The Coyote

By James Oliver Curwood

"You see, Miss Rodney, it isn't a small job—this blowing up of a mountain. It's my first 'coyote,' and I hope it works. It means a lot to me."

Philip Dalton, eleven months out of an engineering college, looked at his watch, and then across at the grim ugliness of the black mountain of rock which lay in the path of the new Trans-continental.

"We'll know in a little less than four hours," he said, and from the mountain, fired in the last glow of sunset, his eyes turned to the girl. "She goes up at nine o'clock sharp to-night. It will be a beautiful piece of fireworks."

The vice-president's daughter was standing with her back to him, her slim figure profiled against the crimson light hovering still over the western wilderness, the light breeze tossing shining wisps of her golden hair about her face and shoulders. The others had gone.

For the first time since she and Dalton had met each other a month before, they were alone. The fact thrilled Philip, and he looked at her unobserved, his face flushing with the emotions which she stirred within him, his eyes filled with the love which he would never have dared to let her see. They had been together often during this month, but there had always been some one else with them—her father, some of his guests, or her fiancé, the little Englishman who was giving her a title.

They had never been alone, like this, and Philip squared his strong young shoulders and drew in deep breaths of the keen evening air, and forgot that he was only one of the half dozen young engineers in camp, at a hundred and fifty a month.

For a little longer Miss Rodney stood with her back to him, looking off into the thousand miles of peopleless waste through which the builders of the new Trans-continental were driving their thin lines of steel. When she turned to him there was a wistful look in her eyes.

"It's wonderful—wonderful," she said. "Oh, what can't you do—you great big strong men who WORK!"

Her voice, her eyes, the flush in her cheeks were other than he had ever known them before.

"I'm sorry that I'm going away to-morrow," she continued, and there was a tone of bitterness in her words. "I've never seen this big, glorious world before. It's the first time I've ever known real MEN!"

He felt a throbbing joy in his breast that held him speechless.

"And you really believe that you can blow up that mountain?"

"To-night, at nine o'clock, Miss Rodney."

"And you—YOU are doing it!"

It was not a question. Wonder, delight, admiration shone in her eyes.

"I'm only the engineer," he replied. "I've superintended the building of the coyote. See that other knob of the mountain off there? Billinger has had charge of that. His coyote goes up at eight-forty-five, mine at nine."

"I wish I could see it," she exclaimed suddenly.

"You can!" The words shot from him with a suddenness that deepened the tan of wind and sun in his face. "There is still time. I will take you down now, if you will let me, Miss Rodney."

"I wanted to go the other day, but Mr. Chelton said that it was no place for a woman."

Her lips tightened a little. Chelton was the man she was to marry.

"Will you go?" he asked. "Will you look at MY coyote?"

"Yes."

She laughed at the unconcealed pleasure in his face. Her blue eyes dazzled him with the sudden mischievous excitement that leaped into them.

"We'll begin right here," he exclaimed. "You see these wires, Miss Rodney? One runs a quarter of a mile over there to my coyote, the other to Billinger's. At the other end of this wire—mine—there are two hundred cases of dynamite and a hundred and fifty sacks of powder. To-night we will bring an electric battery up to this rock, attach the wire, and when you press the button the mountain blows up. Do you understand?"

"I see, I see," she cried softly, leaning close to him as he picked up the ends of the wires. "I wonder—" She looked at him with a sudden daring desire in her eyes. "I wonder if they'd let ME press the button to your coyote?"

His hands trembled as he replaced the wires.

"I—I'd be the happiest man in the camp if you would," he said.

"I will, if they'll let me."

"They——"

"I mean my father, and Mr. Chelton."

Again he saw her lips tighten.

He led the way down the ridge into the little valley that lay between them and the mountain. The way was rough and filled with masses of broken trap and boulders. In one place he held back his hand to her, and she gave him her own, laughing into his eyes.

"What WOULD they say?" she demanded.

