

# THE IRON WAY

A TALE OF THE BUILDERS OF THE WEST.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALBERT WALKER



"Don't Mean to Show Off, Ma."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### Alfred Pays the Fiddler.

Clarifying daylight had not brought Alfred an easy conscience the morning after the banquet. The spell of the fair spirit he had held in his arms the night before had been broken with the setting of the lop-sided moon. And Stella, standing on the railroad platform, wise in staying away from him till that morning, strong in her resolve which he could feel but not define—it needed but this attitude to recall the ardor of his love for her, more insistent as she grew more remote.

Alfred wrote at great length to Stella, making a bad matter worse by his too ardent defense of Amabel, and by self-condemnation that did not ring quite true. The reply to this letter disclosed to him a hitherto unknown Stella.

More than a second time he read it. He knew now that he could never deceive her. She would always know his inmost heart. She might uncomplainingly bear neglect after marriage, coldness; but she would never forgive him if he married her with less than the whole of his love.

The middle of October found Alfred in Placerville, where had been sent to purchase for the company a large amount of fish-joint iron originally bought for the Placerville road. When the river end of this road, the Sacramento Valley road, fell into Central Pacific hands, iron was no longer useful to the defunct San Francisco and Washoe, which was to have taken over all track to Placerville. Yet, "Anything to beat the Central Pacific" was still the cry; and Alfred had need of all his discretion; for the opposition would never knowingly sell rails to the Central Pacific company.

"I have a delicate errand here," he wrote toward the close of a long letter to Stella, "that I may not tell you of further than to say I am making as much haste as possible. I hope to be one of the passengers to Virginia City on the day the Placerville Stage company has set to 'snow under' the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake State Company's schedule. If so, I shall complete my business there and be with you two days later. I'll telegraph the day I leave Virginia.

"By the way, Cadwallader is here, ostensibly looking up laborers, which is about all the company gives him to do lately. He is very cordial, and claims to know of a secret 'big deal,' a mine in Nevada, that he wishes me to join him in exploiting. I'm suspicious of his schemes; yet he has some good men with him, and I may look it up.

"But here is the cream of my letter for you, dear—for us. I am to have a handsome percentage of any money that I can save the company in this enterprise now pending. If the business goes as it promises, the day when I may say 'Come' will be a long leap nearer."

Closing words were penned from a flood of tenderness that carried over mountain and vale, and were still warm on the page when they met Stella's eye.

In her favorite hillside nook, wrapped about with the fruity fragrance of autumn, Stella read and reread Alfred's letter, and mused upon the vague plans for the future that now occupied her mind. Nothing definite had come to her; but her growing determination to improve herself was augmented by a tormenting vision of a little woman in blue, light and dainty, where she herself was heavy; vivacious and quick, where she was slow; charming, where she was dull. Stella wished she were small, delicate, timid—a hundred things she was not; yet she was sensible enough to know that assuming them would be folly. For underlying all her vain wishes was a recognition of something within, a dim vision of the power of her own soul, that brought tranquillity and courage for her difficult venture.

The declining sun shot a level ray into her retreat before she realized the hour and the call of duty. Long before she reached the hotel, Alvin's cheerful voice floated up in one of his jocund songs.

Stella sighed. In a few days Alvin's bright face would be out of her life. He had been promoted from Colfax to the Sacramento office, and was now awaiting his successor. Yet the sight of him carried her thought swiftly to the telegram from Gideon had that morning brought her.

The message was brief. Gideon was coming for her! He had not heeded her negative-laden letters. She had not disclosed her engagement; she had been afraid. And there was reason for fear. The gossip concerning Alfred that floated from tongues to tongue did not escape her sensitive ears. It was said that he was in love with the superintendent's niece; again, that he cared nothing for her, only for the position he might, as her husband, command. Gideon must hear all this. Stella knew it would confirm his belief that Alfred had no love for her, and that she must meet Gideon, tell him, day by day.

