CHAPTER XVII.

Some Letters and a Reply.

HIS letter came to him a week later, though she had posted it the morning she took the train from Morrison. It had lain six days in the postoffice box of the East Coast company, waiting the day when one of the teamsters should call and carry it in overland. Steve had never before seen her handwriting. It was his first letter from her, yet he recognized it the instant Big Louie put it in his hand. And he was glad that night that both Pat Joe and Garry were absent from the up river camp—glad that he was to have the next hour alone. But when he broke the flap of it Big Louie, who lingered uneasily in the open doorway—even Big Louie, whose wits were not particularly keen—knew from the expression which passed over his superior's face that this heavy envelope which he had brought had not contained good news. The quick contraction of muscles which tightened his jaw was too much like a spasm of pain. For her first letter, so the sentence ran, was to be her last. She wrote "less kindly than she would have wished to write" that she and Mr. Wickersham had decided upon the 1st of May, and after the silence had become a throbbing thing Big Louie decided instinctively that he would let go until later the demand which he had planned to make for a raise to meet that raise which, so he had heard it gossiped in town, was being paid the men in the northern lumber camps. He stumbled going out and lost his balance, so that the door crashed to behind him violently. But Steve stood as he had stood when his eyes sought the first line of her note, nor did the crash penetrate his ears.

Repeatedly in the interval which had elapsed since she had bidden him good by the letter had told himself that she would not write, but the repetition had been unconvincing. He knew that now.

Barbara did not write again, and in this at least the man who loved her anticipated her correctly. The letters, however, which Garrett Devereau received each day from Miriam—bulky extra postage epistles—brought often bews of her. And these fragments Garry, knowing without being told for whom they were meant, duly delivered to Steve, in weekly or fortnightly installments, whenever the latter's duties brought him to Morrison, for Garry and Pat Joe, who had been transferred to the lower end of the work along with the bulk of the up river force, had noticed that difference too.

"Miriam says for me to keep my feet dry this cold weather," he'd tell the other man laughingly, "and Barbara sends her regards to all of us and hopes that we are making splendid headway." Or again: "Barbara's looking a little pale, Miriam writes. She says she's—er—trying to do altogether too much for her endurance."

Whatever the bit of news was Garry passed it on religiously, a little guiltily sometimes, because of his own great happiness. Once he had failed signally to read behind his friend's moody silences. His surmise concerning the reason for Steve's changed bearing was not so wide of the mark this time. Often within himself Garry's wrath seethed hot, but he was no longer as ready as he had once been with verbal, cynical criticism. Only to Pat Joe did he dare pour out his soul with that vivid incisiveness which always held Joe spellbound.

"He's eating his heart out over her," he'd explode, "over a girl who is proving every day that she isn't worth a minute's heartache of a man like him. I used to think she had brains if any of them did. I used to think that Barbara Allison was something besides a fluffy little fool. Why can't he see for himself that she's just as worthless as most of the rest of them?"

And from there, without knowing how truly funny such argument sounded coming from his lips, he would soar to wonderful heights of profanity. But save for the pleasure which he took in the pyrotechnics his outbursts made little impression upon Pat Joe. The latter maintained a sort of placid superiority, perhaps because he had learned early that this attitude aggravated Garry's rages, perhaps because he was so very certain of his man.

"I wouldn't go to getting all stirred up like this so early in the game," he'd reply with unvaried calm. "Shucks, it's too early to begin counting either man's pile of chips"—either man to both minds meaning Steve and Wickersham without the naming of names. "You are too liable to premature enthusiasms or discouragements, Garry. That's why I mostly manage to beat you as easy as he beats me whenever we throw a hand or two. Ain't you never going to learn that a man must gamble a bit on the cards still waiting to be dealt?"

And again, confidently:

"He's worried—of course he is! He ain't enjoyin' his meditations a little bit these days, but he's enjoyin' 'em more all by himself that he would be if we were up there with him, forcin' him to look everlastingly like four aces when it's deuces at present he's holding. He's worried, and that's why I don't grow nervous myself, because it is only the man who is too sure who is awful likely to finish broke. Don't you waste any pity on him yet, and I wouldn't let him hear me passing uncomplimentary words concerning his girl either if I was you. Lightning ain't particular where it strikes when it's been a long time cooped up. Every man to his own taste in such matters, says I. And shucks, man, can't you tell just from seein' 'em together that they was made for each other? If a man quit every time a woman began to put him over the jumps we'd have a dangerous decrease in marriage licenses staring us in the face. He's just learning to care more for her, that's all, and caring a lot about anybody never was a comfortable state to be in. It's entirely too uncertain and unsettling. But you wouldn't enjoy not caring about anybody at all your self, would you?"