He knew whom she meant by THEY, and he laughed back at her, with a thrill of pleasure which she could not fail to see.

A somber gloom had begun to shroud the black wall of the mountain when they came to the mouth of the coyote. The opening was about four feet square. Philip went in first, and the girl followed him. The blackness of night lay ahead of them. The girl's hand clung suddenly to his arm, and he felt her shudder.

"Ugh! it's dark— and cold!"

"There's a lantern here," he said. "I'll light it."

In the glow of the light the girl's face shone pale and tense. They had gone twenty paces in the chamber. Suddenly he stopped.

"You're not afraid, are you?" he asked.

"No-o-o-o—not afraid. Only—two hundred cases of dynamite——"

He laughed again, with a joyous ring in his voice, and in this moment, as they stood alone under the mountain, with the faint glow of the lantern lighting up their faces, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to take the little hand that still clung to his arm.

"It can't hurt us," he said. "You could build a bonfire in here and nothing would happen. Look—" He held the lantern high above his head, and she saw that the rock wall of the chamber was four or five feet above them. "The dynamite and the powder are under us," he went on, "with the exception of fifty cases which are piled up at the end of this chamber. There's ten feet of space here, and the chamber is twenty feet wide. It runs back a hundred yards under the mountain. The dynamite and the powder are covered over with six feet of cement and broken rock. The wire goes under ground just outside the mouth of the chamber, and causes the explosion from BENEATH. Now—" He was talking to her eagerly in his enthusiasm. "Now—by leaving this air-chamber—we will get more than one explosion. There will be three or four, where if there were no air-chamber, and no vent, there would be but ONE, and we would lose three times the explosive force we will now get. The first or second explosion will explode the fifty cases of dynamite back there at the end of the chamber. By George, it ought to rip thunder out of the mountain!"

"By George, IT WILL!" she cried, and for an instant he felt her fingers tighten about his own.

"I—I beg your pardon—" he stammered.

"For what?" she demanded. "Because you can work up enthusiasm enough in real work to FORGET YOURSELF? It's glorious! I wish I were a man. If I were I'd—I'd do something—something big—like blowing up mountains, building railroads——"

"You really think it's big?" he asked in a whisper. "I thought—you know——"

"Yes, I know what you thought," the girl interrupted, as he hesitated. "Everyone thinks the same. If I were a man I'd BE a man!"

This time he could not see that curious tightening of her lips.

"I'll show you the dynamite," he suggested. "You're not afraid?"

"No."

He led her deeper into the chamber. No sound came to them now. In the intensity of the silence he could hear the girl at his side breathing quickly, and when he raised the lantern above his head he saw that her eyes were wide open, and their pupils big and dark. A moment more and the lantern glow began to reveal row upon row of boxes in their path.

"That's the dynamite," he said, and his voice sounded hollow and unreal.

"Ugh! shuddered his companion, and he felt her pressing closer to him. Almost in the same breath she clutched his arm with her free hand. "WHAT WAS THAT?"

"Nothing," he began—and stopped.

He had heard the sound, faint at first, like a shovelful of gravel falling upon the rock floor behind them. It was followed now by a strange rushing sound that seemed to send a throb through the mountain, and Philip whirled toward the mouth of the coyote. Back there he should still have seen the pale light of day filtering through the outlet. In place of that there was the blackness of night. He held the lantern behind him, and looked hard. It was still black, and there rushed over him a feeling of horror. If he had been alone he would have cried out, and would have run like a madman to the place where the light should have been. In a flash he knew what had happened. A rock had loosened over the mouth of the chamber, letting down a slide of rock and earth. They were shut in! He tried to speak calmly, but Miss Rodney had felt the thrill of horror that passed like an electric shock through his body.

"I guess it was a little dirt falling over the mouth of the tunnel," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to soil your dress getting out, Miss Rodney, and incidentally you'll have the pleasure of seeing me work for a few minutes."