"I've staked a hull mountain o' hopes on you. I ain't never thought o' you separate from me, some way. I—"

She stopped, and Viola spoke with some spirit in spite of her sobs. "But, ma, you expect me to wear a Mrs. in front of my name some day, don't you? And Mrs.—Mrs. Carter," she blushed and smiled through her tears, though her gaze shifted to the window, "Mrs. Carter's just as good as Mrs. Bernard, ain't it?"

The mother glanced furtively at Alvin, whose heart spoke naively in his adoring eyes fixed on Viola's downcast face. The boy had won Sally B.'s approbation, yet she could not relinquish her dream. "If yore brothers had a lived, Vi," she went on slowly, "I might 'a considered of this. But yore all yo' paw an' me's got to bank on. We're goin' to be rich some day, an' Bernard'll be a name to conjure with; an' yo're all we got to do it proud."

"Oh, ma, we're always just going to rich. It may be a thousand years!" There was a heart-break in Viola's voice that touched Stella's sympathy. "They're so young, Mrs. Sally; it'll be years before they can marry, and they may not care for each other when the time comes. They're too young to marry now; why not let marriage drop out of the case till Alvin has his home to offer, and Viola has seen more of life? Then Alvin can ask for her again."

Alvin peered eagerly into the older woman's face, waiting her slow reply. When it came the two young things hung breathlessly on each word, their faces growing dull with despair as the fateful sentence fell.

"Vi, yo're yo' paw's child's well as mine. I ain't got no right to settle this question without his havin' a say. An' you all might's well know it now's later—yo' paw's made his pile. It's on the sly yet, so lock yer lips. We're goin' to pull up stakes pretty soon an' git to the Bay. An' we'll flame out, an' ride on the gilt edge o' society a while, an' see how that feels. How on airth are two ole duffers like yo' paw an' me goin' to show off without you, Vi?"

"I don't mean to show off, ma," Viola said, pitifully.

"I've slaved all my life waitin' fur the chance to live like white folks; an' now it's come, are you goin' to spoil it all, honey?" She held out her hand and her voice trembled.

Viola looked up suddenly, wondering, to see tears in her mother's eyes. She was accustomed to her mother's fiery sympathy for others; but this was the first time she had ever heard her plead for herself.

A fleeting, hopeless look the child sent Alvin, then crossed the room and took her mother's hand in both her own. "Good-bye, Alvin," she said, pitifully. "She was my mother before you were my lover; and I must stick to her—and paw." She flung herself into Sally B.'s arms and the two sobbed together.

For an instant Alvin stood petrified, then straightened to a new manliness. "Mrs. Bernard, you've no right to require such a sacrifice of us. We only asked you to let us be honest with you about our love for each other. I'm not the kind to forget, and neither is Vi. I'm going to win that home and a bank account; and then I'm coming

with, and Gideon would be defeated; but at what cost? What cost to him, to herself, to Alfred? Fear gripped her at thought of the time when the two men should face each other.

In the parlor she found Sally B., Alvin and Viola in an excited, triangular discussion, Alvin pleading, Sally B. stern, Viola in tears.

"Oh, Miss Stella," Alvin cried appealingly as she entered, "do you think a feller that's all straight but one leg the Lord himself put a crook in ought to be tipped the cold shoulder for that?"

"Boy! 'Tain't that!" Sally B. said sharply before Stella could speak. "If you had a home, an' money, an' could give Vi some place in the world—"

"You bet I'll never ask you to give her up, ma'am, till I have a home for her," Alvin broke in impetuously; "a number one home, too!"

"But, Al, that's turrrible fur off. How in thunder kin you do it?"

Sally B.'s heart warmed to the pluck of him in spite of her determination.

"Do it! I'll just inch along, a little every day, same's I have been doing. I got three hundred saved already, an' on interest; and it'll grow faster all the time. Ma, she helps a lot, too. I'm going to night school in Sacramento; and when I ask you for Vi I'll be no Greaser. I can't go on my shape, but I'll make what brains I got stretch like blazes!" His face was eloquent, but Sally B. would not look at him.