Garry admitted that he wouldn't.

"Well, then, don't waste your time pitying him." A cold gleam flickered in those bleached blue eyes. "Don't you suppose I'd have taken apart long ago this animated ice chest who is making all the trouble just to see what makes him so cold if I didn't know I'd be spoiling the big show? Couldn't you see without my tellin' you that I'd rise up some day and leave him looking like a premature blast after all I've learned he's plannin' to slip us if I wasn't sure that he's going to get it worse than I could ever give it to him, from that girl herself? Well, I would. It makes me shiver, that man; makes me crawl and itch to take his head in one hand and his throat in the other and exert a little strength in opposite directions. Give our entry time! The game is running dead against him at present, I'll admit, but he's husbanding his chips. He ain't drawing wild and squandering his chances. And he's only begun to play."

Before snow came that fall Steve had recovered his outward confidence at least. He had begun to hope again while he waited and labored prodigiously against the coming of spring. But in his heart he was no longer sure. He could not summon back that serene self surety which toward the end had shaken even the girl's certainty in herself. He could no longer argue convincingly with a vision of her as he had often argued with Barbara herself that his way would be her way in the end, for he had begun to realize the width of that gulf which he knew must seem to exist between them, if not to her then to the eyes of others of her world.

It was his memories which gave him consolation those long nights, but they also gave him doubt. Remembering the daintiness of her as she had come to him the night of her party, recalling the things to which she had been accustomed since she had opened her eyes on the first light of day, he began to ask himself, as every man like him had asked who ever loved a woman, how in any fairness he could expect her to accept the little which he could offer in return. To Steve and Pat Joe, to the men of his gang, his confidence was that of the old, old Steve who ten years before had cocked his head at one of Allison's switch engines and promised gravely, "I'll get to be girlin' one of them for myself some day." But his heart ached, and when that ache became so leaden that he couldn't endure it any longer in silence he confided it to the one person in his life who was best calculated to understand. Diffidently he broached the subject with Miss Sarah, approaching it in a roundabout fashion lest Caleb to deceive that bright eyed little lady.

"Garry is saving his money against the fatal day," he laughed one night. "He has become a rank miser. Joe says he goes for days at a time borrowing his tobacco, and he won't play anything but penny ante now when he can be coaxed to play at all."

Miss Sarah was too kind to look at him directly that evening.

"The regeneration of Garry is one of the things which had made my life most happy," she answered. And then, paving the way for what she knew was on his mind: "I suppose you will be surprising us yourself one of these days. And no doubt you'll be just as happily positive as Garry is that your choice is the only one in the world."

They were alone in the big living room. Caleb was still in town gossiping with Hardwich Elliott. And Steve's bruised smile clutched at Miss Sarah's heart.

"I" he overdid his amusement. "I have lived too much alone, I'm afraid, ever to prove very attractive to any woman's fancy. Bachelors are not always born, they are sometimes the habits of loneliness."

"Stuff and nonsense!" the good woman ridiculed him. "Why—why, if it weren't for a suspicion that you might have your eye on some small person or other I'd drop everything and hunt one up for you myself. Why, Stephen, what a remark for me to hear from you!"

Both were silent for a moment.

"Marriage is a mighty expensive proposition," he commented at length profoundly.

"Is Garry such a plutocrat any more?"

"That is not a fair illustration for us to employ," he countered, and Barbara Allison was not the only woman who loved his lazily final statements. "Both Garry and Miriam have been taught that there are worse things than the hardship of making last year's limousine do for another season."

Miss Sarah laughed at this drollery. She was a better antagonist than most. She had practiced on Caleb.

"Can't one girl learn what another has been taught?" she wanted to know. "Stephen, do you mean to sit there and infer that you could continue to care for a girl who could not care for you just for yourself?"

His reply told her how tired he had become in trying to stem the tide of doubt alone. It warned her, too, that she had gone too close, for he veered off sharply. Steve persisted in generalities, but he wanted to talk.

