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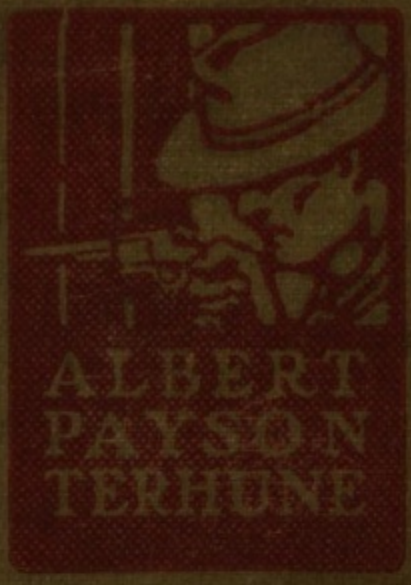
# BLACK GOLD

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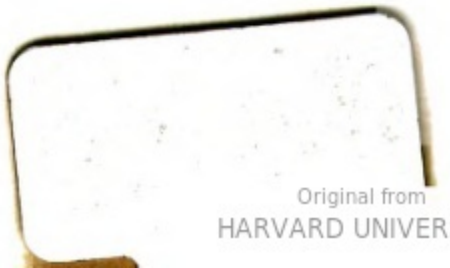

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# BLACK GOLD

## ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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# BLACK GOLD

BY

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

AUTHOR OF "BUFF: A COLLIE," "BRUCE,"
"LAD: A DOG," ETC.

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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# FOREWORD

If you are questing for character-study or for realism or for true literature in any of its forms,—then walk around this book of mine (and, indeed, any book of mine); for it was not written for you and it will have no appeal for you.

But if you care for a yarn with lots of action,—some of it pretty exciting,—you may like "BLACK GOLD." I think you will.

It has all the grand old tricks: from the Weirdly Vanishing Footprints, to the venerable Ride for Life. Yes, and it embalms even the half-forgotten and long-disused Struggle on the Cliff. Its Hero is a hero. Its Villain is a villain. Nobody could possibly mistake either of them for the Friend of the Family. The Heroine is just a heroine; not a human. There is not a subtle phrase or a disturbingly new thought, from start to finish.

There is a good mystery, too; along lines which have not been worked over-often. And there is a glimpse of Untold Treasure. What better can you ask; in a story that is frank melodrama?

The scene, by the way, is laid in Northern California; a beautiful and strikingly individualistic region which, for the most part, is ignored by tourists for the



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man-made scenic effects and playgrounds of the southern counties of the State.

If, now and again, my puppets or my plot-wires creak a bit noisily,—what then? Creaking, at worst, is a sure indication of movement,—of action,—of incessant progress of sorts. A thing that creaks is not standing still and gathering mildew. It moves. Otherwise it could not creak.

Yes, there are worse faults to a plot than an occasional tendency to creakiness. It means, for one thing, that numberless skippable pages are not consumed in photographic description of the ill-assorted furnishings of the heroine's room or cosmos; nor in setting forth the myriad phases of thought undergone by the hero in seeking to check the sway of his pet complexes. (This drearily flippant slur on realism springs from pure envy. I should rejoice to write such a book. But I can't. And, if I could, I know I should never be able to stay awake long enough to correct its proofs.)

Yet, there is something to be said in behalf of the man or woman who finds guilty joy in reading a story whose action gallops; a story whose runaway pace breaks its stride only to leap a chasm or for a breath-catching stumble on a precipice-edge. The office boy prefers Captain Kidd to Strindberg; not because he is a boy, but because he is human and has not yet learned the trick of disingenuousness. He is still normal. So is the average grown-up.

These normal and excitement-loving readers are overwhelmingly in the majority. Witness the fact that "The Bat" had a longer run in New York than

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have all of Dunsany's and Yeats's rare dramas, put together. If we insist that our country be guided by majority-rule, then why sneer at a majority-report in literary tastes?

"Ben Hur" was branded as "a religious dime novel." Yet it has had fifty times the general vogue of Anatole France's exquisite pseudo-blasphemy which deals with the same period. Public taste is not always, necessarily, bad taste. "The common people heard Him, gladly." (The Scribes did not.)

After all, there is nothing especially debasing in a taste for yarns which drip with mystery and suspense and ceaseless action; even if the style and concept of these yarns be grossly lacking in certain approved elements. So the tale be written with strong evidence of sincerity and with a dash of enthusiasm, why grudge it a small place of its own in readers' hours of mental laziness?

With this shambling apology,—which, really, is no apology at all,—I lay my book on your knees. You may like it or you may not. You will find it alive with flaws. But, it *is* alive.

I don't think it will bore you. Perhaps there are worse recommendations.

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE.

*"Sunnybank"*
*Pompton Lakes,*
*New Jersey.*

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# BLACK GOLD

## CHAPTER ONE

THE man awoke—uncomfortably aware of two things. First, that he had been asleep by broad daylight and when he should have been alertly on duty. Second, that some overwhelming danger menaced him.

The roused sleeper was Toni, the Basco sheep herder of the Gale-O'Rell ranch. He was a surly giant; a product of the Pyrenees regions; and sourly discontented with everything in America;—most discontented of all with his Yankee employers and with his task of keeping their sheep from straying.

Toni, awakened by some occult sixth sense, lay quite still. His head was resting on a stone in the far corner of the Gale-O'Rell Number Three sheep range. His body was sprawled supine on the ground.

He could see the bunch of sheep,—some two thousand in all,—grazing stolidly here and there, athwart the rolling pasture; and, on a knoll a furlong away, squatted Zit, the little black collie that was their official guard and guide.

No, Toni had not been startled from sleep by any stampede or by the dog's barking. He realized that. Yet, as his senses gradually sharpened to complete



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wakefulness, he was more and more impressed by the feeling of peril.

His arm felt heavy, across his chest; and instinctively he made as though to move it. Then he felt that both his arms were pillowing his tousled head from the hardness of the stone beneath. And he glanced down at his breast, to see what weight was on it.

His drowsy glance froze into a stare of stark horror.

There, coiled lazily on the man's bare and hairy upper chest, lay a five-foot rattlesnake.

The reptile had crawled thither, presumably, for warmth against the chilly breeze of the early spring day. Though Toni's muscles remained rigidly moveless in the first terror of his discovery, yet some tensing of sinews or some involuntary catch of his breath must have jarred the reptile.

For, lifting its fleshless three-cornered head from among its glossy folds, the snake set up a growingly sharp whirr of its rattles.

