

blasphemy, but not the slightest overconfidence. Bostwick's relief was inordinate. "Then what is the next thing to do?"

"Wait for Lawrence," said the gambler. Then he suddenly rose. "No, we can't afford the time. He might be a week. You'll have to go get him to-morrow."

"Where is he, then?" Bostwick was eager enough to be at work.

"Way out south, on a survey," answered McCoppet. "You'd better take that car of yours, with a couple of men I'll send along, and fetch him back mighty pronto. We can't let a deal like this look raw. The sooner he runs that reservation line, the better things will appear."

Bostwick too had risen. "Will your men know where to find him?"

"If he's still on the map," said the gambler. "You leave that to me. Better go see about your car to-night. I've got to get out and keep active. I'll hustle your men and your outfit. See you again if anything turns up important. Meantime, is your money in the bank?"

"It's in the bank."

"Right," said McCoppet. "Goodnight."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Beth's Desperation

THE following day in Goldite was one of occurrences all more or less intimately connected with the affairs of Van and Beth. Bostwick succeeded in making an early start to the southward in his car. McCoppet had provided not only a couple of men as guides to the field where Lawrence was working, but also a tent, provisions, and blankets, should occasion arise for their use.

Beth was informed by her fiancé that word had arrived from her brother, to whom Searle said he meant to go. The business of buying Glenville's mine, he said, required unexpected despatch. Perhaps both he and Glen might return by the end of the week.

By that morning's train the body of Culver was shipped away, and the camp began to forget him. The Sheriff was after Cayuse.

Early in the afternoon the body of the girl who had never been known in Goldite by any name save that of Queeny, was buried in a hillside, already called into requisition as a final resting place for such as succumbed in the mining camp, too far from friends, or too far lost, to be carried to the world outside the mountains. Half a dozen women attended the somewhat meager rites. There was one mourner only, the man who had run to summon Van, and later had waited by the door.

AT four o'clock "The Goldite News" appeared in the streets of the camp. It contained much original matter, or so at least it claimed. The account of the murder of Culver, the death of Queeny, and the threatened lynching of Van Buren, made a highly sensational story. It was given the prominent place; for the editor was proud to have made it so full in a time he deemed rather short. On the second page was a tale less tragic.

It was, according to one of its many subheadings, a "humorous outcrop concerning two maids and a man." It related, with many gay sallies of "wit," how Van had piloted J. Searle Bostwick into the hands of the convicts, recently escaped, packed off his charges, Miss Beth Kent and her maid, and brought them to Goldite by way of the Monte Cristo mine, in time to behold the discomfited entrance of the said J. Searle Bostwick in prisoner's attire. Bostwick was described as having been "on his ear" toward Van ever since.

In the main the account was fairly accurate. Gettysburg, Napoleon, and old Dave had overtalked during certain liquefying processes. The matter was out beyond repair.

Mrs. Dick was prompt in pouncing on the story; hence Beth was soon presented with a copy. In the natural annoyance she felt when it was read, there was one consolation at least: Searle was away, to be gone perhaps two or three days. He might not see the article, which would soon be forgotten in the camp.

To culminate the day's events, that evening Elsa ran away. She went with a "gentleman" lodger, after having been married by a Justice of Peace.

BETH discovered her loss too late to interfere. She felt herself alone indeed, with Bostwick away, her brother off in the desert, and Van— She refused to think of Van. Fortunately, Mrs. Dick was more than merely a friend; she was a staunch little warrior, protector, and champion, to anger whom was unhealthy. Despite the landlady's attitude of friendliness, however, Beth felt wretchedly alone. It was a terrible place. She was cooped up all day within the lodging house, since the street full of men was more than she cared to encounter, and with life all about her, and wonderful days spreading one after another across the wide open land, her liberties were fairly in a cage.

From time to time she thought of the horse awaiting her order at the hay yard. She tried to convince herself that she would never accept or ride the animal. She was certain she resented everything Van had done. She felt the warmest indignation at herself for breaking into bits of song, for glowing to the tips of her ears, for letting her heart leap wildly in her breast, whenever she thought of the horse-man.

Two days went by, and she chafed at all restraint.

No word had come from Bostwick, none from Glen—and not a sign from the Laughing Water claim. From the latter she said to herself she wished no sign. But Searle had no right to leave her thus and neglect her in every respect!

