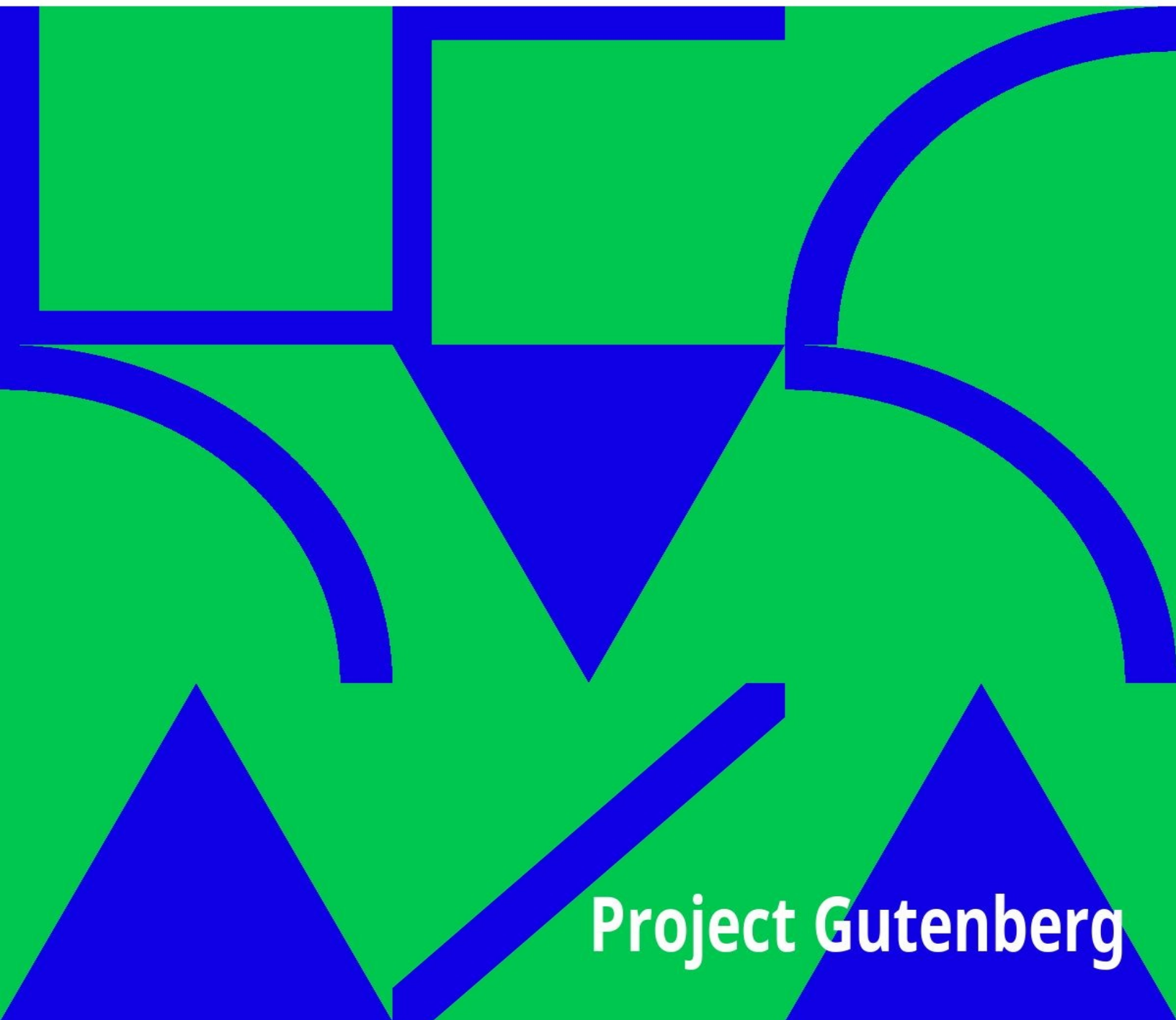


Louisiana Lou

A Western Story

William West Winter

A decorative background pattern consisting of various geometric shapes in green and blue. It includes squares, triangles, and large curved segments that resemble parts of circles or arches, arranged in a complex, interlocking design.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LOUISIANA LOU ***