Toni was sick with fright. He shut his eyes, to blot out the fearsome spectacle of sudden death; and an unconquerable tremor convulsed him.

Again, at this faint movement, the snake whirred its warning rattle. And, to the Basco's added horror, the rattle was answered from somewhere on the ground within six inches of his ear. Toni understood. Within striking distance of him was not only the snake on his chest, but the creature's mate.

Toni forced his shuddering body to deadly movelessness. He tried to pray to his saints. But long abstinence from prayer had rusted his memory for such

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things. He strove wildly against the impulse to leap to his feet and rush off, screaming. He knew, soon or late, his nerves must give way under the strain. Then the end would come. And he braced himself for the wait.

Meantime, through his anguish of suspense, he found brain-space for the ardent cursing of one of the two men he worked for. This man was Barry Gale. It was Gale who had leased the little Number Three range where the sheep now were grazing. He had leased it for three months longer; instead of following the advice of his partner, Dick O'Rell, that the bunch of sheep be sent two months early to their mountain pasturage, on the government grazing land, over in the Tuscan Peaks region.

Toni had looked forward longingly to this season of summer pasturage among the quiet mountains. He would be far away from his nosy employers and free to loaf outrageously on the job; while his tiny black collie, Zit, would wear down pads and flesh by extra herding work.

It was Toni who had suggested to O'Rell that the snows were gone from the lower mountain passes by now; and that an early exodus from the plain would not only save lease-money, but would give the flock the advantage of grazing on the new grass of the uplands, before all the other ranchers of Tehama County should send their sheep to the hills for the summer.

Had Toni's advice and O'Rell's been followed by the pig-headed Gale, the herder would now be miles away from this miserable rolling meadow and from the brace

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of murderous rattlesnakes about to kill him. Wherefore, the Basco mingled his efforts at prayer with far more successfully eloquent efforts at cursing Barry Gale. And, between times, he sweated and froze with terror.

All this century of torment in the space of perhaps twenty seconds. But its intensity kept the Basco from seeing anything but the vibrating three-cornered head, with its ice-black bead eyes and the two pinpoint "pits" below them. These and the forked tongue. He was deaf to all but that low dual whirring.

Perhaps that was why he was oblivious to the springy tread of feet over the grayish-green cropped grass and to the stocky figure of a man who was strolling in his general direction from across the rutted red lane which bisected the grazing ground.

Barry Gale, Marylander by birth and Californian by enthusiastic adoption, was taking this short cut home to his little ranch house, from a two-hour business session with the County Agent at Red Bluff, a few miles to southward.

Inspecting his flourishing young orchards of navel oranges, early that morning, he had come upon stray signs of the dread mealybug scourge. And, in haste, he had betaken himself to the County Agent for help and advice;—on precisely the same principle that sends a man with sudden cardiac pangs to the nearest heart specialist. As he walked homeward, now, he was repeating over to himself, for better surety of remembering:

"Five gallons of distillate emulsion.—Ten pounds of

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soap powder.—Water, one hundred gallons.—Average cost, about three-quarters cent per gallon.—When the bottom of the spray tank is——"

Gale broke off in his lesson's recital, with a grunt of disgust. He had entered the pasture. Subconsciously, he had taken in the general details of the scene before him:—the gray-green rolling land beneath the miracle of the California blue sky, with the giant emerald mountains, beyond, standing guard over the rich Sacramento Valley, and with Shasta's eternal snows dazzling the eye far to northward;—the shifting gray-white groups of grazing sheep, and their absurdly small black collie sentinel on a knoll in the field's center.

All this had photographed itself, mechanically, on Gale's brain. It was a scene that could be duplicated a thousand times within a thousand miles. But there was one vital detail lacking, a detail which was certain to catch and hold any rancher's irritated notice, a detail whose absence drove from Gale's throat that grunt of vexation.

In other words, the picture lacked the inevitable figure of the statuelike herder, brooding over his flock. No herder was visible. Toni, apparently, was not on the job.

As his worried eyes roamed the field, Barry Gale presently saw a patch of faded blue denim between the chewed branches of a corner bush. And thither he bent his steps.

At the rancher's heels trotted Roy, his big gold-and-white collie—a show-type dog—as different as day

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and night from the square-built and wideheaded little Zit. Roy caught Toni's scent, just as Gale caught the glimpse of blue shirt. And in mild interest the collie padded along beside his master, to investigate the phenomenon of a herdsman who was lying drowsily under a bush in broad daylight.

Before the two had traversed more than half the ninety feet of distance which separated them from Toni, the collie halted abruptly in his tracks, his aristocratic long nose wrinkling in disfavor, his dark eyes aglint with wrath. In his furry throat a warning growl was born.

The dog's nearsighted eyes had not discovered the presence of the huge coiled snake on Toni's chest, nor of the reptile's mate on the ground, six inches from the helpless man's shoulder. But a whiff of breeze had just brought him the scent of both serpents;—the nauseating crushed-cucumber smell common to all varieties of pit-viper. And he checked his lazy trot with much suddenness. A collie hates and fears poisonous snakes.

Gale was too much of a dogman to disregard his collie's warning. He stopped, alongside Roy, and glanced around him. He could see nothing to warrant the growl. To his ears, faintly, came a whirring sound that might well have been made by a locust and to which he gave no heed.

Presently, the rancher began to move forward again, but cautiously and with every faculty strained to observation. Roy moved forward with him in visible and growing reluctance, his shoulder pressed close to his

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master's knee, deep muttering growls still swelling far down in his throat.

Ten feet away from the recumbent Toni, Gale stopped his advance. He had seen the herder's face. It was not a pretty sight.

Its sheer hideousness of green-white complexion, up-rolled eyeballs, panic-grinning teeth and distorted muscles was enough to startle any beholder.

As he gazed, lips parted for an exclamation of amazement, Gale heard, louder and fiercer, the whirr of the two rattlers. And, his eyes shifting from Toni's awful face to the big dark smudge on his bare chest, he saw the smudge resolve itself into a coiled serpent.

Gale wasted not the fraction of an instant in preparing. In his fist was his knobbed walking stick. Instinctively, he caught it by the ferrule and swung it as though it had been a golf club. His early prowess on Maryland links gave him speed and accuracy. There was dire need for both.

To smite downward at the snake was not only to endanger Toni's ribs,—which could have knit together again in a short time,—but to run the almost certain chance that the rattler, smitten and broken, might strike the Basco again and again in its death struggles.

This danger flashed into Gale's mind and into Toni's as well as the club went aloft. Changing the direction of the stroke, Gale swung for the snake's head as though he were making a drive on the links.

