

wisdom. "But you'll have to say the going to give as a kind of beacon's return for our and other people's hospitality."

### CHAPTER XXIX.

These two sat side by side and hand in hand for some time. They had so much to say to each other, such plans to form for the future; they would leave England as soon as Stephen was strong enough to travel; they had both saved money, and it seemed that Mary Seaton knew of some place in Australia where they would be welcomed as both would find work. There were frequent and long pauses in their talk, which to these battered souls were perhaps more precious than the exchange of murmured words. Little wonder that for a time the Mouse forgot everything but that the man she had loved and had deceived had forgiven her and taken her back to his heart; but suddenly she remembered Clytie and the peril in which she stood, and suddenly she sprang to her feet with a faint cry.

"I must go," she said, "go at once! Don't try to keep me, dear lad, I will come to-morrow—the same time. God bless you, Stevie!"

"I'll be well enough to start to-morrow, Mary," he said, taking both her hands and drawing her toward him to kiss her. "You've put fresh life into me, and I feel strong enough to go anywhere. Oh, let's go soon, I've got to hate this place."

"So have I, Stevie," she said, under her breath.

She hurried back, and as she was crossing the lower hall she saw Mr. Hesketh Carton enter the front one. She shrank back against the wall, holding her breath, her hand pressed to her heart; and as Hesketh Carton was shown into the drawing-room, she, after a moment's hesitation, slipped round at the back of the house and, gaining the terrace, half-crouched behind the embrasure of the drawing-room window, from whence, by craning forward, she could command a view of the room.

Hesketh Carton leaned against the mantelpiece, his hands folded behind him, his head bent, the expression of his face one of expectancy. The door opened and Clytie came in; and the Mouse, bending forward, saw a look of surprise, bewilderment and disappointment flash with the rapidity of lightning into his eyes, to be replaced by the conventional smile of greeting. Mary heard him make the stereotyped remark: "You are looking well to-day, Miss Bramley," and Clytie's smiling response, "Oh, yes, I am very well," and Mary Seaton's hands closed spasmodically.

It seemed that Mr. Carton had come up to propose a picnic; and the Mouse was straining forward, her teeth clenched, her face white, to catch the reply, when she felt a small hand grasp her arm, and turning with a stifled cry, found Mollie beside her. The shock was so great that the Mouse would have cried out aloud; but Mollie clapped her hand on the open lips and dragged her away from the window.

"No, no, let me go back!" implored Mary, with a whisper. She was shaking with fear and excitement. Mollie, too, was trembling a little, but she kept her eyes fixed on Mary's terrific ones, as she said, in a corresponding whisper:

"What are you doing here? I watched you from my window steal round here. You are watching some one. Who is it? Why are you doing that?"

"For God's sake, let me go back, Miss Mollie," implored Mary. "It's Mr. Hesketh Carton. I must watch him. He is there with Miss Clytie; the secret wants bringing up the tea. He will—Oh, let me go back, Miss Mollie! He! If you only knew!"

"Are you mad?" said Mollie. "What is it I don't know? Whatever it is, I mean to know, and at once."

Mary fought hard for calm, and against the excitement of terror which possessed her; and, bending so that her lips almost touched Mollie's ear, she whispered:

"Yes, you shall know, Miss Mollie. I will tell you everything. You have found me here, and it is too late to keep it back. Besides, I must tell some one; I must have some one to help me to save her."

"To save my sister?" said Mollie, with amazement and yet with a vague sense of some impending evil. "If you are not insane—"

Mary wrung her hands. "No, no! I am not mad, Miss Mollie. I'll tell you everything, if you'll only do as I ask you. Go into the drawing-room, and do not leave them alone together. Watch Mr. Hesketh Carton, watch his every movement, and everything he does; but don't let him see that you're doing it. Never take your eyes off him for an instant! No, no! I'm not mad. I know what I'm saying! If you will come to my room when he's gone—but not before, not before."

ask you to go to a picnic, which he is going to give as a kind of beacon's return for our and other people's hospitality."