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He saw the trail across the cañon alive with moving men and beasts.
(*Frontispiece—Page 261*)

Louisiana Lou

A Western Story

BY
WILLIAM WEST WINTER
AUTHOR OF
"The Count of Ten"

CHELSEA HOUSE
79 Seventh Avenue New York City

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Louisiana Lou

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LOUISIANA LOU

PROLOGUE

The sun was westering over Ike Brandon's ranch at Twin Forks. It was the first year of a new century when the old order was giving place to the new. Yet there was little to show the change that had already begun to take place in the old West. The desert still stretched away drearily to the south where it ended against the faint, dim line of the Esmeralda Mountains. To the north it stretched again, unpopulated and unmarked until it merged into prairie grass and again into mountains. To west and east it stretched, brown and dusty. To the south was the State of Nevada and to the north the State of Idaho. But it was all alike; bare, brown rolling plain, with naught of greenness except at the ranch where the creek watered the fields and, stretching back to the north, the thread of bushy willows and cottonwoods that lined it from its source in the mountains.

Ike Brandon was, himself, a sign of change and of new conditions, though he did not know it. A sheepman, grazing large herds of woolly pests in a country which, until recently, had been the habitat of cattlemen exclusively, he was a symbol of conquest. He remembered the petty warfare that had marked the coming of this kind, a warfare that he had survived and which had ended in a sort of sullen tolerance of his presence. A few years ago he had gone armed with rifle and pistol, and his herders had been weaponed against attack. Now he strode his acres unafraid and unthreatened, and his employees carried rifle or six-shooter only for protection against prowling coyotes or "loafer" wolves. Although the cow hands of his erstwhile enemies still belted themselves with death, they no longer made war. The sheep had come to stay.

The worst that he and his had to expect was a certain coldness toward himself on the part of the cattle aristocracy, and a measure of contempt and dislike toward his "Basco" herders on the part of the rough-riding and gentle-speaking cow hands.

These things troubled him little. He had no near neighbors. To the north, across the Idaho border, there was none nearer than Sulphur Falls, where the Serpentine, rushing tumultuously from the mountains, twisted in its cañon bed and squirmed away to westward and northward after making a gigantic loop that

took it almost to the Line. To the south, a ranch at Willow Spring, where a stubborn cattleman hung on in spite of growing barrenness due to the hated sheep, was forty miles away. To east and west was no one within calling distance.

At Sulphur Falls were two or three “nesters,” irrigating land from the river, a store or two and a road house run by an unsavory holdover of the old days named “Snake” Murphy. For a hundred and twenty-five miles to southward was unbroken land. The cattle were mostly gone—though in days to come they were to return again in some measure. Even the Esmeralda Mountains were no longer roamed by populous herds. They were bare and forbidding, except where the timber was heavy, for the sheep of Brandon and others, rushing in behind the melting snow in the spring, had cropped the tender young grass before it had a chance to grow strong.

Brandon’s ranch was an idyllic spot, however. His dead wife and, after her, her daughter, also dead, had given it the touch of feminine hands. Vines and creepers half hid the dingy house behind a festoon of green and blossoms. Around it the lush fields of clover were brilliant and cool in the expanse of brown sultriness. And here, Ike, now growing old, lived in content with his idolized granddaughter, Marian, who was about six years old.

Brandon, at peace with the world, awaited the return from the summer range of “French Pete,” his herder, who was to bring in one of the largest flocks for an experiment in winter feeding at and in the vicinity of the ranch. The other flocks and herders would, as usual, feed down from the mountains out into the desert, where they would winter.

Little Marian hung on the swinging gate which opened onto the apology for a wagon road. She liked quaint French Pete and looked forward to his return with eagerness. Like her grandfather, he always spoiled her, slavishly submitting to her every whim because she reminded him of his own *p’tit bébé*, in his far-away, Pyrenean home. Marian was used to being spoiled. She was as beautiful as a flower and, already, a veritable tyrant over men.

But now she saw no sign of French Pete and, being too young for concentration, she let her glance rove to other points of the compass. So she was first to become aware that a rider came from the north, the direction of Sulphur Falls, and she called her grandfather to come and see.