"I have been wondering if that is not an old fashioned attitude," he said. "Women, they tell us, have broadened since they usurped many places in the business world once held by men. They are looking mighty keen eyed toward the vote now and a share in the legislation of their growing affairs, or at least so they explain. You have heard many men say 'business is business.' Maybe you have watched

"I could care for such a girl—yes."

quite a few charming brides walk to the altar and wondered if that wasn't their sentiment too."

She chose to be suddenly vexed with him.

"I do not like such humor, and of course you are joking. I have heard Garrett Devereau talk in just such a strain too often to be amused by it. And if you mean—"

"If I meant it I was crying the baby," stated the man coldly, and Miss Sarah knew that he was rebuking himself. "I could care for such a girl—yes. But I doubt if I would marry a woman who had even the smallest doubt. There are too many sharp places to be smoothed over without chancing that tragedy of discontent. It's merely habit that's to blame again, that's all." He cast about for a parallel. "One does not miss sugar so very much from a meal until he knows he can't have it. And then—well, Miss Sarah, I have many times talked peevishly for a man, because there was none to be had."

"We are talking of women. What about salt?" she inquired quickly.

"That is very indispensable, too, but"—

"Of the two which do you always take care shall not be missing from your pack whenever you turn into the woods?"

"I see where you are heading, but"—

"I do not like dissemblance, Stephen," she warned. "You know without the salt of love the sugar of life can grow sickeningly cloying."

He did not win his argument, but defeat gave him far more happiness than could have come from victory. Leaving her that night, he closed his hand over her delicate fingers in a clasp which left her smiling in wonder after he had gone. She watched horse and rider disappear into the whiteness of the new winter till both were lost to her sight.

"Bless the boy!" she murmured then. "Bless the boy!" And to Caleb, her brother, when he came stamping in: "I surely must take a hand with these children. They have been left to their own devices long enough."

Caleb had recovered his good natured view of the whole affair, he was given to grinning these days at her flutterings. On more than one occasion he told her none too flatteringly that she made him think of an officious hen with a brood which a high rate of mortality and prowling night raiders had left bereft of all save two of her hatch. But this particular witticism did not bother her in the least, perhaps because she realized how pat the comparison was. Instead of silencing him she showed him the letter which she constructed some days later—constructed most painstakingly the second week in December. She deigned to read it aloud to him before she dispatched it on its journey.

"Barbara, dear child," she wrote, "this is the appeal of a lonesome spinster lady who finds that winter, still only a lusty infant here, is the season for younger, warmer pulses. I am very fond of Caleb's continual company—that is, with nothing to leave it. The keenest of epigrammarians, my dear, becomes very commonplace, you know, to ears too long tuned to one voice. So I am writing you in dignified desperation to come to me this holiday season. Caleb is not always as epigrammatic as I could wish. I am going to be positive that you will come unless you have already made other plans. And, on second thought, if you have already done so I am going to fall back upon the privileged tyranny of one who once carried you in her arms. You must come to me this Christmas."

There was another whole paragraph of rambling, repeated arguments and then a full page devoted to the beauties of the hills and season.

"The days are diamond brilliant," she wrote, "and the nights as dryly cold and crisp as Caleb's few last cherished bottles of champagne. We have a foot of snow, two feet in the ell of the house where the mint bed lies, and that has afforded Caleb much peace of mind too. The roots will live nicely under their warm blanket, you see—all of which must read frivolously to you, coming from staid Miss Sarah. I can only plead that already I must be less lonely for anticipation of your arrival. Are you well? You will find new roses for your cheeks in this climate. And you may telegraph your acceptance this once if you are too busy to write, although you know I deplore the lack of those punctilios which once made of all custom and etiquette a most charming thing."

It was signed "Yours, my dear, Sarah Hunter."

There was a quaint twist to the letter "S," sharp angles in the chirography which a newer decade of femininity might have found sadly lacking in a largeness of loops now indispensable as indication of "character." And there was a postscript, of course.

"Stephen O'Mara has been several times to dinner since your departure. He is working very hard, but most successfully, I am sure, for he appears to be very happy. He is thinner than he was, but who could have guessed that the boy he was would grow to be such a handsome man! Men with eyes like his and such voices used to break the hearts of susceptible maids when I was sixteen. Do come! S. H."