Miss Rodney did not reply as they retraced their steps. The lantern light revealed the coyote vent choked with earth and broken trap, and when Philip saw the trap, wedged and crushed in the hole, he placed the lantern on the floor, so that the girl could not see his face. He dared not speak for a moment, and turned from her to strip off his coat. With a little cry Miss Rodney sprang to the lantern, and in another moment she was holding it close to his face, staring into his horror-filled eyes. His face was as white as death, and his lips were set in a hard, tense line. In the girl's face Philip did not see what he had expected to see. She said nothing. Her eyes were almost black. The lantern shook in her hand. He knew that she had seen in his face all that he could have told her, and yet in her own there was none of the weakness that he had feared. It was like a white cameo in the half gloom.

He turned from her and began to work, while she held the lantern at his back. At first he made easy progress into the loose trap. Then he came to the wedged chunks, and he knew that he was fighting against a wall almost as solid as the mountain itself. As an engineer he knew the force and weight that it had taken to choke the mouth of the coyote in this way. Outside there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of tons of rock and earth. But he did not quit. Something seemed to break in his head. Only the presence of Miss Rodney kept him from shouting—from shrieking out in his despair for human help, though his voice would have died in the heart of the mountain. He rolled and tossed back ton after ton of rock. His hands were torn and bleeding. The knife-edged trap ripped the arms of his flannel shirt into shreds. Beads of water ran down his face—a sweat of horror more than of exertion. He worked—because he did not want to face the girl, and because there always lingers a hope—one chance in ten thousand—even in the face of death. He knew there was no more than that chance. A little later he saw that there was no use of continuing the hopeless fight. Rocks which ten men could not have moved barred his way. He straightened himself, and with his pocket handkerchief wiped the sweat and dirt from his face. Before he had looked at her, Miss Rodney put her hand on his bruised and naked arm. When he turned she held the lantern on a level with their faces. There was no need of words—of explanations. For three-quarters of an hour she had watched him fight in the face of that wall of rock and earth with a strength which she had never before seen in a man.

"You've done splendidly," she said, "but I don't believe that you can go on."

"No—I can't go on," he said, knowing that she was demanding the truth of him. "I can't go on. We're shut in. Oh, my God—" His panting breath sounded terrible in the death-like stillness of the chamber, and suddenly he caught the hand that was on his arm and crushed it almost fiercely to his breast. "If I had ten thousand lives I'd give them up—every one—if you were out there—and I was in here—alone!"

"I know you would," she replied, and her voice was steadier than his. "I've been watching you, and I KNOW. It's because you're of that sort that I'm—I'm—NOT AFRAID."

"But you don't understand," he said. "A thousand men——"

"I do understand," she interrupted. "What time is it?"

He took out his watch. Her soft hair touched his cheek as they bent together over the timepiece. It was a quarter after seven o'clock.

"An hour and forty-five minutes," said the girl. A shudder ran through her body. She placed the lantern on the floor, and looked at him, her face a pale shadow in the gloom. "We'll never know what happens," she went on, and he wondered if horror and fear had driven her mad. "We'll never know what happens—and THEY'LL never know what has happened. All their lives they'll wonder where we disappeared to. I've been thinking—thinking—thinking while you were at work there, and do you know, I'm not afraid. It's curious, but I'm not. I guess it's because there's a lot of MAN in me. I've always wanted to be a man, to do things—big things. This is the first time I've ever been glad—that I'm a woman."

He came close to her and placed the lantern at their feet.

"If you had only been a man—if you only had!" he exclaimed in a voice that was low and thrilling. "If you had been a man I wouldn't have brought you down here. If you had been any other woman on earth I wouldn't have brought you. I did it because——"

"I WONDER IF THEY'D LET ME PRESS THE BUTTON TO YOUR COYOTE?"

"Why?" she asked softly.

He had taken her hands again, but he dropped them now.