Seeing the stick go up, Toni caught his breath. The sharp contraction of his chest made the rattler's last shred of hesitancy vanish. The snake struck.

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His darting head was a bare inch from Toni's naked throat when the whizzing handle of Gale's stick landed. Full on the side of the outflying neck it struck, and with a skilled force that threw the rattler's whole body clear of Toni's chest. Leaping across the prone Basco, Gale landed with both heavy soles on the back of the wounded snake, driving his heel with full force into the writhing coils.

Then he turned back. Toni had not stirred. Close to his ear was buzzing the second rattler's warning. He dared not so much as cry out to the unsuspecting Gale.

The rancher strode up to him. But, as he did so, Roy flashed in front of his master; directly ahead of the descending right foot. In flashed the collie, and out again.

Roy had nipped at the snake, coiled so close to Gale's toe; had scarred the shimmering body with one of his curved eye-teeth, and had flung himself back and to one side barely in time to avoid the lightning-dart of the snake's head.

Thus, of old, had the collie's wolf ancestors fought such venomous serpents as they could not elude. But those ancestors had fought for their own lives. Their descendant was fighting to save his master.

Before the dog could rush in again, the rattler's motion had caught Gale's eye. And the man understood that the augmented buzzing sound was not caused merely by the other snake that lay thrashing its poisonous life out, a few feet behind him.

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Down came the stick,—clubwise, this time,—and the second rattler's back was broken.

"Get up!" ordered Gale, kicking aside the squirmingly impotent body, and addressing the palsied Basco. "Get up, man! There's no more danger. Of course," he added with wasted sarcasm, "if you want to go on with your snooze, you can stay where you are. No other pair of diamond-backs is likely to drop in on you, to-day."

Slowly, shiveringly, Toni got to his feet. He looked at one slain snake; then at the other; last of all at the faintly amused Gale. Then, drawing a quivering breath, the man began to speak; in the barbarous Basque patois which Gale, with all his more than tolerable knowledge of French, found such difficulty in understanding.

"I hated you," began Toni, thickly. "I called down a curse on you. I wasted your time that you paid me for. I did all this. And—and you have saved me from death. Not alone by your courage, but by your brain. If you had struck down—*so!*—the snake on my breast must have died. But also he must have killed me, as he died. You saved me. In my hate for you, I had a thought to hurt you by poisoning that dog you love. Yet it was he that found the other snake and made you see it before it could strike me or you. *Mon maitre*, you have made me much ashamed. I do not ask forgiveness. But,—but I am your man, from henceforth."

As Gale was straining every faculty to catch the full meaning of the mumbled patois words, the Basco ceased

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speaking and bent quickly down. Before the ranchman could so much as guess at his intent, Toni had caught Gale's calloused hand in both of his own and had kissed its tanned knuckles.

Gale jerked away his caressed fingers, embarrassed and vexed at the Basco's action. With all a true Anglo-Saxon's aversion for a scene, he laughed into the herder's earnest face and said:

"That's all right, Toni. I could have made the stroke better with a mid-iron. But, at that, I didn't 'slice.' If you feel you owe me any debt, just pay it by staying awake on the job after this. As for poisoning Roy,—well, the man who poisons a dog will never go down to hell when he dies. Do you know why? Because all the people down there would refuse to let such a blackguard in, for fear he might corrupt them and give the place a worse name than it has. You're not that kind of man, Toni. No upstanding man could have done it. But I see now why Roy has always disliked you."

The herder listened, with profound respect and credulity, to this astounding bit of theology. Then, timidly, he moved over to where Roy,—tongue out, tulip ears pricked, head on one side,—was watching the last struggles of the snakes.

"*Mon vieux,*" the Basco addressed the collie. "I thank you. And I ask your pardon. I would seek to be your friend, if you will permit."

He held out his hand as he spoke. Roy looked at him, long and critically; then gravely thrust his cold nose into the Basco's palm, in token of friendliness. Toni petted the collie's silken head; and was about to

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speak again when Barry Gale put an end to the maudlin performance by whistling Roy to heel and continuing his homeward walk.

Gale's sole reaction from the episode was one of amusement and of a light contempt for his herder's exhibition of Gallic melodrama. Densely ignorant of the queer Basque nature, Barry had not the remotest idea that he had just won for himself a fiery devotion as complete as Roy's own—a devotion which, one day, might be worth more to him than any offensive or defensive weapon ever forged by mortal man.

Barry Gale was the son of a progressive Chesapeake farmer, who had trained his boy to the paternal profession; only to have Barry, at twenty, turn his back on the farm and announce his intent of becoming a doctor. Followed a three-year medical course, and then a small start in Baltimore as a physician.

Just as Barry was beginning to get on his feet in his chosen trade, a woman had come into his life. She was not a woman of the vampire type such as exists in the movies and seldom elsewhere.

Maida Drace was an unspoiled girl; daughter of Jared Drace, the arch-financier who in those days was employed in standing Wall Street on its head and grabbing the cash that cascaded from its upturned pockets. She had come to Baltimore to visit a school friend and to recuperate from the fatigues of her first "season." There, Barry had met her.

At once, he had fallen crazily in love. It was his first love affair. And it took heavy toll of him. Be-

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fore he could put his fate to the touch by telling Maida of his adoration, he learned that she was the only child of the incalculably rich Jared Drace. In his perhaps foolishly sensitive soul, her enormous wealth and his own poverty were impassable obstacles to his hopes.

He ceased to call on her; and tried—with wretchedly bad success,—to put her out of his memory. Soon afterward, he heard that she had gone back to New York.

It was one of those youthful tragedies at which wise men laugh in later life. But it cut deep into the soul of Barry Gale. For he was not of the sort that can love or cease to love, at will. It disgusted him with himself and with his surroundings. He longed for change of some sort,—of any sort.

So when, a few months later, his father died, leaving him fifteen thousand dollars and leaving the farm to another son, Barry gladly accepted the invitation of his cousin, Dick O'Rell, to pool their mutual cash and to go out to California as ranchmen.

All this had been four years earlier. For more than three years the two cousins had toiled early and late, to make a financial success of their six hundred acre Tehama County ranch. And, because they lived plainly and worked hard and had a knowledge of their profession and were progressive enough to profit by the teachings of the government and of their County Agent, they were succeeding.

Their sheep were pitiably few, by comparison to the Wilcox and Ellenwood flocks. But they were profitable. The navel orange orchard,—planted, but

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neglected, by their predecessor,—was on a more than paying basis. On a small scale they were imitating the Sale method of barley growing; and with as much success in their own lesser way.