"A picnic?" said Mollie, as casually as before, but with a little catch in her voice which she could not prevent, for the preposterous idea were crowding in on her again. "You didn't say we would go, did you? Because I shouldn't, and I won't permit you to do so. You'd catch cold, or—or eat something that would—would disagree with you."

"My dear Mollie, how ridiculous!" said Clytie, starting at her with a smile. "What are you saying?"

"That we won't go to the picnic," said Mollie, with a little catch in her voice, but with that air of resolution which her friends called obstinacy. "Here you are, perfectly well; and you want to run the risk of a picnic, one of those beastly outings at which you sit on the wet grasses or in a howling wind, or a blistering sun. Do you think I want the bother of nursing you through another illness? Not much!"

"Clytie knew it was no use arguing with Mollie when she was in one of these moods, so she shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

"You write and decline at once," said Mollie; "and I'll send James with you."

She dragged Clytie to the writing table and waited while Clytie, half-angrily protesting, wrote the note; then she went out of the room with it, followed by Clytie's "Really, you are too bad, Mollie!"

Mollie despatched James with the note, then went to her own room, and sitting down, buried her face in her hands and tried to solve the problem for herself, falling to do so she went up to Susan's room. In answer to her knock, Mary Seaton opened the door, and when Mollie had passed in, turned the key.

"Now," said Mollie, with a sternness beyond her years, "I want to know everything; and I will know it before I leave this room."

Mary Seaton was very pale, but she was quite calm now, with the hard look in her eyes with which the people at Parraluna were familiar.

"First of all, I want to know why you were watching Mr. Hesketh Carton, and what you know about him?"

"I am going to tell you, Miss Mollie," said Mary, in a low voice. "Mr. Hesketh Carton is a bad man, a cruel, wicked man. I have every reason to say so."

"You knew him before he came to the Hall?" said Mollie swiftly.

Mary stood with bent head, her teeth clenched. "Yes, Miss Mollie. I met him at the works. I knew him then—to my cost. He did me a cruel wrong, the cruellest wrong a heartless man can do to a young girl. It's not fit that I should tell you any more, Miss Mollie, and I would have told you so much if I hadn't been compelled. He left me to starve, to die, I had to go away, to leave my home, to wander about the world alone; but I, yes, I deserved it all—and worse, for listening to him; but he was a gentleman, and I was a poor, ignorant girl—and young—no, I can't tell you, and I won't tell you any more, Miss Mollie."

Mollie, young and innocent as she was, did not need to be told, and she said with downcast eyes and tightly compressed lips:

"My real name is Mary Seaton," said Mary. "I went to Australia and found a home there, and never meant to come back to England; but I had to come, Miss Mollie, to try and do my duty to one who had been very good to me, one whom I thought I could help. It wasn't by accident that I came to the Hall, Miss Mollie. I wanted to, and schemed to come."

"Why?" asked Mollie.

"To watch Mr. Hesketh Carton," said Mary. "to try and serve the person who had saved my life and been a true friend to me. I little thought how necessary it was that I should go, that Mr. Carton should have some one to watch him who knew how bad he was. Oh, Miss Mollie, I don't know how to go on, how to tell you all I've discovered, without frightening you!" she broke off.

"You won't frighten me, Susan—Mary," said Mollie. "I have my suspicions already—suspicions." "You cannot suspect anything half as bad as the truth, Miss Mollie," said Mary. She paused a moment, as if to choose her words; then, in a low voice, she went on: "It's about Sir William's will. You know who will come into the property if—Miss Clytie dies?"

Mollie bent her brows thoughtfully. "Mr. Hesketh Carton," she said; then she uttered a faint cry and shrank back. "What do you mean?" she demanded, with vague terror.

Mary's white lips twitched, and she inclined her head. "Yes, I see you guess, Miss Mollie!" she whispered. "It's that!"

"Oh, no, no!" gasped Mollie. "It's—It's impossible."

"It's true, miss," said Mary solemnly. "I've listened to the other servants while they've been talking of Miss Clytie's strange attacks; and I've asked questions and found that Miss Clytie has always fallen ill after Mr. Hesketh Carton has been to the Hall for a meal."

must be brave and strong, and keep as calm as you can help me fight with him."