The horseman loped easily into sight through the brown dust that rose about him. His horse was slim and clean limbed and ran steadily, but Brandon noted that it

was showing signs of a long journey made too fast. It was a good horse, but it would not go much farther at the pace it was keeping.

And then he frowned as he recognized the rider. It was a young man, or rather, boy, about nineteen or twenty years old, rather dandified after the cow-puncher fashion, sporting goatskin chaps and silver-mounted bridle and spurs, silk neckerchief, and flat-brimmed hat of the style now made common by the Boy Scouts. His shirt was flannel, and his heavy roping saddle studded with silver conchas. He was belted with heavy cartridges, and a holster strapped down to his leg showed the butt of a six-shooter polished by constant handling.

“It’s that damned Louisiana!” said Brandon, with disgust.

The rider trotted through the gate which he swung open and dropped to the ground before the little veranda. Marian had run back behind the vines whence she peered at him half curiously and half afraid. The young fellow, teetering on his high heels, reached for her and, smiling from pleasant eyes, swung her into the air and lifted her high, bringing her down to his face and kissing her.

“Howdy, little Lily Bud!” he said, in a voice which was a soft blend of accents, the slurred Southern, the drawled Southwestern, and something subtly foreign.

He was a handsome, slender, dashing figure, and Marian’s gleeful echo to his laughter claimed him as her own. Even Ike Brandon relaxed and grinned. If the little lady of his heart adopted the stranger, Ike would put aside his prejudice. True, the man was that vanishing rarity, a reputed gunman, uncannily skilled with six-shooter and frowned on by a Western sentiment, new grown, for law and order, which had determined to have peace if it had to wage war to accomplish it.

After all, reflected Ike, the boy, though noted for skill and a certain arrogance which accompanied it, was not yet a killer. The younger element among the cowmen, reckless enough though it was, boasted no such skill as had been common with its fathers. They carried weapons, but they recognized their limitations and there were few of them who would care to test the skill that this young man was supposed to possess. He might, and probably would, go through life peaceably enough, though he was, potentially, as dangerous as a rattlesnake.

“I reckon you could eat,” he remarked, and Louisiana agreed.

“I reckon I can,” he said. “And my old hoss can wrastle a bag of oats, too. He’s got a ride in front of him and he’d appreciate a chance to rest and limber up.”

“You’ll stay the night?”

“No, thanks, seh! An hour or two’s all I can spare. Got business somewhere else.”

Brandon did not urge nor show curiosity. That was not etiquette. But little Marian, taken with the new acquaintance, broke into a wail.

“I want you should stay while I show you my dolly that Pete made me!” she cried, imperiously. Louisiana laughed and ruffled her curls.

“You show me while I eat,” he said. Then he followed Ike into the cabin, debonair and apparently unconcerned. The little girl came too, and, as the Mexican servant set the table, the stranger talked and laughed with her, telling her stories which he made up as he went along, tying his neckerchief into strange shapes of dolls and animals for her, fascinating her with a ready charm that won, not only her, but Ike himself.

He had seen that his horse was fed, and, after he had eaten, he sat unconcerned on the veranda and played with the little girl who, by now, was fairly doting on him. But at last he rose to go and she voiced her sorrow by wails and commands to stay, which he sorrowfully defied.

“I’ve got to ramble, little Lily Bud,” he told her as he led his resaddled and refreshed horse from the stable. “But don’t you fret. I’ll come roamin’ back hereaways some o’ these days when you’ve done married you a prince.”

“Don’t want to marry a prince!” screamed Marian. “Don’t want to marry no one but you-ou! You got to stay!”

“When I come back I sure will stay a whole lot, sweetheart. See here, now, you-all don’t cry no more and when I come back I’ll sure come a-ridin’ like this Lochinvar sport and marry you-all a whole lot. That’s whatever! How’d you like that!”

“When will you come?” demanded Marian.

“Oh, right soon, honey! And you’ll sure have a tame and dotin’ husband, I can tell you. But now, good-by!”

“You’ll come back?”

“You’re shoutin’, I will! With a preacher and a license and all the trimmin’s. We’ll certainly have one all-whoopin’ weddin’ when I come rackin’ in, Petty! Kiss me good-by, like a nice sweetheart and just dream once in a while of Louisiana, won’t you?”