Then, a year or two earlier, they had been among the pioneers of Northern California's rice-growers. And this rice crop alone was now netting them more money per year than all their other ventures combined. The silty, clayey soil of one of their sheep pastures,—little better than hard pan,—had proven ideal for rice-growing. And they were selling this crop, in the paddy, for more dollars per bushel than they could have gotten for any other grain by the cartload.

Altogether, the cousins had prospered, mightily. Yet, deep down in Barry's heart, burned the memory of the girl he loved and whose wealth put her as far beyond his reach as though she were living on the planet Neptune.

He did not let the memory make him gloomy or interfere with his myriad everyday interests. But it was always there. He told himself, from time to time, that he was beginning to forget. Yet, he knew he was making lamentably slow progress.

The old wound had received a new twinge, a year earlier, when news reached him, in a roundabout way, that a New York capitalist had just bought a five-thousand-acre tract of mountain-and-ranch land, along the Sacramento River, near the Iron Canyon—a tract whose southern boundaries bordered a part of his own ranch—and was employing a horde of laborers to erect thereon a huge stone house. The twinge came

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when he learned that this capitalist was Jared Drace.

He was not surprised that any millionaire should buy so picturesquely beautiful an estate and should build thereon a house worthy of its surroundings. Many an Easterner was finding Northern California an ideal place for such a winter home. But that it should have been Maida Drace's father, of all men!

And, even while Barry cursed the amazing coincidence, his supposedly half-healed heart hammered madly at the prospect of seeing Maida again.

Though Gale schooled himself to remember that Maida could never be anything to him and that his only peace of mind must lie in keeping entirely away from her, yet he felt vaguely miserable when he heard, later, that Maida had not accompanied Drace on his journey to California.

According to neighborhood rumors, the multimillionaire was living in a somewhat eccentric fashion at his new big house in the midst of his wilderness tract. His family were not there. Nor was there any such retinue of servants as people had been led to expect. Except for his secretary, Wolfe Naylor,—a tall and saturnine man whom Gale had seen once or twice in the Red Bluff bank,—and for a body-servant named Sludge, and three or four Chinaboys, Drace lived alone.

Thus he had been living for the past six months. Nor, so report said, had he once stirred from off his own estate. There were none of the gay house-parties, none of the conferences with fellow-magnates, none of the mingling with local interests, which folk are

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wont to associate with a great landowner's country life. Jared Drace, apparently, had come to this wonderland, to live as a hermit. The one or two neighbors who,—in California's infinitely hospitable manner,—had called to welcome him to the region, had been received by Wolfe Naylor and had not had so much as a glimpse of Drace, himself.

If the house was short of servants, the estate itself was not tenantless. Tehama County had discovered, to its wondering amusement, that the land was patrolled by not less than twenty khaki-clad guards, who lived in a long stone barracks building, not far from the main house.

These guards carried rifle or automatic and turned back all chance trespassers they met. Such a proceeding, in friendly California, woke the mirthful amaze of the county. By the time this bit of news had been talked over to boredom, came a second fillip to local curiosity.

A steep little stone gorge,—a sort of vertebra to Iron Canyon,—ran through one end of the estate, to the south, where a tongue of Drace's land jutted into Gale's. For the past few months, gangs of laborers had been working in double shifts in this tiny gorge. They had not been local laborers, but had been imported from somewhere east of the Sierras; and were kept from mingling with the folk of the region. From the direction of the gorge by day and by night had come the eternal sound of hammering, of digging, of windlass and chain and engine and of occasional blasts.

This kind of thing, of course, had been too much

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for neighborhood curiosity. Many an idler had strayed over the boundary line and had made futile effort to learn what the secret new enterprise might be,—which was calling for day and night shifts and so much racket. But, always, a guard was somewhere on hand to turn back the curious. And the nature of the work remained a mystery.

Of late, one batch of laborers after another had been taken down to Red Bluff, by night, and loaded onto the southbound trains. Thus, it was inferred, the task was nearing its end.

Some gossips hinted at the sinking of a shaft for gold. But wiser men pointed to the carloads of cement and structural steel which had been shipped by truck from station to the estate; and declared these things were not germane to mining. So the mystery held.

It was not a mystery which interested Barry Gale, overmuch; though his garrulous cousin, Dick O'Rell, had wasted much lung-power in conjectures about it. Maida was not at the Drace estate. That was enough—in relief and in sorrow—for Barry to know. Wherefore, he stuck to his own work and used up his surplus energies in the task of trying to forget the girl who, innocently, had so changed the current of his life.

To-day, as Gale quitted the sheep range and the shakily grateful Basco, he quickened his step. The afternoon was drowsing toward sunset. Barry wanted to get home in time to mix the mealybug spray for the following morning's use, before he must make his evening rounds of the ranch. He had spent more time

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in Red Bluff than he had intended to. And he was needed at home.

Leaving the pasture, he skirted the jut of rockily uneven woodland where Jared Drace's grounds dovetailed into his own. By making a short cut through this tongue of woods he could save nearly a quarter mile on his homeward trip. He had often done this, in other days, before the big estate was bought by Drace. Of late, respect for the myriad "No Trespass" signs, rather than any fear of the truculent armed guards, had kept him off his unneighborly neighbor's land.

But this afternoon, in his haste and in the abstraction of his mind, he forgot to turn to the left, as he reached the woods. Instead, absentmindedly, he stopped, and climbed through the narrow gap between the high fence's wire strands.

The air in the woods was cool, after the glare of sun, and the light filtered down duskily through the arched boughs. The pine-needles made a soft carpet to the man's tired feet after his long trudge over hard roads and uneven sward. Gale paid scant heed to these allurements, as he strode on. For, as became a farmer, he had schooled himself to enjoy the myriad beauties of nature without letting them delay his business.

The forest was made up of lofty pine and redwood. The trees arched high above, and there was no undergrowth to impede his steps. Fantastic boulders reared their heads here and there, like prehistoric monsters, above the drifts of brown pine-needles. Great misshapen black pine-cones, half as large as a man's head,

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were scattered here and there. Over all brooded a mystic greenish half-light and the stillness of death.

Giving no conscious note to the eerie atmosphere of the wood, Barry moved on. Yet, without realizing it, some sense of the place's stark loneliness must have come to him. For he glanced around for Roy.