"Miss Rodney, we're almost equals here now, aren't we? I'm no longer just a mere engineer paid a salary that would just about buy your father's cigars. I'm a MAN. And you're no longer a vice-president's daughter, a great heiress and the fiancé of a titled man. You're just a WOMAN. Our world is this little chamber under the mountain, the last little world we'll ever have. If it won't hurt you—if you don't care—I'd like to—to tell you——"

He stopped, almost wishing that he might recall his words.

"Go on," she urged softly. "Go on—please."

"I asked you to come down, Miss Rodney, because—just once—I wanted to be alone with you, to have you all to myself. I knew it wouldn't happen again—that you were going away to-morrow——and I was sure that it wouldn't do any harm, and that I would be happier afterward. I did it because I loved you."

There was a silence. It seemed like an eternity. And then, swiftly, in that terrible stillness, the light began to fade away. It grew lower, flickered, and went out.

"The oil is gone," he said.

He heard a movement. Something groped out to him in that stark blackness. It was the girl's hand. It touched his shoulder. Her other hand touched his face. He felt her near—nearer. And then, suddenly, her arms were around his neck.

"And that—that's just why this is the first time in my life I'M GLAD THAT I'M A WOMAN," she whispered. "It's the first time I've ever known a MAN, and I love him, if he is nothing but a great big god of a civil engineer."

In the silence of that moment's thrilling joy there sounded the low, tinkling note of the little bell in Philip Dalton's watch. It was half past seven. In the sound there was something indescribably more significant than the mere intonation of time. It was like the first tolling stroke of a church bell miles and miles away, softened by great distance, and muffled by the walls of the mountain until it came to them only in a whisper. The girl's arms tightened about Philip's neck, and he felt her shudder, as though the note of the little bell had touched a vibrant chord in her body, and he drew her closer and closer in his own arms, until he was straining her to him with a strength which he did not realize until a little cry of pain broke from her lips. He loosened his arms, and in the darkness he turned up her face until their lips met, and then he heard her breath come quickly and sobbingly, and in a moment she was crying with her face against his breast. He kissed her again and again, and in the cavernous stillness of the mountain his low words rang with a strength and courage that after a little lifted her face from his breast, and made her take his own face between her two hands.

"I'm sorry, Philip," she said, speaking his name for the first time, "but I just couldn't help it. It—it isn't because I'm afraid. I'm not afraid. I'm NOT!"

She drew his face down to her.

"I can't be afraid with YOU," she said.

Her courage, her faith, her love—the warm throbbing of her body against him, filled him with a madness which he struggled to fight back. For a few moments he dared not speak, but stroked her hair and fondled her face while he bit his lips until the blood came. She was his. She had given herself to him, and never had life called to him as it did now. She felt his arms and his shoulders harden, she felt the stiffening of his whole body, and suddenly he held her back from him, and his madness found vent in words.

"By God, you shall live—you SHALL!" he cried. "There's another lantern on a ledge near the vent. Wait until I find it."

She stood alone, trembling in the blackness, while he struck a match and searched for the lantern. He found it—half filled with oil. His face was not white now. His eyes almost frightened her. She stood near, holding the light, while he went at the rocks again. Her presence put the strength of five men in his arms and body, and he rolled back rock after rock that he had not been able to move before. In the madness of his fight, in the superhuman efforts he was putting in this last struggle, time ceased to exist for him. He did not hear his watch when it tinkled off the hour of eight. Only each time as he turned his eyes, he saw Isobel Rodney's golden head shining in the dim lantern glow, her eyes fixed upon him with a love and faith that drove reason and judgment from him. But at last he came to the end. He came to rocks that he could not move, and as he strained until every muscle in his body seemed to tear themselves asunder, his breath came in a groaning cry. The girl came to him. Her arms were around him again, and he sank down, broken, bleeding, conquered.

