

Nan of Music Mountain

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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CHANCE AND BAD LUCK FOR DUKE MORGAN GIVES DE SPAIN AN OPPORTUNITY HE HAD LONG SOUGHT AND HE MAKES THE MOST OF IT WITH THE GIRL HE LOVES

Henry de Spain, general manager of the stage coach line running from Thief River to Sleepy Cat, railroad division town in the Rocky Mountains, is fighting a band of cattle thieves and gunmen who live in Morgan Gap, a fertile valley 20 miles from Sleepy Cat and near Calabasas, where the coach horses are changed. De Spain has killed two of the gang and has been seriously wounded. Pretty Nan Morgan, niece of the gang leader, has saved his life and he is trying to make love to her, but receives no encouragement.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

But long before Bull Page reached Calabasas that day De Spain had acted. When he left Bull at the bridge he started for Calabasas, took supper there, ordered a saddle horse for one o'clock in the morning, went to his room, slept soundly, and shortly after he was called, started for Music Mountain. He walked his horse into the gap and rode straight for Duke Morgan's fortress. Leaving the horse under a heavy mountain pine close to the road, De Spain walked carefully but directly around the house to the east side. The sky was cloudy and the darkness almost complete. He made his way as close as he could to Nan's window, and raised the soft, crooning note of the desert owl.

After a while he was able to distinguish the outline of her casement, and, with much patience and some little skill remaining from the boyhood days, he kept up the faint call. Down at the big barn the chained watchdog tore himself with a fury of barking at the intruder, but mountain lions were common in the gap, and the noisy sentinel gained no credit for his alarm. Indeed, when the dog slackened his fierceness, De Spain threw a stone over his way to encourage a fresh outburst. But neither the guardian nor the intruder was able to arouse anyone within the house.

Undeterred by his failure, De Spain held his ground as long as he dared. When daybreak threatened, he withdrew. The following night he was in the gap earlier and with renewed determination. He tossed a pebble into Nan's open window and renewed his soft call. Soon a light flickered for an instant within the room and died out. In the darkness following this, De Spain thought he discerned a figure outlined at the casement. Some minutes later a door opened and closed. He repeated the cry of the owl, and could hear a footstep; the next moment he whispered her name as she stood before him.

"What is it you want?" she asked, so calmly that it upset him. "Why do you come here?"

Where he stood he was afraid of the sound of her voice, and afraid of his own. "To see you," he said, collecting himself. "Come over to the pine tree."

Under its heavy branches, where the darkness was most intense, he told her why he had come—because he could not see her anywhere outside.

"There is nothing to see me about," she responded, still calm. "I helped you because you were wounded. I was glad to see you get away without fighting—I hate bloodshed."

"But put yourself in my place a little, won't you? After what you did for me, isn't it natural I should want to be sure you are well and not in any trouble on my account?"

"It may be natural, but it isn't necessary. I am in no trouble. No one here knows I even know you."

"Excuse me for coming, then. I couldn't rest, Nan, without knowing something. I was here last night."

"I know you were."

He started. "You made no sign."

"Why should I? I suspected it was you. When you came again tonight I knew I should have to speak to you—at least, to ask you not to come again."

"But you will be in and out of town sometimes, won't you, Nan?"

"If I am, it will not be to talk with you."

The words were spoken deliberately. De Spain was silent for a moment. "Not ever to speak to me?" he asked.

"You must know the position I am in," she answered. "And what a position you place me in if I am seen to speak to you. This is my home. You are the enemy of my people."

"Not because I want to be."

"And you can't expect them not to resent any acquaintance on my part with you."

CHAPTER XVI.

of what happened with Gale on Music Mountain.

"I wish to God you and I were on Music Mountain again! I never lived or did anything worth living for, till you came to me that day on Music Mountain. It's true I was thinking of what happened when I spoke—but not to remind you you owed anything to me. You don't; get that out of your head."

"I do, though."

"I spoke in the way I did because I wanted to remind you of what might happen some time when I'm not near."

"I shan't be caught off my guard again. I know how to defend myself from a drunken man."

He could not restrain all the bitterness he felt. "That man," he said deliberately, "is more dangerous sober than drunk."

"When I can't defend myself, my uncle will defend me."

"Ask him to let me help."

"He doesn't need any help. And he would never ask you, if he did. I can't live at home and know you; that is why I ask you not to come again."