The collie was not at his heels. For an instant, Gale wondered, regretfully, at this defection. Then he remembered that, as he turned into the wood, Roy had been galloping ahead, in pursuit of a ground squirrel. The dog had not seen his master enter the wood. Roy knew they were bound for the ranch house. When he should cease from his vain chase of the squirrel, he would undoubtedly continue his homeward journey; under the impression that his master was following close behind. So near home, the dog was not likely to bother about casting back for Barry's trail.

Still haunted by that unconfessed sense of loneliness, here in the dark woods, Barry drew in a breath, to call the absent dog to him. The breath was exhaled in a low whistle of surprise; as, at his feet, he chanced to see an object which would have been far more in keeping in a Fifth Avenue shop window than here in the Iron Canyon woods.

Nearly five years earlier, a Canadian lumberman had had his foot crushed by a trolley car, while on a visit to his mother in Baltimore. Gale had set the broken bones and had done it so skillfully that the victim could at last walk with no vestige of lameness. In gratitude, when he paid the nominal bill charged by Barry, the lumberman had given Barry two ermine skins which

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he had brought all the way down from Alberta with him as curios. Barry had had the skins made into a cardcase-purse, and had given it to Maida Drace. It had been an unusual present and had had a wrought clasp as unique as itself.

This ermine purse, now, almost five years later, lay at Barry Gale's feet, here in the California forest.

The man picked it up, wonderingly. Forgotten was his haste; forgotten was everything else that pertained to the present time.

The worn white purse between his brown hands, he stood staring unseeingly at it; half his mind a blank of bewilderment, the other half of it racing wildly.

He was back in Maryland. It was the evening of Maida's birthday. Nell Carrington, her hostess, was giving the New York guest a jolly little birthday party. Gale was invited to it. With him he brought the quaint purse he had just had made for her. With him, too, he brought a decision to tell Maida, that very night, of his overwhelming love for her.

She had been so childishly delighted over the little gift, and she had thanked him so sweetly! Then,—what was the phrasing of the tidings Nell Carrington had told him after Maida had passed on to another room with another man? What was it? Oh, yes! She had said:

"A purse was the most appropriate thing you could have brought her. She has all the money in the world, and she ought to have more things to put it all in."

He had asked what she meant. And he had learned then for the first time that Maida Drace was the only

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child of *the* Drace—the multimillionaire, the Croesus who was reputed to be one of the five richest men in America! And he—he, Barry Gale—was a struggling young doctor whose whole yearly practice was not worth fifteen hundred dollars. And he had been about to ask Maida to share that princely poverty with him! He had gone home early, that night, on a plea of some needful professional call. And he had never again seen Maida.

Yet here, in his hands, was his pretty gift to her! Here in this strip of North California woodland, almost four thousand miles away from the city where he and she had met. For perhaps a full minute, the man stood turning the fur purse over and over, and trying to still the keen pain that stabbed at his heart as memory re-awoke and tore loose from the pitiful bonds wherewith he had sought to bind it down.

Then sanity came back. And Gale began to think more clearly.

There was nothing astounding about this discovery, after all. Now that he stopped to think it over, the only astonishing thing about it was that the girl should have troubled herself to keep so insignificant a gift for so long a time.

He was on her father's land;—although he had not paused to consider this act of trespass. Maida doubtless had come out to Tehama County to visit Drace or even to make her home with him. She had been strolling through this wood, and had chanced to drop her purse. The whole thing was quite natural.

Yet, this knowledge, strangely, did not abate the

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overmastering thrill which had encompassed Barry at sight of the ermine bauble. Rather, it sent that thrill mounting to his brain, dizzying him.

Maida was here! She was within a mile or two of him, at most! Fate had brought her back to him; in spite of all his quixotic resolves to forget her.

Briefly, common sense and his careful plan of campaign struggled against the vibrant impulse which mastered him. He told himself that he had prepared, months earlier, for just such a contingency as this. He reminded himself that he had vowed to keep away from her, should Maida come to Tehama County. As Drace lived like a recluse it was not likely the financier had so much as heard the names of his neighbors. Maida need never know, perhaps, that she and Barry were living so near to each other.

All this, Gale now told himself for the fiftieth time. Which was all the good it did him. For, even as he recounted his excellent resolutions, his active legs were striding fast in a direction at right angles to the one they had been following.

He had faced to the East and was hastening toward the sharp ridge which rose a quarter mile in front of him and which cut off from his view the main part of Jared Drace's estate. From the top of that ridge, probably, he could see the chimneys of the big house itself; or, at any rate, could find some landmark to guide him toward Maida's home.

She had dropped this purse, here in the woods. Perhaps she had dropped it only a few minutes earlier. Perhaps even now she might be just beyond the ridge.

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At the possibility, Barry Gale's fast walk merged into a run.

Afterward, there would be plenty of time for him to kick himself for a born fool for not letting ill enough alone and for tearing open a wound that had never wholly healed. Afterward, it would be time to recall that his position in life and Maida's were still approximately as they had been;—that he was merely a prosperous small rancher, while she was the heiress to something over a hundred million dollars.

Much could be remembered,—and regretted,—afterward. For the moment, the only worthwhile fact in all life was that he and Maida Drace were in the same part of the world again and that every swinging step was bringing him nearer to her. What was to happen when they should meet,—whether, indeed, she would so much as remember who he was,—Barry had not the slightest idea.

Nor did he care. His starved heart was putting wings into his flying feet. And the ridge was close in front of him.

The nature of the ground had changed, in the past quarter mile. Gone were the smoothly rolling undulations. The wood was scraggy and gaunt. Instead of boulders, now, there cropped out everywhere huge blocks of black mineral,—volcanic rock of a long-past æon,—dull and sinister and in cubes well nigh as regular as if they had been hewn by some monster hand.

There were gashes in the dull black earth, too; scars of long ago fissures, in the days when Mount Lassen's volcano still had the same effect on the surrounding

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country as has Vesuvius's. The scene was such as Dürer loved, in his morbidness, to sketch;—such a scene as forms the back-and-foreground of his *Death and the Knight.*

Behind, a bare half mile back, were spring sunshine and the warmly lovely North California landscape with its endless miles of smiling ranchland and of blossoming pink peach trees against a dreamy wall of snow mountains. But, here in the gaunt forest, Nature was in her most sinister mood.

As far as Barry was concerned, he did not know nor care whether his thudding soles smote against basalt blocks or roseleaves. Somewhere ahead was the girl who was all in all to him; the girl he had never learned to forget. That was everything in life which mattered.