“I’ll say your name in my prayers,” she assured him, watching him doubtfully and hopefully as he wheeled his horse, striving to keep back the tears.

And then he was gone, riding at a mile-eating pace toward the south and the Esmeralda Mountains.

Two hours later a tired group of men and horses loped in and wanted to know where he had gone. They were on his trail for, it seemed, he had shot “Snake” Murphy in his own road house in a quarrel over some drab of the place who was known as Lizzie Lewis.

Ike was cautious. It was not a regularly deputized posse and the members were rather tough friends of Murphy. Between the two, he preferred Louisiana. He remembered how unconcernedly that young man had waited until he and his horse were fed and rested, though he must have known that Death was on his trail. And how he had laughed and petted Marian. There was good in the boy, he decided, though, now he had started on his career as a killer, his end would probably be tragic. Ike had no desire at any rate to hasten it.

Nor, as a matter of fact, had the posse. Their courage had cooled during the long ride from Sulphur Falls as the whisky had evaporated from their systems. They were by no means exceedingly anxious to catch up with and encounter what was reputed to be the fastest gun in southern Idaho.

“Whatever starts this hostile play?” asked Ike of the leader of the posse.

“This here Louisiana, I gather, gets in a mix-up with Snake,” the officer explained rather languidly. “I ain’t there and I don’t know the rights of it myself. As near as I can figure it Lizzie takes a shine to him which he don’t reciprocate none. There is some words between them and Liz sets up a holler to Snake about this hombre insultin’ of her.”

“Insultin’ Lizzie Lewis?” said Ike, mildly surprised. “I’d sure admire to hear how he done it.”

“Well, Liz is a female, nohow, and in any case Snake allows it’s his play to horn in. Which he does with a derringer. He’s just givin’ it a preliminary wave or two and preparin’ his war song according to Hoyle when Louisiana smokes him up a plenty.”

“I reckon Snake starts it, then,” remarked Ike.

“You might say so. But rightfully speakin’ he don’t never actually *get* started, Snake don’t. He is just informin’ the assembly what his war plans are when

Louisiana cracks down on him and busts his shootin' arm. But this Louisiana has done frightened a lady a whole lot and that's as good an excuse to get him as any."

"Well," said Ike, dryly, "the gent went by here maybe two hours gone headin' south. He was goin' steady but he don't seem worried none as I noticed. If you want him right bad I reckon you can run him down. As for me I'm plumb neutral in this combat. I ain't lost no Louisiana."

Members of the posse looked at each other, glanced to the south where the gray expanse of sage presented an uninviting vista, fidgeted a little and, one by one, swung down from their saddles. The officer observed his deputies and finally followed them in dismounting.

"I reckon you're about right," he said. "This here buckaroo has got a good start and we ain't none too fresh. You got a bunk house here where we can hole up for the night?"

Ike nodded his assent, noting that the posse seemed relieved at the prospect of abandoning the chase. In the morning they headed back the way they had come.

French Pete had not appeared on the following day, although he was due, and Brandon decided that he would ride south and meet him. Leaving Marian in charge of the Mexican woman, he took a pack horse and rode away, making the Wallace Ranch at Willow Spring that evening. Although Wallace was a cattleman with an enmity toward Brandon's fraternity, it did not extend to Ike himself, and he was made welcome by the rancher and his wife. Wallace's freckle-faced son, a lad of five years, who was known among his vaqueros as "Sucatash," was the other member of the family. Ike, who was fond of children, entertained this youngster and made a rather strong impression on him.

On the following morning the sheepman saddled up and packed and got away at a fairly early hour. He headed toward the Esmeraldas, pointing at the break in the mountain wall where Shoestring Cañon flared out on the plains, affording an entry to the range. This was the logical path that the sheep-herders followed in crossing the range and, indeed, the only feasible one for many miles in either direction, though there was a fair wagon road that ran eastward and flanked that end of the range, leading to Maryville on the other side of the mountains, where the county seat was located.

But Ike rode until noon without seeing a sign of his missing herder and his sheep. French Pete should have entered the plains long before this, but, as yet, Ike was not alarmed. Many things might occur to delay the flock, and it was

impossible to herd sheep on hard and fast schedules.