He was silent. "Don't you think, all things considered"—she hesitated, as if not knowing how easiest to put it—"you ought to be willing to shake hands and say good-by?"

"Why, if you wish it," he answered, taken aback. And he added more quietly, "Yes, if you say so."

"I mean for good."

"I—" he returned, pausing, "don't. You are not willing to be fair."

"I want to be fair—I don't want to promise more than human nature will stand for—and then break my word."

"I am not asking a whole lot."

"Not a whole lot to you, I know. But do you really mean that you don't want me ever to speak to you again?"

"If you must put it that way—yes."

"Well"—he took a long breath—"there is one way to make sure of that. I'll tell you honestly I don't want to stand in the way of such a wish, if it's really yours. As you have said, it isn't fair, perhaps, for me to go against it. Got your pistol with you, Nan?"

"No."

"That is the way you take care of yourself, is it?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself not to be. And you don't even know whom you'll meet before you can lock the front door again. You promised me never to go out without it. Promise me that once more, will you?"

She did as he asked her. "Now, give me your hand, please," he went on. "Take hold of this."

"What is it?"

"The butt of my revolver. Don't be afraid." She heard the slight click of the hammer with a thrill of strange apprehension. "What are you doing?" she demanded hurriedly.

"Put your finger on the trigger—so. It's cocked. Now pull."

She caught her breath. "What do you mean?"

CHAPTER XVII.

Her Bad Penny.

Nan reached her room in a fever of excitement, angry at De Spain, bitterly angry at Gale, angry with the mountains, the world, and resentfully fighting the pillow on which she cried herself to sleep.

In the morning every nerve was on edge. When her Uncle Duke, with his chopping utterance, said something short to her at their very early breakfast he was surprised by an answer equally short. Her uncle retorted sharply. A second curt answer greeted his rebuff, and while he stared at her, Nan left the table and the room.

Duke, taking two of the men, started that morning for Sleepy Cat, with a bunch of cattle. He rode a fractious horse, infuriated, as his horses frequently were, by his brutal treatment, bolted in a moment unguarded by his master, and flung Duke on his back in a strip of lava rocks.

The old man—in the mountains a man is called old after he passes forty—was heavy, and the fall a serious one. He picked himself up while the men were recovering his horse, knocked the horse over the head with a piece of jagged rock when the frightened beast was brought back, climbed into the saddle again, and rode all the way into town.

But when his business was done, Duke, too, was done. He could neither sit a horse, nor sit in a wagon. Sleepy Cat was stirred at the news, and that the man who had defied everybody in the mountains for twenty years should have been laid low and sent to the hospital by a mere broncho was the topic of many comments. De Spain, who was at Calabasas, knew Nan would not be alarmed should her uncle not return that night. But early in the morning a messenger from McAlpin rode to her with a note telling her of the accident.

Whatever his vices, Duke had been a good protector to his dead brother's child. He had sent her to good schools and tried to revive in her, despite her untoward surroundings, the better traditions of the family as it had once flourished in Kentucky. Nan took the saddle for Sleepy Cat in haste and alarm. When she reached her uncle's bedside she understood how seriously he had been hurt, and the doctor's warnings were not needed to convince her he must have care.

Duke refused to let her leave him, in any case, and Nan relieved the nurse, and what was of equal moment, made herself custodian of the cash in hand before Duke's town companions could get hold of it. Occasional trips to the gap were necessary as the weeks passed and her uncle could not be moved. These Nan had feared as threatening an encounter either by accident, or on his part designed, with De Spain. But the impending encounter never took place. De Spain, attending closely to his own business, managed to keep accurate track of her whereabouts without getting in her way. She had come to Sleepy Cat dreading to meet him and fearing his influence over her, but this apprehension, with the passing of a curiously brief period, dissolved into a confidence in her ability to withstand further interference, on anyone's part, with her feelings.

Gale Morgan rode into town frequently, and Nan at first painfully apprehended hearing sometime of a deadly duel between her truculent gap admiral and her persistent town consort—who was more considerate and better mannered, but no less dogged, and, in fact, a good deal more difficult to handle.

As to the boisterous mountain man, his resolute little cousin made no secret of her detestation of him. She denied and defied him as openly as a girl could, and heard his threats with continued indifference. She was quite alone, too, in her fear of any fatal meeting between the two men who seemed determined to pursue her.

