

CHAPTER VIII.

THE brief hour of darkness that preceded the dawn was that night intensified by a dense smoke, which, after blotting out horizon and sky, dropped a thick veil on the highroad and the silent streets of Indian Spring. As the buggy containing Sheriff Dunn and Brace dashed through the obscurity, Brace suddenly turned to his companion.

"Some one ahead!"

The two men bent forward over the dashboard. Above the steady plunging of their own horse-hoofs they could hear the quicker irregular beat of other hoofs in the darkness before them.

"It's that horse thief!" said Dunn, in a savage whisper. "Bear to the right, and hand me the whip."

A dozen cuts of the cruel lash, and their maddened horse, bounding at each stroke, broke into a wild canter. The frail vehicle swayed from side to side at each spring of the elastic shafts. Steadying himself by one hand on the low rail, Dunn drew his revolver with the other. "Sing out to him to pull up, or we'll fire. My voice is clean gone," he added, in a husky whisper.

They were so near that they could distinguish the bulk of a vehicle careering from side to side in the blackness ahead. Dunn deliberately raised his weapon. "Sing out!" he repeated impatiently. But Brace, who was still keeping in the shadow, suddenly grasped his companion's arm.

"Hush! It's *not* Buckskin," he whispered hurriedly.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't you see we're gaining on him?" replied the other contemptuously. Dunn grasped his companion's hand and pressed it silently. Even in that supreme moment this horseman's tribute to the fugitive Buckskin forestalled all baser considerations of pursuit and capture!

In twenty seconds they were abreast of the stranger, crowding his horse and buggy nearly into the ditch; Brace keenly watchful, Dunn suppressed and pale. In half a minute they were leading him a length; and when their horse again settled down to his steady work, the stranger was already lost in the circling dust that followed them. But the victors seemed disappointed. The obscurity had completely hidden all but the vague outlines of the mysterious driver.

"He's not our game, any way," whispered Dunn. "Drive on."

"But if it was some friend of his," suggested Brace uneasily, "what would you do?"

"What I *said* I'd do," responded Dunn savagely. "I don't want five minutes to do it in, either; we'll be half an hour ahead of that d—d fool, whoever he is. Look here; all you've got to do is to put me in the trail to that cabin. Stand back of me, out of gun-shot, alone, if you like, as my deputy, or with any number you can pick up as my posse. If he gets by me as Nellie's lover, you may shoot him or take him as a horse thief, if you like."

"Then you won't shoot him on sight?"

"Not till I've had a word with him."

"But"—

"I've chirped," said the sheriff gravely. "Drive on."

For a few moments only the plunging hoofs and rattling wheels were heard. A dull, lurid glow began to define the horizon. They were silent until an abatement of the smoke, the vanishing of the gloomy horizon line,

and a certain impenetrability in the darkness ahead showed them they were nearing the Carquinez Woods. But they were surprised on entering them to find the dim aisles alight with a faint mystic Aurora. The tops of the towering spires above them had caught the gleam of the distant forest fires, and reflected it as from a gilded dome.

"It would be hot work if the Carquinez Woods should conclude to take a hand in this yer little game that's going on over on the Divide yonder," said Brace, securing his horse and glancing at the spires overhead. "I reckon I'd rather take a back seat at Injin Spring when the show commences."

Dunn did not reply, but, buttoning his coat, placed one hand on his companion's shoulder, and sullenly bade him "lead the way." Advancing slowly and with difficulty, the desperate man might have been taken for a peaceful invalid returning from an early morning stroll. His right hand was buried thoughtfully in the side-pocket of his coat. Only Brace knew that it rested on the handle of his pistol.

From time to time the latter stopped and consulted the faint trail with a minuteness that showed recent careful study. Suddenly he paused. "I made a blaze hereabouts to show where to leave the trail. There it is," he added, pointing to a slight notch cut in the trunk of an adjoining tree.

"But we've just passed one," said Dunn, "if that's what you are looking after, a hundred yards back."