She read it aloud from beginning to end, nor did she falter much when Caleb greeted the postscript with a shout of joy. Caleb was most high spirited these days, for the line in regard to the progress of Steve's work was in truth an understatement if anything, even though the assurance of his happiness might have been called a misconstruance of facts.

"What do you think of it?" his sister asked pleasantly, when she had finished reading. "Will it do?"

"If you mean will it fetch her, I can only say heaven knows!" Indeed, he was enjoying himself. "You feel positive that she cares for him, you say? But I thought you were always inclined to believe Steve rather easy to look at, even as a boy?"

"I was," maintained Miss Sarah. Her voice grew girlish. "Do you remember the night you gave him my old hunting coat, Cal, and he went to sleep with it in his arms?"

Some of the teasing note left her brother's voice.

"Then why do you tell Barbara—why do you seem to infer"— He floundered hopelessly.

"Stupid!" said Miss Sarah. "Will she come?"

"She won't!" he stated solidly.

When he spoke in that tone Miss Sarah always chose to believe the contrary, and events in this instance proved her right. Barbara did not write. She wrote a long letter full of little twists and turns which led at last to the subject which Miss Sarah had mentioned so parenthetically.

"I'm delighted at the prospect of getting away from town for a week," she closed as she had opened her reply—"delighted at Mr. O'Mara's splendid success. Last night I overheard father telling some business associates that he would one day be the biggest power in the north country, unless something happened to check him soon. That was very flattering, wasn't it? It will make you very proud, I know. Tell Mr. O'Mara I wished to be recalled to him. As I have already warned you in this letter, father insists on coming with me. I think he must be a little tired of the city himself, for he is very restless. And remind Uncle Cal that I am to have the wishbone or I will not come at all."

This reply Miss Sarah also read aloud to her brother in a voice that was not quite Christian, however, for it was gloating in tone.

"There!" she breathed. "And, Cal, aren't you ashamed sometimes to have your judgment so often refuted by a mere woman?"

She fails to mention whether she ever noticed the "color of his eyes" (Caleb choked a little—"or—or the heartbreaking quality of his voice. Maybe she hasn't noticed 'em yet herself, eh?"

Miss Sarah went upstairs to her desk and she wrote two letters that night before she retired. One went to Barbara. The other had not so far to travel, but it was longer in reaching its destination.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Blue Flannel and Corduroy.

THE world was snowbound—at that small world which lay between the hills in the valley at Thirty-Mile. For two days it snowed so heavily that all work paused but intermittently at the up river camp, and then, two days before Christmas, the mercury dropped sharply into the bulbs and the weather cleared.

From his window Stephen O'Mara watched the heavy loads creak up to the storehouse door. He watched the drivers throw tarpaulins over the loads and knew that they were too weary to unload that night. And he was still there at the frosted pane when the three horn, Big Louie chief pawing ahead, hove into view again from the direction of the stables and came straight toward his own shack. He opened the door and bade them enter before they had had a chance to knock. The swagger in the shoulders of two of them told him what to expect. Big Louie was only clumsy, as usual.

"You did well to make it," he told the latter kindly, as he always addressed him. His nod to the others who reeked of white whisky, was in part a question, in no wise a welcome. "Well?" he asked.

Apparently there had been a conference beforehand, for there was no hesitancy on the part of Fallon, who had been ordained spokesman.

"We've come for our time," he growled.

Steve nodded gravely.

"I see," he murmured. "May I ask what's your grievance this time?"

They were satellites of Harrigan. Because of that he had kept them all where his eyes could find them at times. And, even though their arch leader in discontent had not crossed his path in many days, he listened now to an echo of Harrigan's activities.

"They're offering three a day in the reserve camps." Fallon should not have gloated. "Three a day and a bonus for the high week cut. We're going back to the river."

"I see," again observed Steve. "Are they guaranteeing this wage for as long as you want to work?"

Apparently they had decided, too, that there should be no bargaining.

"We want our time," Fallon reiterated. "This is going to be a man's year on the river!"

"You also?" Steve inquired of Shayne.

"Yes, me also," he came back, "an' a hundred others before the ice goes out."

Big Louie he had given up for lost before that, and yet it was with Big Louie that Steve made a sincere effort.

"I'd like to have you stay," he faced the third man. "I need you, for you can do more with horses than any man I know. You are worth three a day to me. Do you care to think it over?"

Big Louie's eyes had been mournful when he stumbled in out of the cold. They were that now. He started to turn toward the window for a look at the stables and then thought better of it. Resolutely, for him, he shook his head.