Instead she gazed at Viola, all the mother's pent pride shining in her eyes. "Oh, Vi," she said, after a pause that was broken only by the buzz of an uneasy autumn fly on the window.

## CHAPTER XX.

### Into the Night.

"Howdy, honey," Uncle Billy said to Stella that evening as he came in and took his supper-seat at the table, where Sally B. proudly included him in her elastic family circle. "Are you ready fo' the race?"

"Oh, Uncle Billy, are we really going to race the Placerville Stage company to Virginia City? I thought their weeks of talk and preparation were just to beat our previous time schedule."

"Yes, I reckoned it would go at that; still, Mr. Crocker's word's the law."

"But why didn't he give you more warning? You haven't even a day to get ready!"

"Our folks have biggeh pots a-boiling than staging. However, the Boss is in Virginia now; and I reckon he got so tired of those blamed Placerville Stage agents blowin' oveh there that he's reljyin' on us to shut their mouths. And we've got to do it, if we ain't ready. It's my trip."

"The race is on!" Alvin shouted, as he pegged in with a message for Sally B.

Exclamations in concert were shot at Alvin from several tables.

"Yes, the steamer Chrysolopolis left the San Francisco wharf at four o'clock; and she's streaking it up the bay like lightning!"

"I hope she'll keep up her gait plumb to Sacramento," Uncle Billy said at the first break in the hubbub.

"You bet she won't," some one replied. "She'll have a breakdown after she gets the mail and passengers off at Freeport for the Placerville Stage people."

"Don't you go into partnership with any worry," Alvin said, pausing at the door. "I ain't givin' away the clicker, but let me tell you the C. P.'s ain't fools."

"I got to have hot lunch ready for them passengers to eat on the fly," Sally B. said brusquely. "Uncle Billy, what time do you reckon they'll be here?"

"Some time peah about fo' o'clock in the mawnin'; I figger. You can tell into five minutes when we hear what time the train leaves Sacramento."

Sally B. sped away to the kitchen. Stella detained Uncle Billy a second in the hall, her hand on his coat lapel. She had intended to speak with him about schools, where to go, how to set about the new life; but these questions must wait. His trip and its success were the only things that mattered now.

"Aren't you going to rest?" she asked. "There are plenty others to work. Go to bed early, won't you, Uncle Billy?"

He crossed his warm, strong hand over hers, with fond pressure. It was sweet to have her womanly solicitude, to feel her near him, her soft hand pulsing under his own. "Aftah the fight is time enough to rest, little girl. I must see that my wagon and stock are all right for the first hard drive. I'll have to trust to luck aftah that, or to the hostlers—that's about the same thing."

"Well, rest as much as you can, then. I'll have a luck flower for your button-hole when you start." She smiled into his eyes, her own shining with excitement. "You'll win, Uncle Billy! I know it!"

She watched him down the street to the stage barn, where she knew no item of preparation would escape his vigilant eye. Yet there was time to spare. Would he take advantage of it? Perhaps not. She knew he was master of that perfect relaxation that prepares for stress as well as sleep does.

Alvin had dropped his study, Viola was fighting her trouble alone and Sally B. was in the kitchen. Stella, left with no pressing duty, wandered into the dark parlor. Lighting it was Viola's task, but she had forgotten to

She drew a chair to the window that faced the dim mountain across the gorge, closed her senses to the little world about her and was quickly off with the sprites of the night to keep her heart's tryst with Alfred. Not quite alone did they two meet this night in fancy's fair halls. Viola, Alvin, even Sally B.'s uncompromising black eyes interrupted Stella's dreams.

Minutes ticked by unheeded. Hurrying feet came and went; calls, cries, hasty commands, odors of unusual cooking floated past inadequate doors; but Stella was oblivious till a draught of air struck her cheek sharply and Gideon's voice called her.

She started to her feet. "Gideon! Where—you said 'To-morrow' in your message! Who told you I was here?"

"No one. I can always find you, Stella. Something tells me. The instant I opened the door I knew you were here. A kind of fragrance—I could tell it."