Brace uttered an oath, and ran back in the direction signified by his companion. Presently he returned with a smile of triumph.

"They've suspected something. It's a clever trick, but it won't hold water. That blaze which was done to muddle you was cut with an axe; this which I made was

done with a bowie-knife. It's the real one. We're not far off now. Come on."

They proceeded cautiously, at right angles with the "blazed" tree, for ten minutes more. The heat was oppressive; drops of perspiration rolled from the forehead of the sheriff, and at times, when he attempted to steady his uncertain limbs, his hands shrank from the heated, blistering bark he touched with ungloved palms.

"Here we are," said Brace, pausing at last. "Do you see that biggest tree, with the root stretching out half-way across to the opposite one?"

"No; it's further to the right and abreast of the dead brush," interrupted Dunn quickly, with a sudden revelation that this was the spot where he had found the dead bear in the night Teresa escaped.

"That's so," responded Brace, in astonishment.

"And the opening is on the other side, opposite the dead brush," said Dunn.

"Then you know it?" said Brace suspiciously.

"I reckon!" responded Dunn, grimly. "That's enough! Fall back!"

To the surprise of his companion, he lifted his head erect, and with a strong, firm step walked directly to the tree. Reaching it, he planted himself squarely before the opening.

"Halloo!" he said.

There was no reply. A squirrel scampered away close to his feet. Brace, far in the distance, after an ineffectual attempt to distinguish his companion through the intervening trunks, took off his coat, leaned against a tree, and lit a cigar.

"Come out of that cabin!" continued Dunn, in a clear, resonant voice. "Come out before I drag you out!"

"All right, 'Captain Scott.' Don't shoot, and I'll come

down," said a voice as clear and as high as his own. The hanging strips of bark were dashed aside, and a woman leaped lightly to the ground.

Dunn staggered back. "Teresa! by the Eternal!"

It was Teresa! the old Teresa! Teresa, a hundred times more vicious, reckless, hysterical, extravagant, and outrageous than before, — Teresa, staring with tooth and eye, sunburnt and embrowned, her hair hanging down her shoulders, and her shawl drawn tightly around her neck.

"Teresa it is! the same old gal! Here we are again! Return of the favorite in her original character! For two weeks only! Houph la! Tshk!" and, catching her yellow skirt with her fingers, she pirouetted before the astounded man, and ended in a pose. Recovering himself with an effort, Dunn dashed forward and seized her by the wrist.

"Answer me, woman! Is that Low's cabin?"

"It is."

"Who occupies it besides?"

"I do."

"And who else?"

"Well," drawled Teresa slowly, with an extravagant affectation of modesty, "nobody else but us, I reckon. Two's company, you know, and three's none."

"Stop! Will you swear that there is n't a young girl, his — his sweetheart — concealed there with you?"

The fire in Teresa's eye was genuine as she answered steadily, "Well, it ain't my style to put up with that sort of thing; at least, it was n't over at Yolo, and you know it, Jim Dunn, or I would n't be here."

"Yes, yes," said Dunn hurriedly. "But I'm a d—d fool, or worse, the fool of a fool. Tell me, Teresa, is this man Low your lover?"

Teresa lowered her eyes as if in maidenly confusion.

"Well, if I'd known that *you* had any feeling of your own about it — if you'd spoken sooner" —

"Answer me, you devil!"

"He is."

"And he has been with you here — yesterday — to-night?"

"He has."

"Enough." He laughed a weak, foolish laugh, and turning pale, suddenly lapsed against a tree. He would have fallen, but with a quick instinct Teresa sprang to his side, and supported him gently to a root. The action over they both looked astounded.

"I reckon that was n't much like either you or me," said Dunn slowly, "was it? But if you'd let me drop then you'd have stretched out the biggest fool in the Sierras." He paused, and looked at her curiously. "What's come over you; blessed if I seem to know you now."

She was very pale again, and quiet; that was all.