"I am done—me," he muttered. "I work for no company that will leave honest men to starve."

It was hopeless from the start, yet Steve tried again.

"I can promise you work as long as you are able to hold a rein," he offered, but he moved nearer the door while he was speaking. "That is all I can promise."

Perhaps Fallon believed that Big Louie was weakening. Perhaps he felt that the situation was too highly dramatic to be wasted, for he made a wide flourish with one hand.

"We want our time, and we want it now," he threatened. "We're going to show you who boosses this river before we're done with you!"

Fallon shouldn't have gloated; he shouldn't have threatened. And Shayne shouldn't have smiled. Steve had slipped the latch loose. Now he swung open the door.

"Call for your time at the Morrison office," he said evenly, "and if you're going—why, go!"

By collar and belt he swung him back and drove him sprawling into a drift.

"Are you in a hurry, too, Shayne?" he asked pleasantly, and Shayne buried his head beside Fallon's in the snow. Then Steve closed the door carefully and turned again to Big Louie.

"Louie," he said, "I make it a rule to urge no man who does not wish to stay. If it needs persuasion to keep you I do not want you here. But you are running with the wrong crowd, Louie. You'll learn it some day, but some day may be too late."

The big, dreamy eyed man was hardly listening, but he gestured toward the door. And Steve treated his departure kindly, as he had always treated his presence.

Outside where Shayne and Fallon had picked themselves up Big Louie hesitated and fumbled in his pocket with a cold cramped hand. He deliverd the letter for Stephen which had been intrusted to him by Miss Sarah. There are many men like Big Louie who are pitifully faithful until events outstrip their intellects. Steve was sorry for him, and a half hour later, after he had read Miss Sarah's prim note requesting his presence at dinner at 7:30 Christmas eve, he grew sorrier still while he watched the ill assorted trio meet once more, blanket packs upon their backs and snowshoes on their feet. Big Louie had joined the men now from the direction of the stables. There were words between them, for Steve saw the huge man's arm lift to strike Shayne to the ground and then drop harmlessly back to his side. And Steve knew what that bit of pantomime meant. Big Louie had been to bid his team goodby. There was a smudge of brown sugar across his coat, though the watcher was too far away to see that. But he knew that Big Louie had been crying, knew that Shayne had smiled. It was the second time that Shayne had smiled that evening—his second bad mistake. Long after they had disappeared into the north toward the Reserve company's camps Steve wondered that it had not cost him his life.

Miss Sarah's note which had been almost a week on the way was very primly correct, but the inevitable postscript which underran it sounded a more intimate note.

"We are not excessively formal as a rule, Stephen," she wrote, "so a dinner jacket will be adequate. As I am expecting two other guests besides your friends, Mr. Morgan and Garrett Devereau, I must ask you to let no business matters interfere with your promptness."

Steve dared not let himself wonder who those other guests would prove to be. Miriam Burrell he knew, had already written Garry that this was to

"And if you're going—why, go!"

be the saddest Christmas and the merriest that she had ever known, giving as respective reasons her inability to be with him and the fact that she was so entirely his. Because he would not let himself hope this time he was not disappointed, or at least so he told himself, when he found only Dexter Allison with Caleb the next afternoon near 6. And on a sudden thought his eyes went roving around the room then, looking for Archibald Wickersham. But Miss Sarah gave him no time for a protracted scrutiny.

"Your room is ready, Stephen," she told him and steered him toward the stairs. "You have an hour in which to dress, and you know already that I am old maidenishly strict."

And then, three-quarters of an hour later, when he had dressed and turned to the stairway Barbara was there at the foot of the flight waiting for him to appear. In a little low pink satin gown that made rounded her slenderness—made her appear even smaller than she was—she gave him an elaborate courtesy from the main floor and flung up at him her laughter.

"Merry Christmas, Sir Galahad!" she called.

Steve, who was only dimly aware of the fact that Garry and Pat Joe had arrived, the latter guilty of his first dinner jacket and enormously proud of his guilt, stood looking at Barbara while she was chattering at him without hearing distinctly a word she spoke.

"You look as though I were a wraith," the girl accused him. "Am I so pale after a few weeks of sophisticated city air?"

"I thought you looked like—shall I tell you what I thought?"