"I shan't call out," said Mollie between her teeth. "If my sister is in danger, I can bear anything—to save her. Tell me, tell me, quick!"

Mary moistened her lips. "Mr. Hesketh came to lunch yesterday," she said as calmly as she could; "I was passing through the lower hall; he was on the terrace. I saw him—saw him come back into the dining-room. Ah, Miss Mollie, you can never imagine what I felt at the sight of him; the hate, the loathing! The table was laid; there was no one but himself in the room. I watched him. I saw him look round cautiously, saw him go to Clytie's place at the table, and—"

Her hand closed tightly on Mollie's arm. "I saw him—saw him pour something from a little bottle into Miss Clytie's wine-glass." Mollie would have sprung up; a cry of horror, of terror, nearly escaped her lips; but she pressed her hand upon them and drew a long breath, and waiting till Mollie was calm again, went on:

"He went back to the terrace, to the farther end, and I crept into the room and changed the glasses and brought the other up here. There was a small quantity of something like water, quite colorless, with no smell to it. I took half of it—"

Mollie turned to her with an indescribable look. "And—and it was bad, as you know, as I was meant for Miss Clytie, he was not the first time; she has been ill several times after taking a meal with Mr. Hesketh Carton. Don't speak, Miss Mollie, dear; don't cry out; be as brave as you have been—and you've been braver than I expected!—and I will show you."

She unlocked the cupboard and took out the glass with the remainder of the liquid in it. And it's evidence to send Mr. Hesketh Carton to the gallows. A cruel, wicked man, a—murderer!"

Mollie stared at the glass, shrinking from it and wringing her hands.

"Oh, Clytie, Clytie!" she moaned. "What shall I do, what shall I do?"

"There is only one thing to be done, miss," said Mary, as she returned the glass carefully to the cupboard and put the key in her pocket. "We must take her away out of his reach. What else is there to be done? Miss Clytie—you would not bring him to justice, the scandal, the public court, the shame of it all! No, Miss Clytie could not bear it. There is only one thing to do, to take her away."

"Yes, yes!" assented Mollie, agitatedly. "I see all you mean, I understand; but where?"

"To her husband," said Mary, in a low voice.

Mollie started and stared. "To her husband! Then—then—you know?"

"Yes, Miss Mollie," said Mary. "I know, I promised not to tell, but I must, for his own sake. The person who saved my life, who would have saved my little child, if he could, was Mr. Douglas—Sir Wilfrid Carton. He found me when I was wandering, starving, out there in Australia, and he befriended me and found me shelter and a home. Ah, you'd know what a gentleman, Miss Mollie! He left Australia when I was there, and came to England. It was my doing, for I found a paper, telling of Sir William's death, and I gave it to him, not letting him know that I knew who he was. I thought he would come to his own, and that I had paid him back just a very little for all his goodness to me; but he came back to Australia, unhappy, wretched; and one night when he was driven beyond himself, he told me—it broke from him almost unaware—that had happened here in England."

Mollie continued to stare at her, almost breathless with amazement.

"He loves Miss Clytie, loves her with all his heart and soul," continued Mary; "he is eating his heart out with how he wishes to see her, that wild, desperate place. Ah, you'd know what it meant, what he's suffering, if you'd seen him, heard him, the night he opened his heart to me! He's a rich man now."

"Rich!" echoed Mollie.

"Yes, they found gold," said Mary simply. "But all the gold in the world is worth nothing to him without Miss Clytie."

Mollie sprang to her feet and paced up and down. "Yes, yes," she cried. "And my sister loves him, Mary. And she's here eating her heart out, too. And Mr. Hesketh Carton!" She shuddered, and her hands clenched. "Oh, if I could only get her there, if we could only bring them together. Help me, Mary! It must be done—just how, how? Can we not send to him? He is rich now; he will not be too proud to come."

Mary shook her head. "Miss Clytie would have to wait for him, remain here; and Mr. Hesketh Carton—to think that they should both be in danger!"