As he rode Ike looked at the trail for signs of passing horsemen, but he noted no tracks that resembled those of Louisiana, which he had observed for some distance after he had left the ranch at Twin Forks. Just where they had left the trail and disappeared he had not noted, having but an idle interest in them after all. He had not seen them for many miles before reaching Willow Spring, he remembered. This fact gave no clew to the direction the man had taken, of course, since, being pursued, he would naturally leave the trail at some point and endeavor to cover his sign. He might have continued south as he had started or he might have doubled back.

At about one o'clock in the afternoon, as he was approaching the gap that opened into Shoestring, Ike saw, far ahead, a group on the trail. There seemed to be a wagon around which several men were standing. The wagon resembled one of his own camp equipages, and he spurred up his horse and hastened forward with some idea that the cow-punchers might be attacking it.

As he came nearer, however, one of the men swung into his saddle and headed back toward him at a gallop. Ike drew the rifle from its scabbard under his knee and went more cautiously. The man came on at a hard run, but made no hostile move, and when he was near enough Ike saw that he was not armed. He shoved the rifle back beneath his knee, as the rider set his horse on its haunches beside him.

"Ike Brandon?" the man asked, excitedly, as he reined in. "Say, Ike, that Basco ewe-whacker o' yours is back there a ways and plumb perforated. Some one shore up and busted him a plenty with a soft-nose thirty. We're ridin' for Wallace, and we found him driftin' along in the wagon a while back. I'm ridin' for a medicine man, but I reckon we don't get one in time."

"Who done it?" asked Ike, grimly. The cow-puncher shook his head.

"None of us," he said, soberly. "We ain't any too lovin' with sheep-herders, but we ain't aimin' to butcher 'em with soft-nose slugs from behind a rock, neither. We picks him up a mile or two out of Shoestring and his hoss is just driftin' along no'th with him while he's slumped up on the seat. There ain't no sheep with him."

Ike nodded thoughtfully. "None o' you-all seen anythin' of Louisiana driftin' up this a way?" he asked.

"Gosh, no!" said the rider. "You pickin' Louisiana? He's a bad hombre, but this

here don't look like his work."

"Pete's rifle with him?" asked Ike.

The man nodded. "It ain't been fouled. Looks like he was bushwacked and didn't have no chance to shoot."

Ike picked up his reins, and the man spurred his horse off on his errand. The sheepman rode on and soon met the wagon being escorted by two more cowboys while a third rode at the side of the horses, leading them. They stopped as Ike rode up, eying him uncomfortably. But he merely nodded, with grim, set face, swung out of his saddle as they pulled up, and strode to the covered vehicle, drawing the canvas door open at the back.

On the side bunk of the wagon where the cowboys had stretched him, wrapped in one of his blankets, lay the wounded man, his face, under the black beard, pale and writhen, the eyes staring glassily and the lips moving in the mutterings of what seemed to be delirium. Ike climbed into the wagon and bent over his employee, whose mutterings, as his glazing eyes fell on his master's face, became more rapid. But he talked in a language that neither Ike nor any of the men could understand.

With a soothing word or two, Ike drew the blanket down from Pete's chest and looked at the great stain about the rude bandage which had been applied by the men who had found him. One glance was enough to show that Pete was in a bad way.

"Lie still!" said Ike, kindly. "Keep your shirt on, Pete, and we'll git you outa this pretty soon."

But Pete was excited about something and insisted on trying to talk, though the froth of blood on his lips indicated the folly of it. In vain Ike soothed him and implored him to rest. His black eyes snapped and his right hand made feeble motions toward the floor of the wagon where, on a pile of supplies and camp equipment, lay a burlap sack containing something lumpy and rough.

"Zose sheep—and zose r-rock!" he whispered, shifting to English mixed with accented French. "*Pour vous—et le bébé! Le p'tit bébé an' she's mère—France—or—*"

"Never mind the sheep," said Ike. "You rough-lock your jaw, Pete, an' we'll take care o' the sheep. Lie still, now!"

But Pete moaned and turned his head from side to side with his last strength.

“*Mais—mais oui!* ze sheep!” He again stuttered words meaningless to his hearers who, of course, had no Basque at command. But here and there were words of English and French, and even some Spanish, which most of them understood a little.