"Most certainly," she was forced to insist. "Wasn't it a bald enough invitation for a pretty speech?"

"I thought you looked like a small pink bon bon," responded Steve leisurely, and, while the rest laughed at her discomfiture, Pat Joe leaned over and nudged Garry.

"What'd I tell you?" he demanded. "What'd I tell you? Say, ain't he working well tonight?"

There was no keeping the girl within doors after dinner was over. She ran upstairs and changed into moccasins and white blanket coat and skirt that barely met the moccasin tops halfway. And Steve, who had changed, too, and was waiting for her when she came down, had knotted a crimson scarf about the middle of his belted jacket to match the white one twisted about her throat.

The man and girl climbed far that night in quite unbroken silence. They had reached the crest of the first hill and stopped with the higher ridges in front of them, black bulks filigreed with white, before Barbara decided that she would have to make him talk.

From the first he talked stilly that night. On other occasions she had noticed how his mind seemed to veer, whimsically, from one topic to another with little apparent continuity of thought, only to swing back again just when she was beginning to feel that she had lost the thread of inference to point his argument with parallels that were new and delightful wisdoms to her ears. But tonight his grave voiced divergences oftener than not left her thoughts behind his thoughts.

"It is a very easy country to get lost in," he remarked when he had had to insist that his sense of direction and not hers should be the one to be trusted.

"It doesn't seem complicated," he pondered. "To a man who has come into the world with his sense of north and south and east and west all safely relegated to his backbone instead of having to depend upon the flighty functions of his brain for his guide it's about the simplest thing there is. He finds his way without thinking about the lay of the land or moss on the trees or the sun or stars. But the other one—the one who has to stop and reason that he must travel so many miles to the west to reach home in the afternoon because he came that many in the morning—why, he even gets to doubting his compass, until night catches him without a roof over his head and no wood collected for a campfire."

"I shall try to remember that," she answered saberly. "If ever I am lost I—I shall try to wait confidently for daylight and keep my eyes to the fore."

She was near to tears when he stooped and knelt in the snow to tighten a thong slipping from one webbed foot. Below them stretched a plain of shimmering frost points, bounded by inscrutable walls of black timber. Somewhere within the warmer heart of a swamp a fox yapped hungrily; somewhere within her own heart his whimsical discourse had awakened a sense of the mystery of his wilderness—its friendship for those who love it—its implacable enmity for those who do not understand. And he looked up just when that emotion came flooding into her face.

"It is wonderful—wonderful—wonderful!" she breathed, throwing out both arms with that ecstatic impulsiveness which he knew so well. "Now I know why you said men always return to it once they have felt its spell."

"You are lovelier than you know!" came back from him, almost gruffly again, and she could not parry with lightness so swift and strained a speech.

"You always tell me very pretty things," was all she could think of to say in reply.

But then, rising, he flung back his head and shook himself as if throwing off a burden too restraining and irksome. He laughed aloud, and from that minute until he loosed her feet from the snowshoes he was more like her "blue flannel and corduroy" lover again. But his attack no longer made her fear herself.

"If I cared for you, yes," he made her admit before he would let her go in that night. "If I cared for you my engagement to no man could stand in the way. But that is the reason I know I do not care."

She had seen him grave with doubt that night, seen him fight to shake it off. There was doubt in his answer now.

"Because I am not"— But he could not force himself to ask it.

"Because I could never care as you would demand the woman should care who marries you."

She wanted to help him a little, she didn't know just why. Pity is a very dangerous emotion when pity is not sought.

"You are loving me that way this minute," he said, but his words were dogged. "Loving me more than you know."

There was neither reference to her letter nor mention of that night at Thirty Mile when she had stolen out to bid him goodby. Other long tramps followed on other pale and zero nights, but his attitude remained much the same.

* * * * * * *

"You will be coming back," he told her again the day he put her on the train. "You will be back in the spring?"

It was his old, hopeful challenge, with all the hope left out.

"I think so," she faltered in return. "I mean to come and see the completion of your work if father will let me." She knew a moment of confusion. "I wonder many nights if you are safe up here in the hills."

Indeed, Miss Sarah had made progress, though the surface indications were small. The girl would never think of him again simply in terms of blue flannel and corduroy. But that was not the most disturbingly vivid memory which she carried away with her.