"Mr. Douglas—Sir Wilfrid, in danger, too!" said Mollie, with surprise.

"Yes, Miss Mollie, there is always danger in a diggers' camp; and he is surrounded by bad and desperate characters. He might have been killed the last time I saw him if I had not been able to warn him."

Mollie uttered an exclamation. "Oh, Mary, if he is in danger—that will be quite enough for my sister. She loves Sir Wilfrid—I told you—and when a woman like my sister loves a man and he is in danger she will not let pride or anything else prevent her from going to him."

Mary Seaton drew a breath of relief. "It must be at once, Miss Mollie," she said, "before—before—She must not be allowed to run any more risks."

Mollie nodded. "Yes, we shall go at once; and no one shall know, in case in case things do not work out as we wish. We will say that we are going on the Continent, Italy, Spain, anywhere."

CHAPTER XXX.

The days of the week, the months, dragged along wearily for Jack, and he was given every opportunity of realizing the grim fact that success and wealth cannot of themselves bring happiness.

They had found gold in even larger quantities than Choze had expected, and Jack's third share already amounted to that which in less pleasurable days than these would have been considered a fortune. Choze was, naturally, in a state of continual satisfaction, and every night, as they sat beside their fire and smoked, he indulged in the anticipatory joy of planning the delightful future which his wealth would secure for him. He was going back to England when all the gold had been got, going to have a high old time in London, then buy a farm and settle down as a country gentleman.

"I suppose you'll do the same kind of thing, Douglas," he remarked one night. "You can't do better with his money than settle down in the dear old country; and you're just cut out for that line; you're a gentleman already made, whereas I shall have to learn the part. I can see you in a big old mansion of a place, married to a nobleman's daughter, or some such kind of swell, hunting the hounds and sitting on the Bench. Yes, you will be in your proper place, then."

Jack always evaded these questions with a shrug of the shoulder, and deftly changed the subject. He knew that no return to England was possible for him, and that he should probably end his days at Parraluna or Silver Ridge; he would never go back to claim Clytie, to exact of her the consequence of her sacrifice.

Choze was not given to brooding at the worst of times—few healthy men are—and, indeed, there was too much occupation for his mind to permit of much brooding. The work was incessant, and the overseeing of it, which he shared with Choze, entailed a large responsibility; and, in addition to the ordinary cares of so great an undertaking, the two men were harassed by a larger influx of lawless and rowdy element to Red Gulch. Against this large number of desperadoes the Silver Ridge men had all they could do to hold their own. Depredations were frequent, and theft, large and small, was always occurring; sometimes the offenders were captured, but by the necessity of the case, to see that justice was promptly done.

There was a kind of guerrilla warfare between the two camps, the ruffian Snyder, with whom Jack had thrice come in contact, had disappeared; but other ringleaders had taken his place, and had, so to speak, organized the villainy of Red Gulch. Jack had found his greatest difficulty to lie in the conveyance of stores, machinery and similar things from Parraluna to Silver Ridge.

It was not always possible to send sufficient escort to protect them from parties of the Red Gulch desperadoes, who somehow or other contrived to learn the dates on which the stores were dispatched, and now and again succeeded in intercepting the wagons and making off with the more portable property. Jack and Choze had issued a notice, in the shape of a warning, that these highwaymen of the backwoods would, if caught in the act, and in the event of their offering any resistance, be shot on the spot; and the notice had for a time restrained the gang. Great caution was used also in starting the wagons, so that a large escort should not be necessary for every man was wanted at the digging. And Jack was beginning to flatter himself that no further attempt need be made to hold up the supply.

But his confidence was rudely dispelled. One evening, just as the men had knocked off, Choze came into the hut with a disturbed countenance which told Jack that something was the matter.

"Anything wrong?"