"Don't, Gideon," she interrupted. She was looking for matches, but his alert sense caught the aversion in tone and movement.

"Your father once told me that a Pima princess was my great-grandmother. I cannot escape my heritage from her," he took the match she had struck and lighted the hanging lamp. The flame shone full on his upturned face, and Stella gazed at him fascinated, while he adjusted wick and shade. He seemed to her excited gaze the concentrated beat and pulse of a hundred lives controlled by the master will that spoke through his burning eyes. Often she wondered about his power over her, wondered why Gideon away, was so small a part of her life; yet near, so masterful, monopolizing. In the pause while he attended to the lamp this question rose again; and was still unanswered.

He turned to meet her mute scrutiny. His eyes were deep and tender, his voice wooing. "You're glad to see me, aren't you, sweet Star?" He threw his arm about her waist with a motion both swift and gentle, as might be a panther mother's, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Don't, Gideon!" Stella cried, breathless, struggling unavailingly, yet not quite sorry that his arm did not yield. Always with Gideon present came the memory of their comradeship, a comforting sense of his strength, a desire to lean upon him. If he would only be content with brotherliness!

"Moppett, why do you push me away? It's so long since I saw you. If I were your brother by blood as I am by rearing, you'd take my kiss, and kiss me back. Isn't the tie almost as close? We've been so much more to each other than ordinary brother and sister." He dropped his arm and stepped back; and the consideration, the gentleness and regret in his tone subdued Stella with quick contrition.

"Oh, Gideon, I don't mean to be cold, unkind; but I'm afraid of—of what I see in your eyes."

He looked long into her face. "Dear little girl!" he said at length; and the adjective did not seem unfitting when he stood near her. "Don't be afraid of me, Stella. I love you, and I want your love in return, not your fear."

"But I can't help it, Gideon. You would compel me, hurt me. Does true love ever hurt?"

"Does a mother love her child when she gives it into the surgeon's hands?" Stella would not see his meaning.

"That doesn't apply to us."

"It does, Stella." He went to her again, standing close, and looking down upon her tenderly. "I've come for you, dear. He kissed her suddenly. "I remember what you said, flower-eyes. I'll not kiss you on the lips till—till I've the right—"

"Gideon, you can never have that!" she interrupted, springing back.

Still he controlled himself to gentleness. "Stella, dear, listen. Love like mine compels love. You think your heart forever lost to that—to the man who has deserted you. Yet you surely will soon wake to the shame of it. Your womanhood will help me, if not your love; that will follow. I've a house and garden for you in Sacramento; your own home, trim and neat, where the roses on the trellis wait for your care. There you shall live in peace, and show the gossips that Alfred Vincent did not break your heart—did not win you to cast you off. To-morrow we shall be married—"

"Gideon! Gideon! Stop, for heaven's sake! How many times must I tell you I cannot—I will not marry you? I love Alfred Vincent. Some day he intends to marry me—"

"Intends to marry you? Some day!" Tenderness fled. The words flashed forth like the hiss of a snake. He faced her fiercely, the veins in his



"Moppett, Why Do You Push Me Away?"

forehead swelling quickly, undulating. The primordial male was master now, holding in leash every trace of refinement, every saint's virtue he had won. "Listen, Stella Anthony! If that woman-dandy cared for you, if he had been man enough to marry you, to put you beyond the insult of railroad-camp gossip and curiosity, I'd hide away in the mountains and live on memories. But he's spoiling your life! And he shall not live to spoil it longer! I'll—"

"No, no, Gideon!" she broke in excitedly. "Don't say those words! You shall not harm him!" She stood erect, her eye blazing back flame for flame. For herself weak, for him she loved she was a lioness at bay. "Do you call that love?" she asked scornfully, "to strike a woman through the man she loves? I could hate you, Gideon Ingram! Leave me! I hope never to see your face again!"