"You can't," she whispered, stroking back his hair. "You can't do it, and—and—" The look in his eyes frightened her again. "Philip—you look so strange—you frighten me. You're—you're not——"

"I'm all right," he said, pulling himself together with an effort. "Little sweetheart, I guess we've lost."

"What time is it?" she asked.

He pulled out his watch.

"Twenty-five minutes of nine," said the girl. There was not a tremor in her voice. Her fingers continued to fondle his hair. "Yes, we've lost, but haven't we won a LITTLE something, Philip?" She put her face down against his hot cheek. "I want to walk," she said. "Can't we walk—back and forth?"

He placed the lantern on one of the rocks, and with her hand in his they walked slowly out into the gloom.

"Yes, I've won something—the greatest thing in the world," he said, and there was the thrill of the old strength and fearlessness in his voice. "I wouldn't exchange what I've won for life—not for ten lives. It's YOU. You're losing everything. But—after all—it won't be so very bad——"

She interrupted him, her fingers clasping his more firmly.

"No, it won't be so very bad," she said bravely. "There are a good many worse things, Philip. I, too, would not exchange what I've found in this mountain for that OUT THERE. Do you know, if I had to keep that contract—money for a title—and I had a choice, I'd stay here with you."

"God bless you," he whispered.

"I would," she said, as though she thought he doubted her. "And now, Philip, let's talk of what we would have done if you had only told me that you loved me up there on the rock—where the wires are? Let's make it REAL. I'm going with you—EVERYWHERE—and I'm going to help you build railroads, and bridges, and blow up mountains. You'll let me, won't you?"

He was choking. He drew her close in his arms, and held his face away from her so that she would not discover the hot tears that were running down his cheeks.

"Yes," he said, "we'll go everywhere—together. Nothing can part us—even in death——"

"Nothing," she said.

They both stood silent, and under their feet there came a sudden and terrible throb, a throb that grew stronger even as they held their breath, until the mountain seemed to tremble over their heads and under their feet, and was followed by a dull and distant roar, like rumbling thunder smothered in the bowels of the earth.

"Fifteen minutes more," she said, and the hand that stroked his face was like ice.

"Yes," he replied, "that's Billinger's mountain."

They went back into the circle of ghostly light thrown out by the lantern. She lifted her eyes straight to his face, and he marveled at the strength which he saw in them. Her cheeks were like wax. Her lips were pale. Against this white contrast her blue eyes shone deeper and darker. The coils of her golden hair had loosened, and suddenly he reached up and shook them down, so that her shining tresses rippled about her shoulders, filling his nostrils with a sweet breath as he strained her close to him again, burying his face in that golden glory.

"My wife!" he cried to her softly.

He felt her arms tighten about him, and in their thrilling pressure there came to him an inspiration which made him loosen his arms, and hold her back from him, staring at her with eyes into which there had come a strange and sudden radiance.

"If you were my wife," he whispered. "If you were—it would be easier—a thousand times easier! My wife—my wife——"

He repeated the words, looking into her eyes. His breath broke in something that was almost a sob.

"Isobel—sweetheart—will you be my wife?"

For a moment she did not seem to understand.

"Your wife——"

Her hands stole in their sweet, caressing way to his face.

"Yes, my wife. I am an Episcopalian. And here—now—in the heart of this mountain—without witnesses—we can be man and wife. It is legal—in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of God! My wife—my wife——"

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean—" A glory of understanding leaped into her eyes. "I know what you mean——"

"You will be my wife?"

"Yes."

Philip Dalton straightened himself. He raised a bruised and ragged arm above his head, and his pale face seemed suddenly to glow with the strength and triumph of a god as his words rang out clear and mighty against the echoing walls of the mountain.

I, PHILIP DALTON, TAKE THEE, ISOBEL RODNEY, TO BE MY WEDDED WIFE, TO HAVE AND TO HOLD FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, TILL DEATH DO US PART."