"Yes," replied Choze, going for his gun and hurriedly putting on his riding-boots. "Those fellows at Red Gulch have found out by some means or other that the wagon started last night. Teddy brought me the news. Sharp lad, that boy. He was scouting round their camp before dawn this morning, and he saw four men, the worst of them, ride out of the camp. They went eastward, but Teddy, knowing that they could have no business in that direction, started to strike the Parraluna road, and presently he saw my gentlemen coming onto it; they had made a round to divert suspicion. Teddy made for home for all he was worth, and has just brought me the news. The boy was pretty high worn out, and I gave him some grub and made him turn in. Teddy will find his wages raised from next Saturday, eh, Douglas?"

"There is a future before Teddy," said Jack, quietly, as he got his gun and filled his cartridge-belt.

"I told them to get your horse ready," said Choze; "and I've got two men, old Parraluna hands, waiting with it under the clump of trees in the hollow. And I told them to hold their tongues. We want to work this little affair quietly, and to down these fellows red-handed. We'll tie 'em up and send them to the nearest magistrate."

Jack was the first to come up to the two women, who had been released, for Choze had waited a moment or two to take aim at the ruffian in front, but missed him. The two women had slipped from their horses and were clinging together, and Jack almost rode onto them, for he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing.

"Mollie!" he cried. "Mollie! You here! Am I mad! Mary!"

Mollie flung herself upon him, half-frantic with terror, but not on her own account.

"Jack, Jack!" she cried. "Yes, we are here! We came to you! But Clytie!" She looked in the direction in which Clytie had almost disappeared, and wrung her hands.

"Clytie!" he echoed hoarsely, his eyes following hers. Then, springing on his horse and shouting over his shoulder to Choze, "Take the camp to the wagon to Parraluna!" he started in pursuit of Clytie and her captors, feeling as if he were moving, acting like a man in a nightmare; and with only one desire, a desire that burnt in every fibre of his being like a consuming fire—to gain her side, to save her.

His horse was young, one he had broken in before he left Parraluna, high-bred, and as full of spirit as an Arab; but the ruffian in front of him had got a start, and Jack knew that he would have to call upon his horse to do its utmost. It was a race of greater import than the Derby, a race for life, a life so precious in his eyes that he shook in the saddle, and the veins in his temples seemed bursting.

With a word to the horse, he bent low over its neck, jockey fashion, and settled down to a swift but steady gallop, holding the horse well within his power until the moment came for the decisive rush. He gained a little, and, as he did so, he saw Clytie glance over her shoulder, and heard her cry out. A mist swam before his eyes, his lips were parched, the breath seemed to hiss as it passed through them. Once he raised his revolver and fired; but anything like an effective aim under the circumstances was impossible. The ruffian looked round as the bullet whizzed past him, and Jack fancied he could hear him laugh derisively.

Jack knew that at the bottom of the dip, down which they were descending at a breakneck pace, ran a fork of the river from the bed of which they were getting their gold. His horse would not take water readily; the time lost in forcing it through the river would give the Red Gulch man a further start. He put on the spur now; the river came in sight, shining dimly in the faint light. With his teeth clenched, and urging his horse by voice and spur, he came down the slope like an avenging god, and saw his prey climbing the bank of the river. He raised his revolver and fired again. The man swerved aside to spoil the aim, and, in doing so, jerked Clytie's horse.

It stumbled, strove to recover itself, and then fell forward. The ruffian released the bride, turned in his saddle to shake his fist and yell a volume of oaths at his pursuer, then dashed into the water, swam across, and was lost in the wood on the other side.

In another moment or two—which seemed ages, eons of dread and anxiety to Jack—he had gained Clytie's side. Almost before he had reached her, she had struggled to her feet and stood, swaying a little, as if she were dizzy and half-stunned, and with her hand pressed to her brow. He caught her on his arm—clutched her, rather—and pressed her to him protectively. He forgot in that electric moment their parting, the gulf that yawned between them.

"Clytie!" he whispered to her hoarsely. "Don't be afraid. You are safe, quite safe! It is I, Jack—Jack Douglas, you know! Are you hurt?"

He feared that she would faint, expected her to do so, but though she was white and trembling, she met his eyes bravely, and tried to smile.

