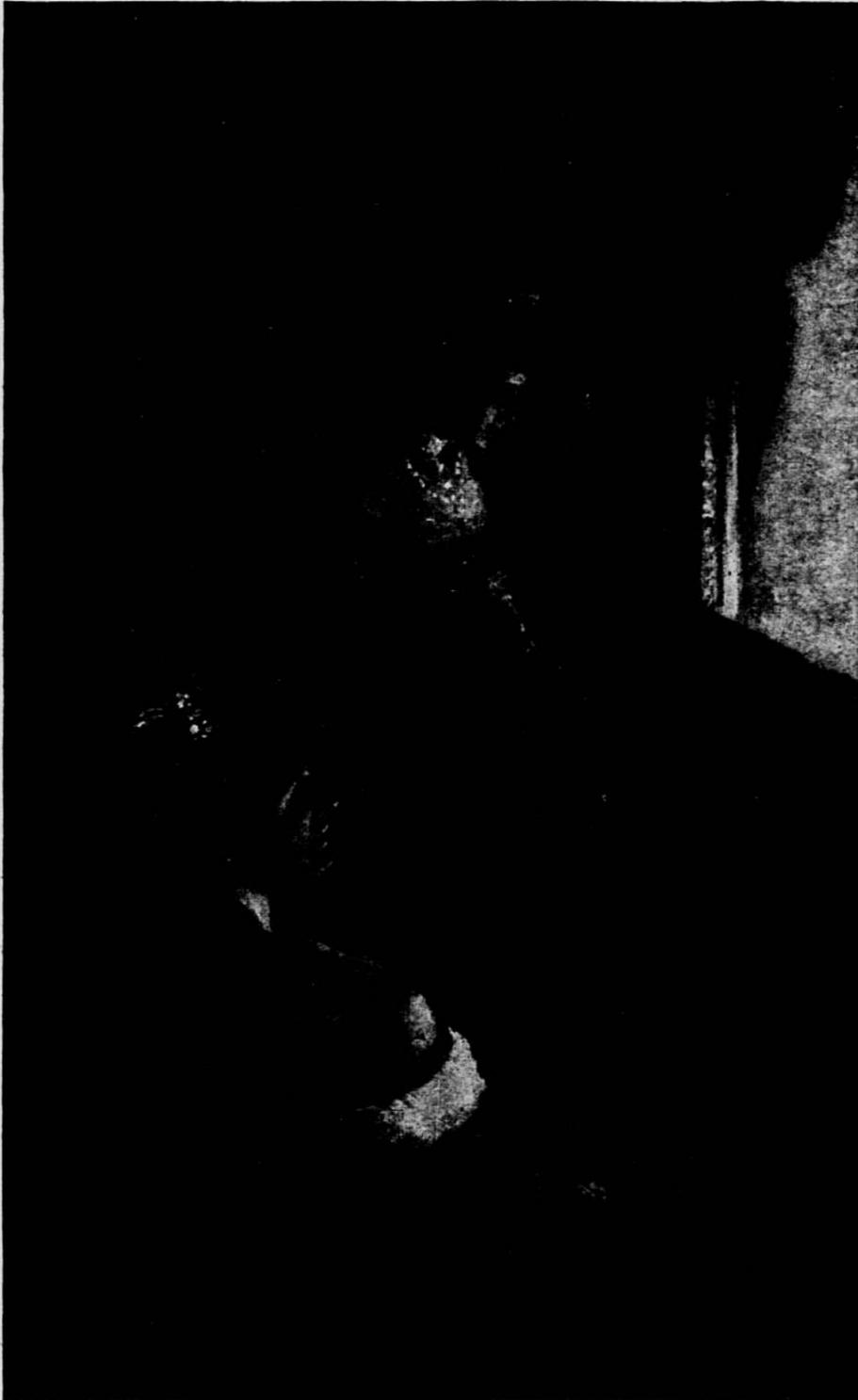
Miles flushed. His heart had its own rebound. He had his secret. Some day he would reveal it to her. So he replied carelessly, "Oh, here and there. I've knocked about some."

"You've a really nice voice, you know," patronized Miss Payton. "Do you know, such voices are sometimes cultivated with astonishing results!"

"I've heard it," he said, and thought her simplicity adorable. He was always unsuspectingly at his best when Miss Payton was at her worst. He was of those virile, straightforward natures who can believe a woman most lovingly feminine when she is most a fool.

"My uncle," she ran on,—"you know he's a leading voice on the Metropolitan committee, and has two boxes right in the middle of what they call the 'diamond horseshoe,'—well, my uncle often jokes that his tenors cost him many times more than his registered stock. Seriously speaking, they often make simply fabulous salaries." She glanced at Miles archly. "Now, who knows, she jested, "who knows but you might do the same, some day, if you were to go away and study. Wouldn't that be romantic? And who knows?"