Gideon did not speak. Stella roused and angry was a new being to him. He had not realized that her spirit was as intrepid as his own. Stripped of compassion for his love of her, wrenched free from the claim of their past, she flung out her stinging words like whip-strokes.

"Love! What do you know of that sacred thing? Hide in your mountains! Yes! And stay, till you learn that first of all love is not for self, but to serve the loved one. I could never love you. If Alfred were ten times dead, I'd not marry you!"

Red lights were burning in Gideon's passionate eyes, and he turned to her with savage counter threat.

"Whether Vincent lives or not, you shall be my wife, Stella Anthony! There's no other woman in the world but you, and I shall be worthy of you. You shall see my face again—you shall pray to see it!" He towered over her, his stormy eyes fixed on hers undimly, yet he did not touch her.

"Good-bye," he said in a lower voice. "I shall find him; and I shall come again!" He stepped backward as he finished.

She sprang after him, but he had closed the door and slid into the night. When she looked out he was neither to be seen nor heard. She stood a moment in the open doorway, striving to quiet the tumult of soul and body. The weakness of reaction came quickly. The scene rehearsed grew in portent. No fiery courage rose to meet the memory of his threats; yet they grew more dreadful; and the compelling power of his presence remained. A dozen uncertain plans chased one another through her whirling brain. She would telegraph Alfred. But where? What could she

say? She could not send heart-true words over the wires, accuse Gideon beforehand of murder!

She would write—get Uncle Billy to deliver her letter in person. She wrote a feverish letter, destroyed it, and wrote again; then hastened out to find Uncle Billy. In the kitchen she came upon Sally B. superintending the extra baking.

"Uncle Billy? He's snatchin' 40 winks. He didn't go up till a bit ago; he ain't to be disturbed." She was emphatic. "Say! The race begins O. K.! Train'll be here at 2:50 instid o' four o'clock! Uncle Billy 'lows he'll git off in four minutes after."

"Oh, I must speak to him alone," Stella pleaded; "just a minute, when he comes down. Tell him when you call him, won't you?"

Another time Sally B. would have heeded the distress in Stella's tone, and questioned her; but she was intent on her work, caught in the hour's excitement. She gave absent-minded assent; and Stella crept back to the parlor, where she lowered the lamp and again sat down with her fears. Had Gideon been able to get a seat in Uncle Billy's coach? She would go and see. She opened the door and peered out. The street was deserted. Yet bright, unshaded windows gleaming in all directions; extra lights in the saloon across the way; knots of men at the doors; the rattle of chips, the clink of ice and glass, and an occasional voice raised above the subdued murmur that came from Sally B.'s barroom—all told Stella that the town waited awake for the night's event.

She stole out, passed the hotel and peeped guiltily into the stage office. Only the clerk on duty was within, and he was nodding. Cautiously she approached and looked over the passenger list that lay open on the counter. Gideon had not booked.

Though half stunned by dread and fear, she yet could not face Sally B. again and the busy kitchen. She paced restlessly, stopped to reread her letter and add a penciled word, and went into the hall to listen for Uncle Billy. Silence. No one was stirring in the house outside of the cook's domain.

Back she turned to her nervous tread, counting her steps mechanically. Her mind was painfully alert, supersensitive. The half-hour struck.

"The clock is surely wrong!" Stella whispered. But the dining-room clock quickly rang a confirming chime; and the doomsday tick, tick, went slowly on.

She crept out again to the stage office, where the clerk no longer coquetted with duty in his chair, but lay full length on the counter, frankly seduced by Morpheus. The passenger list still lay open, and Stella looked. Gideon's name was not there!

She wondered why, since his looks even more than his words told her that he would seek Alfred at once. As she walked back new fears beset her. Why was Gideon not going on the stage? Could Alfred be already on his way to Colfax? Near? Coming now, and Gideon had learned it? A terrifying vision of their meeting shook her; yet quick comfort came with the recollection of Alfred's promised telegram. He would surely keep his word.

Ten minutes of two! Ten minutes past—fifteen!

A light step came down the stair, and Stella flew into the hall.