The truth was that after Calabasas, De Spain, from Thief River to Sleepy Cat, was a marked man. None sought to cross his path or his purposes, and neither the town hunts of Calabasas nor those of their Morgan Gap sympathizers had any champion disposed to follow too closely the alert Medicine Bend railroad.

In and about the hospital, and in the town itself, Nan found the chief obstacle to her peace of mind in the talk she could not always avoid hearing about De Spain. Convalescents in the corridors, practically all of them men, never gathered in sunny corners or at the tables in the dining room without

De Spain's name coming in some way into the talk, to be followed with varying circumstantial accounts of what really had happened that day at Calabasas.

And with all the known escapades in which he had figured, exhausted as topics, by long-winded commentators, more or less hazy stories of his earlier experiences at Medicine Bend in the company of Whispering Smith were dragged into the talk. One conspicuous stage-guard at the hospital told a story one night at supper about him that chilled Nan again with strange fears, for she knew it to be true. He had had it from McAlpin himself, so the guard said, that De Spain's father had long ago been shot down from ambush by a cattleman and that Henry de Spain had sworn to find that man and kill him. And it was hinted pretty strongly that De Spain had information when he consented to come to Sleepy Cat that the assassin still lived, and lived somewhere around the head of the sinks.

On that very evening it chanced the doctor came late. When he walked in he asked her if she knew it was Frontier day, and reminded her that just a year ago she had shot against Henry de Spain and beaten the most dangerous man and the deadliest shot on the mountain divide in her rifle match.

How he had grown in the imagination of Sleepy Cat and Music Mountain, she said to herself—while the doctor talked to her uncle—since that day a year ago! Then he was no more than an unknown and discomfited marksman from Medicine Bend, beaten by a mountain girl—now the most talked-of man in the high country, and the suspicion would sometimes intrude itself with pride into her mind, that she who never mentioned his name when it was discussed before her, really knew and understood him better than any of those that talked so much—that she had at least one great secret with him alone.

When leaving, the doctor wished to send over from his office medicine for her uncle. Nan offered to go with him, but the doctor said it was pretty late and Main street pretty noisy—he preferred to find a messenger. When there came a rap on the half-open door, she went forward to take the medicine from the messenger and saw, standing before her in the hall, De Spain.

She struck back as if struck. She tried to speak. Her tongue refused its office. De Spain held a package out in his hand. "Doctor Torpy asked me to give you this."

"Doctor Torpy? What is it?"

"I really don't know—I suppose it is medicine." She heard her uncle turn in his bed at the sound of voices. Thinking only that he must not at any cost see De Spain, Nan stepped quick-

ly into the hall and faced the messenger. "I was over at the doctor's office just now," continued her visitor evenly; "he asked me to bring this down for your uncle." She took the package with an incoherent acknowledgment. Without letting her eyes meet his, she was conscious of how fresh and clean and strong he looked, dressed in a livelier manner than usual—a partly cowboy effect, with a broader hat and a gayer tie than he ordinarily affected. De Spain kept on speaking: "The telephone girl in the office downstairs told me to come right up. How is your uncle?"

She regarded him wonderingly. "He has a good deal of pain," she answered quietly.

"Too bad he should have been hurt in such a way. Are you pretty well, Nan?" She thanked him.

"Stay here a good deal, do you? I'll bet you don't know what day this is?"

Nan looked up the corridor but she answered to his point: "You'd lose."

"It's our anniversary," she darted a look of indignant disclaimer at him. But in doing so she met his eyes. "Have you seen the decorations in Main street? Come to the door just a minute and see the way they've lighted the arches." She knew just the expression of his eyes that went with that tone. She looked vexedly at him to confirm her suspicion. Sure enough there in the brown part and in the lids, it was, the most troublesome possible kind of an expression—hard to be resolute against. Her eyes fell away, but some damage had been done. He did not say another word. None seemed necessary. He just kept still and something—no one could have said just what—seemed to talk for him to poor defenseless Nan. She hesitated helplessly. "I can't leave uncle," she objected at last.

"Ask him to come along."

Her eyes fluttered about the dimly lighted hall. "I ought not to leave." "I'll stay here at the door while you go."

Irresolute, she let her eyes rest again for a fraction of a second on his eyes; when she drew a breath after that pause everything was over. "I'd better give him his medicine first," she said, looking toward the sickroom door.