He nodded, returning smile for smile, as one who appreciates the full humor of a thing. "Who knows?" he agreed.



The Countess Was Present in Her Full Glory.

"But of course you won't," pursued Miss Payton. "You mustn't! This is your life, and it is not unworthy. Don't let me put any such ideas into your head."

"I think I have learned the value of sound nerves," he said.

Miss Payton reflected. At times he seemed almost a person of education.

A BRIGHT idea occurred to her. At the mansion bungalow of the Payton ranch was a certain highly ornamental stand of rosewood, with many supplementary cylinders resembling black lacquer; silent little packages wrapping their treasures of vibration. From this apparatus the operator could produce at will ghost voices of very live singers, honeyed melodies caught in a maze of little graven lines. Why not organize a party and bring this preserved music to Miles'

ranch? Her uncle was now on hand himself, and had brought with him several New York guests to join his niece and her chaperons. It would be diversion for them. After all, diversions out here were limited. On the other hand, for this rather nice cowboy it would be, or ought to be, an ecstatic treat; for he was undoubtedly musical by nature. As the great moon came up she would get him to sing a Scottish ballad she had once overheard him doing, which sounded really effective, even without accompaniment. And he would be all her own discovery! It would be delicious!

That she might reverse the process and invite Miles to her bungalow mansion, went beyond her social conceptions of such matters. It was all right to go to him. It would be a vastly different matter to bring him among her own. In the latter case he must needs be treated not only with the full consideration of a guest, but, if she had him sing, with the distinction of a guest of honor. Then he would have the right to expect other invitations to follow. He might get a wrong idea. Miss Payton's coquetry was like her poise and grooming. It never lost its liberal portion of astuteness.

Tactfully, therefore, she begged Miles' permission to bring over her uncle and a few friends some evening. "As a touring car proposition," she said, "the locality is hopeless. We'll come in buckboards, strictly *à la prairie*, and bring along a few canned tenors, just to see what you think of them."

"It'll be some hauling," laughed Miles, and was honestly delighted, as she had counted on his being. That she wished to bring her friends to him, and the music machine and the song records too, appeared an ultimate expression of her interest and thoughtfulness. He could hardly contain his own secret. And his secret was approaching a material climax. In the left breast pocket of his flannel shirt was a tightly folded telegram brought to him that day over thirty miles of plains by a ranch friend living near the railroad station.

The telegram was from Evenheim, now sole lessee and proprietor of a circle of new opera houses in three or four of the largest cities. To Evenheim, Miles had written following his initial glimpse of Miss Payton. Miss Payton had entered his life, and suddenly, inexplicably, the world had beckoned once again. In writing to Evenheim, he only took the step Evenheim had awaited since his flying visit to Miles' ranch two years before. At that time Miles had shaken his head. He had refused to be tempted. Yet, jocularly, as if for the fun of the thing, he had sung a scale for his old manager, out against the sunset.

NOW, Miles, though far from the inner temple, had been in a sense a votive priest of music. In the old days of the English Opera Company, music had spoken to him miraculously like an oracle, and he had proclaimed the rune with a tongue that seemed hardly his own. And so when once again he heard that echo from the carved rosewood stand brought over by Miss Payton and her friends he found a strange frenzy arising within him. He was drunk with the way that lay open before him, reeling in air castles, like any dancing bacchante swaying along the way of beaten grapes.

To the riot brewing in his soul he contributed his own quota. He sang the Scottish song, of Miss Payton's selection, for them, and other Scottish songs besides. And once, uncontrolably, he added his voice to that of a famous barytone's in some duet ground out from the records, drowning the tenor's dead echo from the cylinder in a shimmer of live exultance. Music kissed his brow and touched it with a glory which the beholders mistook for moonlight. One and all they pronounced him a marvel.

Miss Payton's eyes were dim, a rather unusual circumstance. She touched Miles' hand in the shadow. "Come!" she whispered under cover of their fulsome praise. "It has all come too close—I feel I cannot bear it. Let us walk a little while. You'll excuse us, Uncle, and all the rest of you," she said out loud. "We're going to play water carriers and bring you two great jugfuls on our heads from the farther spring. It's colder, you know. We won't be gone long."

In their absence, Payton, financier, explained the phenomenon freely to the others. "The fellow doesn't look it, but he probably has some Italian or Spanish in him somewhere," he vouchsafed. "They're liable to be musical in any station of life. Of course, we're impressed largely through the mere oddity of the circumstances. These records, even the best of them, are poor competitors, and this Texas moonlight is a magic orchestra. If we heard him on Broadway, it would be a different story. We'd probably find him awful to listen to."

As for the water carriers, they tarried by the clump

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