"Uncle Billy!" she called softly, and drew him into the parlor. She put her letter in his hand, told him of Gideon, breathlessly describing Alfred's danger, though concealing its cause. She did not dream that Uncle Billy guessed it well.

He promised to mount guard over Alfred, though he scoffed at her fear, and declared that Gideon, son of the night, was doubtless alone somewhere fighting out his anger.

"Oh, Uncle Billy, you're such a dear, good father to me," she cried impetuously; and, heedless, did not see the light die in his eyes, recked not of a missed heart-beat.

His back was toward the lamp, his face downcast; yet when he lifted it again, he was calm, his voice steady, though Stella caught a vibrant sadness in it she could not understand.

"Honey, there's something I've been wishing to speak to you about for a month o' Sundays, but I couldn't raise the pluck." He stopped, and Stella, so overwrought, grew suddenly apprehensive, though she did not speak.

"Yo' Uncle Billy's stake in Mammon's mighty small; but such as it is, it is decided to you, child. I haven't any kin of my own, that is, none that's as near to me as you are, honey. I fixed the papers in Auburn yestehday."

For an instant Stella did not comprehend. She looked questioningly into his face and he smiled back at her, waiting for her to speak. Then it broke suddenly—a will! All a young heart's dread of death came into her eyes. Uncle Billy dead! And she profiting by it? It could not be. He surely would live long years still. She could not spare him!

The prokient sorrow, the generous deed, broke down Stella's defenses, and tears flowed uncontrolled while she haltingly told her gratitude. Uncle Billy had barely dried her eyes when Sally B.'s step sounded in the hall.

"I'm in heah, Sally B.," he called, "and all ready." Before she could turn back from the stairs and enter he drew Stella to him and kissed her. "Don't forget my luck posy, honey," he whispered, as Sally B. opened the door. And in that instant Stella's eyes were opened.

Ten minutes later the coaches, Uncle Billy's leading, lined up beside the thronged sidewalk. Some passengers stood near the second coach. Only a privileged few coming on the train would go with Uncle Billy.

Stella, a rose in her hand, stood with others near the stage office door. "Is Mr. Ingram going with Uncle Billy or in the other coach?" she asked the clerk, as he returned to his post from some errand.

"Ingram? He left town hours ago. Took Ball's best horse, Nig. Told Ball if he broke the nag's wind he'd pay any figure Ball—"

Stella did not wait to hear him through. "Book me for Virginia City!" she cried. "In Uncle Billy's coach—"

"You can't!" he began.

A whistle shriiled through the darkness.

"Yes! yes! I'll make him let me!" she panted, and was gone.

A deep rumble shook the town. The "Governor Stanford" raced into the station. Flying figures caught up mail and treasure and ran with them to the waiting coach. Passengers, their linen dusters fluttering back on the night breeze, hurried after, gulping Sally B.'s scalding coffee on the run and snatching her neatly packed hot lunches.

Stella, fastening her cloak and carrying a small valise in the other hand, came flying out of the hotel door. She pressed her scant golden horde into the booking clerk's hand as she passed. "Give the change to Mrs. Sally," she said through set teeth, and ran around in the street to the opposite side of the stage. "Please help me up, sir," she called softly to the passenger on the box. "I've booked, and I'm to have the seat next you."

The man moved, intending to step down and help her up; but the hostlers cried: "All ready!"

"No, no! There isn't time," Stella called frantically, as she heard Uncle Billy answer the hostlers. "Reach me your hand!" she implored, her foot on the forward hub.

The passenger obeyed, and she was seated, the "luck rose" safe between her teeth, when Uncle Billy sprang up, crying "Let 'em go!" His face was full of disappointment in spite of the jovial replies he flung back to the torrent of good wishes from the bystanders. As he swiftly gathered the lines he caught sight of Stella.

"Good Lord! You can't go, honey!" "I must! You'll—"

The hostlers loosed their hold with a yell and the horses sprang out. With wild cheers behind them they plunged into the black night. The race was again on.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.)

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