His monosyllabic answer was calm: "Do." Then she laid her hand on the knob of the door to enter the room: "Can I help any?"

"Oh, no!" she cried indignantly. "He'll stay here."

Nan disappeared. Lounging against the window sill opposite the door, he waited. After a long time the door was stealthily reopened. Nan tiptoed out. She closed it softly behind her: "I waited for him to go to sleep," she explained as she started down the corridor with De Spain. "He's had so much pain today—I hope he sleeps."

"I hope so, too," exclaimed De Spain fervently.

Nan ignored the implication. She looked straight ahead. She had nothing to say. De Spain, walking beside her, devoured her with his eyes; listened to her footfalls; tried to make talk; but Nan was silent.

Standing on the wide veranda outside the front door, she assented to the beauty of the distant illumination, but not enthusiastically. De Spain declared it could be seen very much better from the street below. Nan thought she could see very well where they stood. But by this time she was answering questions—dryly, it is true, and in monosyllables, but answering. De Spain leading the way a step or two forward at a time, crossed her down the driveway.

She stood again irresolute, he drinking in the fragrance of her presence after the long separation and playing her reluctance guardedly. "Do you know," she exclaimed with sudden resentment, "you make it awfully hard to be mean to you?"

With a laugh he caught her hand and made her walk down the hospital steps. "You may be as mean as you like," he answered indifferently. "Only, never ask me to be mean to you."

"I wish to heaven you would be," she retorted.

"Do you remember," he asked, "what we were doing a year ago today?"

"No." Before he could speak again she changed her answer: "Yes, I do remember. If I said 'no' you'd be sure to remind me of what we were doing. We can't see as well here as we could from the steps."

"But from here, you have the best view in Sleepy Cat of Music Mountain."

"We didn't come out here to see Music Mountain."

"I come here often to look at it. You won't let me see you—what can I do but look at where you live? How long are you going to keep me away?"

Nan did not answer. He urged her to speak. "You know very well it is my people that will never be friendly with you," she replied. "How can I be?"

They were passing a lawn settee. He sat down. She would not follow. She stood in a sort of protest at his side, but he did not release her hand. "I'll tell you how you can be," he returned. "Make me one of your people."

"That never can be," she declared stubbornly. "You know it as well as I do. Why do you say such things?" she demanded, drawing away her hand.

"Do you want to know?"

"No."

"It's because I love you."

She strove to command herself. "Whether you do or not can't make any difference," she returned steadily. "We are separated by everything. There's a gulf between us. It never can be crossed. We should both of us be wretched if it ever were crossed."

He had risen from the bench and caught her hand. "It's because we haven't crossed it we're wretched," he said determinedly. "Cross it with me now!" He caught her in his arms. She struggled to escape. She knew what was coming and fought to keep her face from him. With resistless strength, and yet carefully as a mother with an obstinate child, he held her slight body against his breast, relentlessly drawing her head closer. "Let me go!" she panted, twisting her averted head from the hollow of his arm. Drinking in the wine of her frightened breath, he bent over her in the darkness until his pulsing engerness linked her warm lips to his own. She had surrendered to her first kiss.

He spoke. "The gulf's crossed. Are you so awfully wretched?"

They sank together down on the bench. "What," she faltered, "will become of me now?"

"You are better off now than you ever were, Nan. You've gained this moment a big brother, a lover you can drag around the world after you with a piece of thread."

"You act as if I could."

"I mean it; it's true. I'm pledged to you forever—you, to me forever. We'll keep our secret till we can manage things; and we will manage them. Everything will come right, Nan, because everything must come right."

"I only hope you are not wrong," she murmured, her eyes turned toward the somber mountains.

After this important turn of affairs, De Spain lays plans to overcome Nan's tribe and marry her. Big developments are described in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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His One Thought.

"New York Waiters" said Dr. W. W. Campbell, director of the Lick observatory, during the sixty-ninth session of the Association for the Advancement of Science, "think too little about good service and too much about gouging you out of an enormous gratuity."

"I had a very typical experience with a waiter in a Fifth avenue restaurant the other day.

"Got any celery?" I said to him.

"He gave a great start. Then he bent down and whispered in my ear: 'No, sir. Ye got to rely entirely on yer tips here.'"

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