"No, I am not hurt," she managed to breathe. "I am not hurt; but I am—I am a little frightened. I—I didn't think you would save me; let me—let me sit down a moment." She sank on the bank, and while he stood near her, so near that he could grip her to him if she showed the least sign of swooning, she fought for breath and composure.

"Mollie, Mary!" she panted. "Quite safe!" he said, soothingly. "They are on their way to Parraluna, where you came from. They are quite safe. Will you try and stand up, so that I may see if you are hurt by your fall?"

His voice was still thick with the emotion which thrilled through every vein; but a change had crept over his manner; he was beginning to remember their parting, the reason for it. She stood up—he gave her his hand to help her—and pushed from her forehead her hair which had been blown loose by the ride in the wind.

"Where are we?" she asked, still in a dazed way. "Can we get to Mollie?"

Jack glanced at the horses. His was standing with its legs apart, almost speckled; hers was hobbling, dead lame, feeding at a little distance.

"I am afraid not," he said, reluctantly. "The horses would not carry us until they have had a rest and some food."

"Then we must stay here and wait," she said, with evident distress. "And Mollie!"

"You need not be anxious about Mollie," he said; "she will know that I should come up to you in time."

"That is true," she said, simply.

"They stood for a moment in silence, an awkward silence; then Jack uttered a little sound of relief; he had remembered the hut.

"There is a place near here, an out-ride's hut to which I can take you. You can rest there until we can go on, or some of them come for us."

He got his horse and lifted her on to it, and, supporting her with his arm, walked beside. Not a word was spoken. Every now and then he heard her sigh and felt her quiver, as she realized all she had gone through. They reached the hut and he lifted her down and led her in.

There was a pile of sheepskins in the one corner, and he quickly made it into a rough couch.

"Lie there and close your eyes, and try to sleep," he said, as lying there and half-closing her eyes went; but, through her lashes, she watched him light a fire on the hearth, take some food—the tinned meat, biscuits, and tea which were always kept in readiness there for the visits of the out-ride—from the cupboard; watched him as he went out for water, and, coming back, set the kettle to boil; and only when he turned to, her closed her eyes, and pretended to be unconscious. For there had been an expression in those eyes which she shrank from his seeing.

"Are you rested enough to try and eat something?" he asked. "You will be better if you can. Stop; stay where you are, stay and rest. I will bring you some tea."

He brought her some food, and she tried to eat; she did manage to drink

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"Are you rested enough to try and eat something?" he asked. "You will be better if you can. Stop; stay where you are, stay and rest. I will bring you some tea."

He brought her some food, and she tried to eat; she did manage to drink

for, feeling as if he were moving, acting like a man in a nightmare; and with only one desire, a desire that burnt in every fibre of his being like a consuming fire—to gain her side, to save her.

His horse was young, one he had broken in before he left Parraluna, high-bred, and as full of spirit as an Arab; but the ruffian in front of him had got a start, and Jack knew that he would have to call upon his horse to do its utmost. It was a race of greater import than the Derby, a race for life, a life so precious in his eyes that he shook in the saddle, and the veins in his temples seemed bursting.

With a word to the horse, he bent low over its neck, jockey fashion, and settled down to a swift but steady gallop, holding the horse well within his power until the moment came for the decisive rush. He gained a little, and, as he did so, he saw Clytie glance over her shoulder, and heard her cry out. A mist swam before his eyes, his lips were parched, the breath seemed to hiss as it passed through them. Once he raised his revolver and fired; but anything like an effective aim under the circumstances was impossible. The ruffian looked round as the bullet whizzed past him, and Jack fancied he could hear him laugh derisively.

Jack knew that at the bottom of the dip, down which they were descending at a breakneck pace, ran a fork of the river from the bed of which they were getting their gold. His horse would not take water readily; the time lost in forcing it through the river would give the Red Gulch man a further start. He put on the spur now; the river came in sight, shining dimly in the faint light. With his teeth clenched, and urging his horse by voice and spur, he came down the slope like an avenging god, and saw his prey climbing the bank of the river. He raised his revolver and fired again. The man swerved aside to spoil the aim, and, in doing so, jerked Clytie's horse.

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