"Teresa! d—n it, look here! When I was laid up yonder in Excelsior I said I wanted to get well for only two things. One was to hunt you down, the other to marry Nellie Wynn. When I came here I thought that last thing could never be. I came here expecting to find her here with Low, and kill him — perhaps kill her too. I never even thought of you; not once. You might have risen up before me — between me and him — and I'd have passed you by. And now that I find it's all a mistake, and it was you, not her, I was looking for, why" —

"Why," she interrupted bitterly, "you'll just take me, of course, to save your time and earn your salary. I'm ready."

"But *I'm* not, just yet," he said faintly. "Help me up." She mechanically assisted him to his feet.

"Now stand where you are," he added, "and don't move beyond this tree till I return."

He straightened himself with an effort, clenched his fists until the nails were nearly buried in his palms, and strode with a firm, steady step in the direction he had come. In a few moments he returned and stood before her.

"I've sent away my deputy—the man who brought me here, the fool who thought you were Nellie. He knows now he made a mistake. But who it was he mistook for Nellie he does not know, nor shall ever know, nor shall any living being know, other than myself. And when I leave the wood to-day I shall know it no longer. You are safe here as far as I am concerned, but I cannot screen you from others prying. Let Low take you away from here as soon as he can."

"Let him take me away? Ah, yes. For what?"

"To save you," said Dunn. "Look here, Teresa! Without knowing it, you lifted me out of hell just now; and because of the wrong I might have done her—for her sake, I spare you and shirk my duty."

"For her sake!" gasped the woman—"for her sake! Oh, yes! Go on."

"Well," said Dunn gloomily, "I reckon perhaps you'd as lieve left me in hell, for all the love you bear me. And maybe you've grudge enough agin me still to wish I'd found her and him together."

"You think so?" she said, turning her head away.

"There, d—n it! I did n't mean to make you cry. Maybe you would n't, then. Only tell that fellow to take you out of this, and not run away the next time he sees a man coming."

"He did n't run," said Teresa, with flashing eyes. "I—I—I sent him away," she stammered. Then, suddenly turning with fury upon him, she broke out, "Run! Run from you! Ha, ha! You said just now I'd a grudge against you. Well, listen, Jim Dunn. I'd only to bring

you in range of that young man's rifle, and you'd have dropped in your tracks like"—

"Like that bar, the other night," said Dunn, with a short laugh. "So *that* was your little game?" He checked his laugh suddenly—a cloud passed over his face. "Look here, Teresa," he said, with an assumption of carelessness that was as transparent as it was utterly incompatible with his frank, open selfishness. "What became of that bar? The skin—eh? That was worth something?"

"Yes," said Teresa quietly. "Low exchanged it and got a ring for me from that trader Isaacs. It was worth more, you bet. And the ring did n't fit either"—

"Yes," interrupted Dunn, with an almost childish eagerness.

"And I made him take it back, and get the value in money. I hear that Isaacs sold it again and made another profit; but that's like those traders." The disingenuous candor of Teresa's manner was in exquisite contrast to Dunn. He rose and grasped her hand so heartily she was forced to turn her eyes away.

"Good-by!" he said.

"You look tired," she murmured, with a sudden gentleness that surprised him; "let me go with you a part of the way."

"It is n't safe for you just now," he said, thinking of the possible consequences of the alarm Brace had raised.

"Not the way *you* came," she replied; "but one known only to myself."

He hesitated only a moment. "All right, then," he said finally; "let us go at once. It's suffocating here, and I seem to feel this dead bark crinkle under my feet."

She cast a rapid glance around her, and then seemed to sound with her eyes the far-off depths of the aisles,

beginning to grow pale with the advancing day, but still holding a strange quiver of heat in the air. When she had finished her half abstracted scrutiny of the distance, she cast one backward glance at her own cabin and stopped.

"Will you wait a moment for me?" she asked gently.

"Yes — but — no tricks, Teresa! It is n't worth the time."

She looked him squarely in the eyes without a word.

"Enough," he said; "go!"

She was absent for some moments. He was beginning to become uneasy, when she made her appearance again, clad in her old faded black dress. Her face was very pale, and her eyes were swollen, but she placed his hand on her shoulder, and bidding him not to fear to lean upon her, for she was quite strong, led the way.