The ridge,—a precipice-like outcrop of volcanic rock which covered a long wrinkle of earth, some seventy feet high, thrown up by a prehistoric eruption,—reared itself in black masses of lava and basalt, to check his progress. Up it he went;—a breath-and-muscle-testing climb whose difficulties he did not note in his eagerness to get to the top.

Not for a year or more had he climbed this cliff-like rise. Dimly, he remembered that there was some sort of a gully or narrow wooded valley beyond; and then a succession of abrupt hills, one of which was cut transversely by a gorge. Up somewhere in that tumble of volcanic hills, was Jared Drace's house. There,—or between here and there,—was Maida Drace.

The steeply arduous climb started Gale's mind on a

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new tack. His only reason for believing Maida was here rested on his finding of the ermine purse. Was it not strongly possible that she had tired of the thing, long ago, and had given it to some servant of the family? Or perhaps to some one else connected with her father's household? Might not this "some one else" have dropped it? Might not Maida herself still be in New York?

He breasted the summit, and paused; while his anxious gaze swept the country in front of him. Ahead, the sun was setting in a dazzle of yellow glory. Barry's eyes, accustomed to the dusk of the woods, blinked as the level rays smote athwart them.

He took off his cap and held it to shield his brows from the glare and to permit him to see beneath it.

As he was lifting the cap, something whisked it sharply out of his hand. At the same moment, the venomous snap of a rifle sent crackling echoes out of every rock and cleft for a mile around.

Barry, dazedly, glanced down at his cap. It lay on a black volcanic rock, a few feet away from him;—a bullet hole drilled neatly through it.

Gale throbbed with a hot gust of anger. Often he had seen armed guards patrolling Drace's land. Oftener, he had heard of their brutal threats to trespassers. But he could not bring himself to believe that one of them could have fired, without warning, and in daylight, at a harmless intruder like himself. He stared angrily around him. His eyes, grown used now to the light, focussed on a spot a furlong in front of him.

The remembered gorge gashed a rocky hillock at

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that point. Masses of earth and stone and a few barrels of concrete and some bright steel bars and a mixing trough for cement littered the opening of the gash. Just behind this, around an aperture in the rock, three or four men were grouped. Some were dressed as laborers; others were in khaki.

Directly in front of these and on a slight eminence of rock, stood a tall and wiry man in riding clothes. He gripped a rifle, from which he was ejecting a shell.

Even at that distance, Barry recognized him as Wolfe Naylor, Drace's lanky secretary. And he shouted hotly to the fellow to put down the gun. As he called, Gale began to run and to slide down the farther side of the ridge, toward the group.

By way of reply, Naylor whipped the rifle to his shoulder again, and took aim. And, from behind him, a new figure stepped out into the open and upon the rock where Naylor stood.

The newcomer was a woman; slender, infinitely graceful, in her snowy afternoon dress. The sunset light glorified her and seemed to envelop her in a shimmering white aura.

Her face was turned toward Barry; and, in the sunset it was transfigured.

Forgetful of his peril, Gale stared in rapt adoration at her. And his panting lips formed the soundless cry of,

*"Maida!"*

Then, simultaneously, two things happened.

The girl threw out her arm, with a frightened excla-

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mation of protest, and struck up the leveled rifle-barrel. And, as she did so, Naylor fired.

This much Barry Gale saw. This much he always remembered. But, that was all he saw or remembered. For his muscular knees turned to tallow. He plunged forward through a sky full of multi-hued shooting stars.

Then everything went black; and he sank for miles down into a cool darkness. After which he slept—or died. He did not know which. Nor did he care.

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## CHAPTER TWO

GALE awoke with a racking headache and a buzzing of his ears. There was a strong smell of liniment in his nostrils.

For a few moments, he lay still, while thought and memory came back. With no trouble at all he was able to trace the various happenings of the afternoon, up to the point where Naylor had fired and Maida had struck up the barrel of the rifle. Everything since then was a blank.

Presently he opened his eyes. He was lying on a big white bed in a big gray room. Twilight was deepening into dim dusk, through the windows. Gale lifted his hand to his head. His practised fingers encountered there a damp bandage that had evidently been applied by an amateur in such matters; but by a conscientious and deft amateur.

Barry got to his feet, somewhat shakily; and made his way to a wall mirror. Before this glass, in the fading light, he lifted the bandage and examined the hurt it covered. Already, from his sensations and from his surgical knowledge of wounds, he had made a fairly accurate guess as to the extent of his injury. Now, supplementing sight with touch, he muttered, half aloud, as he had been wont to in the olden hospital days:



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"Just a superficial abrasion.—Left frontal, an inch above the temple.—Mild case of concussion.—A touch of iodine and a scrap of adhesive would have been enough, without this liniment-soaked turban.—And, now, as the swooning heroine would say,—'Where am I?' "

He moved toward the nearest window. His head still throbbed; but the pain was lessening; and he no longer felt shaky. The bullet, sent wild by Maida Drace's gesture, had struck a rock above Gale, on the ridge, had ricocheted and in passing had kissed the man's forehead. The impact had apparently been severe enough to cause slight concussion of the brain for an hour or so; but had left the skull uninjured. Incidentally, it had left Barry with a keenly healthy curiosity as to what had happened since then and as to where he might now be.

As he neared the window, Gale could see the far-off mountain-wall that girds the Sacramento Valley to eastward; Mount Lassen with its cap of snow and its faint reek of volcanic smoke rising high into the twilight sky from far behind the Tuscan Peaks. Nearer,—perhaps a mile to southward,—Barry could see the blurred line of the ridge he had scaled. Between it and him was flung the jumble of hills and gorges he had seen in the brief instant before the vision of Maida had dazzled him.

Thus, at first glance, he knew he must be in a rear room of Jared Drace's big new stone house. But whether he had been brought hither a prisoner or as

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an act of mercy to a wounded trespasser he could not tell.

Directly below the window was a flagged courtyard whose far side was bounded by a nine-foot roughcast wall. A wide gateway pierced this outer wall. And the gate was standing open. Just outside it stood a low-hung motor truck. The radiator of another such truck was visible behind the first.

As Gale was still looking aimlessly down from his second-story window, he saw a man step out into the courtyard, from the house. The man was Wolfe Naylor. The secretary took a step or two into the courtyard, then turned back and spoke. Barry leaned forward, until his face touched the pane. In his heart was a sudden hope that it might be Maida to whom Naylor was speaking.

From his new angle of vision, as he advanced close to the windowpane, he could see that a cellar door of wrought iron, just below him, was open. Out of this subterranean hole was emerging a line of men.