"I love you." He framed the words silently as the train was pulling out, and, although their positions were reversed, the moment was so reminiscent of that day when he had leaned out of her father's switch engine cab and asked if she wanted a ride that it made her throat ache.

She waved a small gloved hand to him on the platform.

She did not want to go.

CHAPTER XIX.

Setting the Stage.

THERE are two interviews which should be mentioned here if for no other reason than merely because they were both so entirely the outcome of Miss Sarah's Christmas party. Neither of them was long. The last one which took place between Wickersham and the girl he was to marry was the briefer of the two. But her prettily serious argument that the 1st of May was too early a date for their wedding in view of the work which he had to do and her own state of unpreparedness left him so white of face that she felt guiltily sorry for him for many days to follow—felt guiltier still at the relief she experienced when she had established that reprieve. The other interview was longer and took place days earlier, but it was no more of a delight to Archibald Wickersham.

Dexter Allison had returned home almost a week in advance of his daughter, pleading stress of business, but in spite of the demands upon his time and attention he had found it impossible to forget the night of the dinner, when he had watched his daughter's eyes upon Stephen O'Mara's face.

He had been troubled more than a little since his Christmas trip to Morrison. The night before New Year's Wickersham was announced at 9. He was thinking of Barbara's mother when he beckoned his guest to a chair, shook his head over his red cheeks and offered a cigar.

"Devilish cold weather," he grunted none too graciously, for he had not wanted to be disturbed just then.

The younger man admitted that it was. His mind plainly was not upon the weather, but he found difficulty in introducing a topic of his own choosing. Outspokenness had never been one of Archie Wickersham's boldest characteristics, so Allison assisted him now. Allison liked a man to be outspoken.

"Well," he demanded, "let's hear. What's on your mind?"

There are times when hatred will betray almost any man. Hatred now led Wickersham to speak not wisely, but well upon.

"I want you to refuse to renew my name on the East Coast notes," he said. "They are due on the second."

Few men had ever said "I want you to" to Dexter Allison and, as he put it, "got away with it to any great extent." And of all nights this one in particular was the least likely to prove propitious for such an attempt. That was Wickersham's oversight.

"So!" said Dexter. "So! Well, now, for your reason."

Wickersham had not learned until after Barbara's departure that she was spending the holidays in Morrison, for he had himself expected to be away. And it is only fair to the girl to say that she had honestly forgotten to apprise him of her plan, in her real excitement at going, but finding it out for himself had not made the fact any pleasanter to Wickersham.

"It should be clear enough without explanation"—he enunciated each word nicely—"if you want that road they are building."

Allison glanced up, surprised at the tone employed.

"Meaning of course I do," he mused. "And yet—and yet I don't know!"

Fear burned in the tall, thin man's eyes that night—fear that made his hatred for the absent man who was teaching him fear anything but a pretty thing to watch.

"I've tried to buy off their men." He was holding himself with an effort that made him tremble. "I've held up their supplies on every track that we control, but they've had the luck with them. They've made up lost time by working day and night. I've"—

"You've set a drunken fool to steal his plans," drawled the other with deadly sarcasm, "like a second rate one night stand villain. Don't forget to mention that too!" His lounging body shifted a little.

"Archie, do you remember what I told you about that woods rat, as you called him once? Did I tell you that he would fight? Well, listen, and listen closely, while I repeat it for you. He hasn't even warmed to it yet!"

Wickersham went yellow at that, but his icy self control held firm. He did not break into vituperation this night. He smiled, though his voice was only a whisper.

"Men have dropped out of sight before now in those woods," he hissed. "I'll win or I'll see that he lies and rots in one of his own sink holes."

A big voice is a wonderful weapon at times. Allison's booming bass made Wickersham's threat seem only mean and hollow when the heavy man leaped to his feet and shook a finger under that high bridged nose.

"No, you won't!" he snapped. "No, you won't! And if I didn't know, after hearing you talk, that you haven't stuff enough in you to be dangerous I'd fix you so you'd be in no condition to bushwhack anybody for the next six months. I'm in a bad mood tonight. Drop out of sight, eh? You'll play this fair—fair at least as I see it by my standards, and they are better standards than yours. You've come dictating to me, ordering me to slip a knife into their backs. Are you that kind of a sneak? Did you think I was? Now, listen again, and listen well, for I mean what I say!

"I want that railroad if the man who is building it is too weak to keep me from taking it away from him. But if I don't get it on such a basis I'll

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