"You look more like yourself now, and yet — blast it all! — you don't either," said Dunn, looking down upon her. "You've changed in some way. What is it? Is it on account of that Injin? Could n't you have found a white man in his place?"

"I reckon he's neither worse nor better for that," she replied bitterly; "and perhaps he was n't as particular in his taste as a white man might have been. But," she added, with a sudden spasm of her old rage, "it's a lie; he's *not* an Indian, no more than I am. Not unless being born of a mother who scarcely knew him, of a father who never even saw him, and being brought up among white men and wild beasts less cruel than they were, could make him one!"

Dunn looked at her in surprise not unmingled with admiration. "If Nellie," he thought, "could but love *me* like that!" But he only said:

"For all that, he's an Injin. Why, look at his name. It ain't Low. It's *L'Eau Dormante*, Sleeping Water, an Injin name."

"And what does that prove?" returned Teresa. "Only that Indians clap a nickname on any stranger, white or red, who may camp with them. Why, even his own father, a white man, the wretch who begot him and abandoned him, — *he* had an Indian name — *Loup Noir*."

"What name did you say?"

"*Le Loup Noir*, the Black Wolf. I suppose you'd call him an Indian, too? Eh? What's the matter? We're walking too fast. Stop a moment and rest. There — there, lean on me!"

She was none too soon; for, after holding him upright a moment, his limbs failed, and stooping gently she was obliged to support him half reclining against a tree.

"It's the heat!" he said. "Give me some whiskey from my flask. Never mind the water," he added faintly, with a forced laugh, after he had taken a draught at the strong spirit. "Tell me more about the other water — the Sleeping Water, you know. How do you know all this about him and his — father?"

"Partly from him and partly from Curson, who wrote to me about him," she answered, with some hesitation.

But Dunn did not seem to notice this incongruity of correspondence with a former lover. "And *he* told you?"

"Yes; and I saw the name on an old memorandum-book he has, which he says belonged to his father. It's full of old accounts of some trading post on the frontier. It's been missing for a day or two, but it will turn up. But I can swear I saw it."

Dunn attempted to rise to his feet. "Put your hand in my pocket," he said in a hurried whisper. "No, there! — bring out a book. There, I have n't looked at it yet. Is that it?" he added, handing her the book Brace had given him a few hours before.

"Yes," said Teresa, in surprise. "Where did you find it?"

"Never mind! Now let me see it, quick. Open it, for my sight is failing. There — thank you — that's all!"

"Take more whiskey," said Teresa, with a strange anxiety creeping over her. "You are faint again."

"Wait! Listen, Teresa — lower — put your ear lower. Listen! I came near killing that chap Low to-day. Would n't it have been ridiculous?"

He tried to smile, but his head fell back. He had fainted.

CHAPTER IX.

FOR the first time in her life Teresa lost her presence of mind in an emergency. She could only sit staring at the helpless man, scarcely conscious of his condition, her mind filled with a sudden prophetic intuition of the significance of his last words. In the light of that new revelation she looked into his pale, haggard face for some resemblance to Low, but in vain. Yet her swift feminine instinct met the objection. "It's the mother's blood that would show," she murmured, "not this man's."

Recovering herself, she began to chafe his hands and temples, and moistened his lips with the spirit. When his respiration returned with a faint color to his cheeks, she pressed his hand eagerly and leaned over him.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Of what?" he whispered faintly.

"That Low is really your son?"

"Who said so?" he asked, opening his round eyes upon her.

"You did yourself, a moment ago," she said quickly.

"Don't you remember?"

"Did I?"

"You did. Is it so?"

He smiled faintly. "I reckon."

She held her breath in expectation. But only the ludicrousness of the discovery seemed paramount to his weakened faculties. "Is n't it just about the ridiculous thing all round?" he said, with a feeble chuckle. "First *you* nearly kill me before you know I am Low's father; then I'm just spoilin' to kill him before I know he's my son;