They looked like gnomes, in the uncertain gloaming light. The likeness was the greater, because each and every man in the long single file was bent double by an uncouthly awkward weight of some sort, carried on the shoulders.

Out from the cellar and into the courtyard and across the flagging, crawled the queer, dimly seen procession of hunched-over men in brownish garments; all-but reeling under the heavy and formless burdens they bore.

Wolfe Naylor, in front of them, directed and mar-

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shaled the odd line toward the gateway. As the first of the burden-bearers staggered through it, Naylor stood to one side. His sharp eyes ran over the swaying line of men. And,—whether by mere chance or whether attracted by the blur of lighter color against the window pane above him,—he glanced upward.

For the fraction of a second, he stared at Gale; and, in the dusk, his dark face seemed to twist and to grow paler. Then his whole visage blazed into fury. With a snakelike swiftness his right hand sought his hip.

At the same instant, the window shade was jerked downward, and Gale's indistinct view of the court was cut off. As the shade was lowered, the dark room sprang into brilliant light.

Barry whirled around. At his elbow stood a man. One of the newcomer's hands still held the bar of the shade he had lowered. The fingers of the other were just dropping away from the electric light switch, in the wall beside the window.

The man must have come into the room on shoes of silence. The lowering of the shade and the turning on of the light were Gale's first intimation of his presence. The interloper did not speak, nor did he so much as glance in the guest's direction. He passed on to the two other windows, methodically, and pulled down their shades.

Gale's eyes followed him, in a sort of fascination. The fellow was dressed in closefitting and almost clerical black. His hair was sparse and dark; and it was plastered smoothly to his large head. Thus far he

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bore, in manner and costume, the aspect of a typical well-trained upper servant.

But after a single glimpse of his pallid face, Barry had no thought for the man's other characteristics. The face was small for so large a head. And it was colorless. The features were inconspicuous,—all but the eyes. These were unusually wide-open. The pupil and iris were entirely covered by a pale grayish film.

A single glance at these widely blank orbs was enough for a man with Gale's long medical training. This servant was blind;—stone blind from birth.

What struck Barry with astonishment was the blind man's unhesitant and direct manner of moving about the room. He did not stumble nor grope, after the manner of the blind. His step was assured.

As he passed by the foot of the bed, on his way to the third window, his hands were hanging limp at his sides. The little finger of his left hand happened to brush lightly against one corner of the damp head-bandage which Gale had taken off and tossed there.

Instantly, at the feather-light touch, the man paused in his progress across the room. Not turning his eyes downward, but with a lightning-quick play of his sensitive long fingers, he located the bandage; lifted and folded it and carried it along with him, as he went to the window. In like manner, as he came to a chair which Gale had shoved a yard or so to one side in reaching the mirror, the first touch of the man's advancing foot against the chairleg told him of its presence in a place where it did not belong. Instantly, he checked his advance, before the touch of his toe could approxi-

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mate anything like a kick. Picking up the chair, he restored it to its wonted place; and moved on.

Shifting his interested gaze from the blind man's face, to his feet, Barry saw he was shod in list slippers. Not only did this account for the utter silence of his tread; but it rendered his sensitive pedal nerves conscious at once of any obstacle in their way.

Sketchily, Gale ran over in his mind the tales he had heard of this household's personnel. He recalled the gossip that Naylor and Drace's valet, Sludge, and the Chinaboys were the financier's only indoor employees. And he jumped to a conclusion. The blind man had finished his rounds of the room and was at the door; his hand on the knob.

"You're Sludge, Mr. Drace's valet, aren't you?" asked Barry.

"Yes, sir," answered the man, respectfully; adding, "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

"Yes," said Gale "you can tell me how I got here, for one thing; and why I was——"

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Sludge, a faint uneasiness tinging his severely correct manner, "but I am afraid there is nothing I can tell you. I heard you had had an accident and had been brought here; and that Miss Drace had bound up your head and that she said you were not in danger. She took a first aid course, sir, and she knows about such things. She said you were not to be disturbed until you came to yourself. Mr. Drace sent me up here to see if you needed anything and to arrange the shades and the light. That is all I

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know about it. Is there anything I can do for you before I go down, sir?"

Gale made no reply. He was gazing foolishly at the bandage in Sludge's hand; and thinking he would have taken it from his head in less contemptuous fashion if he had known Maida's fingers had bound it there. Taking Barry's silence, apparently, for a negative answer to his query of service, Sludge left the room.

Barry stared after him, his brows puckering. Everything here seemed so queer,—so abnormal;—the gnome-like procession of burden-bearers, marshaled by Naylor;—Naylor's homicidal snatching for the pistol on his hip, at sight of the face at the window;—this stone-blind valet, so super-efficient in spite of his affliction;—above all, the primal fact that Wolfe Naylor should have opened fire on him as he stood harmlessly on the ridge-crest above the gash-like little gorge.

None of it made sense, to Gale. Yet it made as much sense as that he should be once more in the same house with Maida Drace. And at the thought he thrilled with eager anticipation of seeing her again. Not more than five minutes had elapsed since his awakening. Yet he felt he had wasted precious time. Everything could wait,—the solution of these odd problems, and all;—everything except the sight of Maida.

He went to the door;—wondering if by any chance it might be locked from the outside. His defiant turn of the knob proved he was not a prisoner. For the well-oiled door swung outward at his first pressure.

Gale found himself in a wide upper hallway with a flight of broad and shallow stairs ahead of him. Cau-

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tiously,—for his head still ached and his steps were not yet wholly steady,—he descended these stairs.

In the stone-floored hall, below, a huge hearth-fire crackled. Its flickering light played fitfully on wall-trophies and on the few bits of massive furniture that were scattered through the raftered foyer. It played also on the white dress and sunny hair of a girl who was hurrying in from a rear room, her white little hands full of fresh bandages.

Half way down the stairs, Barry Gale halted, at sight of the advancing girl. She did not see him, until she had set one dainty foot on the lowest stair. He did not speak; but stood, dazed and ridiculously happy, staring down at her.

Then as she began the ascent, she glanced up, and saw him standing above her. With a little cry of surprise, she halted. And for an instant the two faced each other, wordless. It was Maida who broke the brief silence.

"Barry!" she exclaimed, an almost maternal solicitude in her sweet young voice. "You mustn't be walking around like this! And your bandages have come off, too! I left you not ten minutes ago, to go and look for these other dressings. And here you've——! Oh, are you feeling any better? Any better at all?"