THE morning of the third long day Mrs. Dick brought her two thin letters. One had been mailed in Goldite, by a messenger down from the Laughing Water claim. It came from Van. He had written the briefest of notes:

Just to send my love. I want you to wear my nugget. Folded into the paper was a spray of wild peach bloom.

Beth tried to think her blushes were those of indignation, which likewise caused the beat of her heart to go mad. But her hand fluttered prettily up to her breast, where the nugget was pinned inside her waist. Also his letter must have been hard to understand; she read it seventeen times.

Then she presently turned to the other. The envelop was addressed in typewriter characters; but the writing inside she knew; her brother Glen's.

DEAR OLD SIS.—Say, what in the dickens are you doing out here in the mines,—by all that's holy!—and what's all this story in "The Goldite News" about one Bronson Van Buren doing the benevolent brigand stunt with you and your maid, and shunting Searle off with the cons? Why couldn't you let a grubber know you were hiking out here to the desert? Why all this elaborate surprise, this newspaper wireless to your fond and lonesome? What's the matter with your writing hand? Is this Van brigand holding them both?

What's the matter with Searle? I wrote him two or three eons ago, when he might have been of assistance. Now I'm doing my little old eight hours a day in an effort to sink down to China. I'm on the blink, in a way; but not for long, for this is the land where Opportunity walks night and day to thump on your door, and I'll grab her by the draperies yet.

But me!—working as a common miner! Though I've got a few days off to go and look at a claim with a friend of mine; so you needn't answer till you hear again. But if Searle is dead, why don't he say so? I only touched him for a few odd dollars,—I needed only a grubstake; fifty would have done the trick,—and he doesn't come through. And nobody writes. I guess it's me for the Prodigal; but when I get next to the fatted calf, I'll get inside and eat my way out by way of his hoofs and horns.

Why couldn't you and Searle and the maid come down and have a look at me—working? It's worth it! Come on! Maybe it's easier than writing.

Yours for the rights of labor, GLEN.

Astonished by the contents of this communication, Beth read it again, in no little bewilderment, to make sure she had made no mistake. No letter from herself? No word from Searle? No answer to Glen's request for money? And he had asked for only a "few odd dollars"? There must be something wrong. He had sent the most urgent requirement for sixty thousand dollars. And she herself had written at once. Searle had assured her that he had sent him word by special messenger. Starlight! was less than a long day's ride away. Glen had already had time to see that account in the paper and write.

She had no suspicions of Bostwick. She had seen Glen's letter and read it for herself. And Searle had responded immediately with an offer to lend her brother thirty thousand dollars. There must be some mistake. Glen might be keeping his news and plans from herself, as men so often do from all their women relatives. Searle might even have overlooked the importance of keeping Glen fully posted, intending to go so soon to Starlight. Her own letter might have been miscarried.

She tried to fashion explanations; but they would not entirely fit. Searle had been gone three days. He had gone before "The Goldite News" was issued. The paper had arrived at Glen's while the man in his car had failed.

For a moment she sickened with the reflection that Searle might once more have fallen captive to the convicts still at large—with all the money. Then she presently assured herself that any news so sinister as this would have come very promptly to Goldite.

It was all too much to understand, unless Glen was ill or out of his reason. His two letters, the one to Searle and this one to herself, were so utterly conflicting! She gave it up. It was not to be solved from such a distance. Moreover, Glen wrote that he was off on a trip, and asked her to wait before replying. It was irritating, all this waiting alone here in Goldite; but there seemed to be nothing else to do.

THE long morning passed, and she fretted. In the afternoon "The Goldite News" broke its record. It printed an extra, a single sheet, in glaring type, announcing the capture of the convicts. By a bold and daring coup, it said, the entire herd of criminals, all half starved and weakened by privations, had been rounded up and transported back to prison. Unfortunately, the report was slightly inaccurate. Matt Barger, the leader in the prison delivery, and the most desperate man in the lot, had escaped the posse's vigilance, with at least two of his fellows. Of this important factor in the welcome story of the posse's work, Goldite was ignorant, and doomed to be in ignorance for a week.

THE news to Beth was a source of great relief; but her troubles in other directions were fated to increase. That evening three men called formally; formally, that is to say, in so far as dressing in their best was concerned and putting on their "company manners." But Beth and courtship were their objects, a fact that developed somewhat crudely with the smallest possible delay.