And then, in the stillness, there rose the girl's voice, firm and sweet, saying after him:

"AND I, ISOBEL RODNEY, TAKE THEE, PHILIP DALTON, TO BE MY WEDDED HUSBAND, TO HAVE AND TO HOLD FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, TILL DEATH DO US PART."

"My wife!"

"My husband!"

Their hearts ceased to beat. Clear and distinct the bell in Philip Dalton's watch began tinkling off the hour of nine.

One—two—three—four. He crushed the girl's head in his arm, smothering the sound from her. Five—six—seven. He pressed his lips to her's. Eight—nine——

"My wife—my sweet little wife——"

Her face was growing cold. Her lips were cold. Her arms slipped from his shoulders. She became a weight in his arms.

"God in heaven be praised!" he breathed.

He looked into her white, still face again, buried his face in the warm sweetness of her hair, and as he waited whispers of prayer formed themselves on his lips.

TICK—TICK—TICK—TICK——

He could hear his watch. A clammy chill crept through him. The roar of the bursting mountain seemed already to fill his head. Sickness—weakness—overcame him, and he sank down upon the cold rock floor with his unconscious burden.

TICK—TICK—TICK——

His watch was beating off the seconds, faster and faster. He counted them, ten, twenty, forty, sixty—and they raced so swiftly that his brain could not follow. Something had happened to the wire up on the rock. They were attaching the battery. A moment more——

The seconds grew into minutes. Five—ten—he lifted his head. Good God, what did it mean? The girl moved, and he strained her to him. She was coming back to life. His fingers touched her soft throat, and he knew that God would have him choke back her life a little longer. His fingers tightened, and he groaned aloud. The bell in his watch struck again. It was a quarter after nine. It would happen soon—it MUST happen soon. There had been a delay—they were pressing the button now. A little longer—just a little longer——

A sound came to him. It was not the ticking of his watch. It was not the little bell. He raised his head, his eyes shining madly. It was a voice—a faint shout—beyond the choked up mouth of the coyote.

He dropped the girl and sprang to the rocks, and his voice rose in shrieks that were like those of a madman. Answering shouts came to him through the mass of earth and rock. They heard him! He heard the beat of metal picks on hard rock!—one, two, three, and then an army of them! Their CLICK—CLICK—CLICK—came to him faintly, swiftly, and he continued to shout until he staggered back exhausted. The girl had regained consciousness, and was swaying on her feet, holding out her arms to him and murmuring incoherent things. He sprang to her and caught her in his arms.

"We're saved!" he shouted. "Something has happened! They're out there—they hear us—I can hear them working!"

She looked at him dumbly, incomprehendingly, and her hands went to his face again, and in her eyes there was a look as though she feared the strain had been too much for him.

"Come—listen!" he cried, and he drew her to the choked mouth of the coyote, holding her trembling form in his arms.

For a moment they held their breath.

In the silence there came to them distinctly the rapid beating of many picks upon rock.

An hour later a crumbling slide of earth and rock cleared the mouth of the coyote. A flood of warm, fresh air rushed in upon Philip and the girl he still held in his arms. In a moment he was carrying her over the débris. A dozen lanterns flashed in their faces, a score of men had drawn back, leaning on their picks and crowbars, staring at them white-faced and silent, as men will stare at those who have come out of the jaws of death. But one sprang forward, and caught the girl from Philip. It was her father, the vice-president, and from behind him Philip heard the voice of one of the men, which told him what had happened. A rock had fallen upon the wire leading to the dynamite, and had severed it. The battery had failed to explode the mountain, and men had come down to investigate.

He drew in great draughts of air, and looked at Isobel and her father. The girl had freed herself from his arms, and another man was standing near, holding out his hands to her. It was the Englishman. And then he saw the girl draw herself erect—turn—and search for him; and when she saw him standing there in the glow of many lanterns, white, torn, and waiting, she went to him with a great, sobbing cry, and all who stood there heard the marvelous words which fell from her lips.

"MY HUSBAND—MY HUSBAND!"