"Why, I'm all right, now!" he laughed, to reassure her and to banish from her upturned face the look of worry. "It was only a tap on the head. My head is uncommonly thick, so I've been told by most of my friends. And I'm in first rate shape. So it was just

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a prolonged knockout;—nothing worse. As soon as my ears stop singing, I'll be as good as new."

"You should have lain still," she insisted. "I telephoned for the nearest doctor I could find in the book. But he wasn't at home. They promised to send him over here as soon as he gets back. Come here and sit down. You oughtn't to be standing up, when you're——"

"I'm all right," he declared, taking from her grasp the big hall chair she was trying to push toward him. "But it's good to sit down," he added, sinking into the chair's deep cushions as she seated herself on a fireside bench near him, "because it means we can talk, the way we used to. Do you remember the long confabs we used to have, in front of the hall-fire at the Carringtons'? We——"

He broke off in his retrospective speech. He had not meant to bring back old times or even to hint at them. Yet, at almost his first word, he had blundered into the past. Before he could shift the current of talk, the girl shifted it for him.

"What must you think of us, here?" she was saying, earnestly. "You know what happened to you, don't you? You were shot. And——"

"So I gather," he interposed, drily, "but please don't be distressed about it. If I remember rightly you spoiled Naylor's otherwise flawless aim by knocking his rifle aside as he was drawing trigger. I have you to thank for——"

"Please don't blame Mr. Naylor, too severely," she begged. "It wasn't as bad as it must have seemed.

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You see, he thought you were one of the poachers who have been overrunning our place for the past few months. He thinks they are trying to get the lay of the land, to rob the house; or perhaps to steal from some of the storehouses. He is obsessed on that danger. And when he saw you to-day he thought of course,—coming from that direction, and so far from any road or anything,—that you were spying out the land. So he took a rifle from one of the guards and fired twice. Not at you, but over your head, to frighten you off. The poor fellow was terribly cut up when he found how near he had come to killing you."

"H'm!" mused Gale, recalling the hole in his cap and the steady aim of the gun for the second shot. "Yes,—he must have been terribly cut up. Surely. But when a man has such cute impulsive little ways with a rifle, he must expect a shock now and then. Don't let's bother about it, any longer, though. No harm is done. How did you happen to be there? And how did you happen to have me brought here instead of taken home or down to the hospital at Red Bluff?"

"We couldn't take you to your own home," she said, "because none of us knew where you live, or whether you live anywhere around this region. I wanted to have you rushed straight to the hospital. But Mr. Naylor examined your head and he saw it was not a dangerous wound. And he wouldn't take you to Red Bluff. He said people would—gossip."

"That's quite possible," conceded Gale.

"He wanted you tended, there, in the canyon, until you could come to yourself enough to tell us where

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you lived. But I made them bring you home here, of course. Mr. Naylor is very efficient and all that. But he doesn't seem to have much sympathy or understanding for people who are in trouble. I've noticed that. The idea of rigging up a shack of boughs, and making a pine needle bed in it, as he suggested we do, and leaving you for one of the guards to look after! It's lucky I happened to be there. I had been for a walk, through such an uncanny, ghostly bit of forest, and over the most impassable ridge! And I had just happened to come out at a point where Mr. Naylor was superintending the work some of the men were doing. I hadn't been there five seconds, when he fired at you. You must have been only a little way behind me. I had stopped to rest for a while on the top of the ridge, of course. But——"

"You say Naylor was terribly cut up, when he found he'd creased me," ventured Gale. "How did he show it? By bitter tears or only by swooning?"

"Not by either of those approved old ways," she confessed. "In fact, he didn't do or say much. But I could see from his face how the accident had shocked him. He——"

"I see," assented Gale. "I know the type. One of these strong, silent men who show no trace of outward emotion,—as long as they're winning."

But he said the last five words in the recesses of his own heart; and he recalled Naylor's expression and the swift reaching toward his pistol, when his eyes had encountered Barry's, from the courtyard.

Barry was frankly puzzled. He could not account

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for Naylor's double effort to shoot him, down yonder by the gorge. In view of the course both shots had taken, he knew Naylor had lied in saying he intentionally fired over Gale's head. And assuredly, that reaching for the automatic at his belt, there in the courtyard, had been no accident!

Yet why on earth should the man hate him and yearn to murder him? The two had never exchanged words, nor had they so much as been introduced. They had seen each other perhaps twice, in all.

Naylor, presumably, had not known Gale's name, nor where he lived. Otherwise he probably would have had the injured man carried to his own home. In spite of this, he had tried to kill Barry; and presumably still yearned to kill him. Sane men do not do these things. Yet Naylor, presumably, was sane. Gale gave over the unsolvable problem, and turned to the pleasanter pursuit of listening to Maida. She was saying:

"I couldn't believe it was you. I saw you, for just that flash of time, standing on the ridge. You had changed so much and grown so much more tanned and muscular and—and careworn, this past four or five years! But in that second I recognized you. I—I don't yet know what you are doing out here. Nell Carrington wrote me, ever so long ago, that you'd left Baltimore. But she didn't know where you'd gone. And to think of my finding you, thousands of miles away! I didn't come out here, myself, till last month. But you must have known I was here, didn't you? Why didn't you come over to see me, Barry? I've been so lonely, here, all by myself! Father is busy and

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abstracted, all the time. And I don't know any of the people out here. Oh, it's so good to have met you again! Are you in California on a visit or do you live here, now?"

"I live here," he made answer, spreading out his hardened palms for her inspection. "Don't these calouses tell their own story?"

"Your hands don't look like a doctor's, any more," she mused, studying them, her dainty head on one side. "They look so strong and rugged and—efficient and all. Like a farmer's hands. You aren't a farmer, are you?"

"There aren't any farmers in California," he reproved her with mock solemnity. "There are no farmers west of the Sierras. As soon as a farmer, traveling west, crosses the Divide, he ceases automatically to be a farmer; and becomes a rancher. Every farm, this side of Kansas, is a ranch. Whether it covers half a state or half an acre. No, I'm not a farmer. I'm a rancher. If a cyclone should pick up a Kansas farm and blow it all the way out here, the farm would change in mid-air, into a ranch, the instant it crossed a certain imaginary line. And if a man, from the West, traveling East——"

"You're a rancher?" she queried, with a real interest. "A rancher? And you used to be a doctor! They said you had so much promise, too!"

"My promise was as nothing, to the promises of my dead-beat patients," he made light answer, seeking to skirt a perilous theme. "And at last I grew tired of uncollectable bills; and of pouring medicine of which

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