One of these persons, Billy Stitts by name, was

fairly unobjectionable as a human being, since he was a quaint, slow witted, birdlike little creature, fully sixty years old and clearly harmless. The others were as frankly in pursuit of a mate as any two mountain animals.

Beth was frightened when the purport of their visit flashed upon her. She felt a certain sense of helplessness. Mrs. Dick was too busy to be constantly present; Elsa was gone; the ways of such a place were new and wholly alarming. She felt when she made her escape from the three that her safety was by no means assured. Her room was her only retreat. Except for Mrs. Dick, there was not another woman in the house. She was wholly surrounded by men,—a rough, womanless lot whose excitements, passions, and emotions were subjected to changes constantly, as well as to heats, by the life all around them in the mines.

That night was her first of real terror. Every noise in the building, and some in the streets, made her start awake like a hunted doe, with imaginings of the most awful description. She scarcely slept at all.

The following day old Billy Stitts called again very shortly after breakfast. He proved such an amiable, womanly old chap that he was almost a comfort to the girl. She sent him to the postoffice, for a possible letter from Glen. He went with all the pleasure and alacrity of a faithful dog, apologizing most exuberantly on his return for the fact that no letter had come.

She remained in the house all day. The afternoon brought the two rough suitors of the night before, and two more equally crude. Mrs. Dick, to Beth's intense uneasiness, regarded the matter as one to be expected and quite in accord with reason and proper regulations. A good looking girl in camp, and her men folks all giving her the go-by—and what could you expect? Moreover, as some of these would-be courtiers were husky and in line for Fortune's smile, with chances as good as any other man's, she might do worse than let them come and hear what they had to say. It was no girl's need to be neglected as Searle and Van were patently neglecting Beth!

THIS was the stage in which Beth at length began to meditate on Spartan remedies. It was not to be endured! No word had come from Searle. The world might have swallowed him up. She was sick of him; sick of his ways of neglect. And as for Van— There was no one to whom she could turn, unless it was Glen. If only she could flee to her brother! She thought about it earnestly. She wished to think it possible. She tried to plan the way.

Her horse was at the hay yard. Starlight was only one day off in the desert. The convicts were no longer about. If only she could ride there—even alone! An early start, a little urging of the pony, she could fancy the journey accomplished with the utmost ease; then scornful defiance, both of Bostwick and Van.

But a woman riding in this lawless land alone! She was utterly disheartened, disillusioned, at that. It would be no less than madness. And yet it seemed as if she must go. Searle's silence, coupled with conditions here, was absolutely intolerable.

With plans decidedly hazy, nothing but a wild, bright dream really clear, she questioned Billy Stitts concerning the roads. He was familiar with every route in miles, whether roadway, trail, or "course by compass," as he termed trackless cruising in the desert. He gave her directions with the utmost minutiae of detail as to every highway to Starlight. He drew her a plan. She was sure that, after much confusion, she could have ridden to Starlight in the dark. What branches of the road to shun, which trails to choose, possibly for gaining time, what places to water a famishing horse,—all these and more she learned with feverish interest.

"Now a man would do this," and "A man would do that," said Billy time after time, till a new, fantastic notion came bounding full fledged into Beth's anxious brain and almost made her laugh with delight. She could dress as a man and ride as a man and be absolutely safe on the journey! She knew a dozen unusual arts for dyeing the skin and concealing the hair and making the hands look rough. Make-up in private theatricals, at professional hands, she had learned with exceptional thoroughness.

She would need a suit of khaki, miner's boots, a soft big hat, and a flannel shirt. They were all to be had at the store. She could order her horse to be saddled for a man. She could readily dress and escape unscathed from the house. In a word, she could do the trick!

The plan possessed her utterly. It sent her blood bounding through her veins. Her face was flushed with excitement. She loved adventure—and this would be something to do!

Nevertheless, despite all her plans, she had no real intention of attempting a scheme so mad. Subconsciously she confessed to herself that it was just the merest idle flight, not a thing to be actually ventured, or even entertained.

That night, when she was more beset, more worried, than before, however, desperation was coming upon her. The plan she had made no longer seemed the mere caprice of one in pursuit of pleasure; it appeared to be the only possible respite from conditions no longer to be borne.

WHEN the morning came, after a night of mental torture and bodily fear, her patience had been strained to the point of breaking, and resolve was stealing her courage.

The word that should have come from Searle was