“Ze r-rock—*pierre*—or! Eet eez to you *et le bébé* one half. Ze res’ you send—you send heem—France—*pour ma femme—mi esposa* an’ ze leet-leetla one? *Mi padron*—you do heem?”

“What’s he drivin’ at?” muttered one of the cowboys. But Ike motioned them to proceed and drive as fast as possible toward Willow Spring. He bent toward the agitated herder again.

“I’ll take care of it, Pete,” he assured him. “Don’t worry none.”

But Pete had more on his mind. He groped feebly about and whined a request which Ike finally understood to be for paper and a pencil. He looked about but found nothing except a paper bag in which were some candles. These he dumped out and, to pacify the man, handed the paper to him with his own pencil. It was evident that Pete would not rest until he had had his way, and if he was crossed further his excitement was bound to kill him almost at once. In obedience to Pete’s wishes Ike lifted him slightly and held him up while he wrote a few scrawling, ragged characters on the sack. Almost illegible, they were written in some language which Ike knew nothing about but, at the bottom of the bag Pete laboriously wrote a name and address which Ike guessed was that of his wife, in the far-off Basse Pyrenean province of France.

“I’ll see it gits to her,” said Ike, reassuringly. But Pete was not satisfied.

“Zose or,” he repeated, chokingly. “I find heem—on ze Lunch R-rock, where I step. Eet ees half to you an’ lett’ Marian—half to *ma femme* an’ ze *bébé*. You weel find heem?”

“Ore?” repeated Ike, doubtingly. “You talking French or English?”

“Or! *Oui!* Een Englees eet ees gol’, you say! I find heem—back zere by ze Lunch R-rock. Zen some one shoot—I no see heem! I not know w’y. One ‘bang!’ I hear an’ zat ees all. Ze wagon run away, ze sheep are los’, an’ I lose ze head!”

“Ore!” repeated Ike, blankly. “You found gold, is that what you’re telling me? Where?”

“Back—back zere—by ze Lunch Rock where I eat! Much or—gold! I find heem

an' half is yours!"

"That's all right," soothed Ike, thinking the man was crazy. "You found a lot of gold and half is mine and Marian's, while the rest goes to your folks? That's it, ain't it?"

Pete nodded as well as he could and even tried to grin his satisfaction at being understood, waving a feeble hand again in the direction of the burlap sack. But his strength was gone and he could not articulate any more. Pretty soon, as the wagon jolted onward, he relapsed into a coma, broken only by mutterings in his native and incomprehensible tongue. By his side Ike sat, vainly wondering who had shot the man and why. But Pete, if he knew, was past telling. To the story of gold, Ike paid hardly any heed, not even taking the trouble to look into the sack.

After a while the mutterings ceased, while his breathing grew more labored and uneven. Then, while Willow Spring was still miles away, he suddenly gasped, choked, and writhed beneath the blanket. The blood welled up to his lips, and he fell back and lay still.

Ike, with face twisted into lines of sorrow, drew the blanket over the man's head and sat beside his body with bowed face.

As they rode he pondered, endeavoring to search out a clew to the perpetrator of the murder, certainly a cold-blooded one, without any provocation. Pete's rifle, the cowboys had said, was clean and therefore had not been fired. Furthermore, the wound was in the back. It had been made by a mushrooming bullet, and the wonder was that the man had lived at all after receiving it.

He questioned the cowboys. They knew nothing except that Pete had been found about two miles down on the plain from Shoestring and that his sheep were, presumably, somewhere up the cañon. When Ike sought to know who was in the Esmeraldas, they told him that they had been riding the range for a week and had encountered no one but Pete himself, who, about five days back, had driven into the cañon on his way through the mountains. They had seen nothing of Louisiana, nor had they cut his trail at any time.

The wound showed that it had been recently made; within twelve hours, certainly. But the horses had traveled far in the time given them. One of Wallace's riders had ridden back up the cañon to search for possible clews and would, perhaps, have something to say when he returned.

They finally arrived at Wallace's ranch, and found there a doctor who had come from a little hamlet situated to the east. His services were no longer of avail, but

Ike asked him to extract the bullet, which he did, finding it to be an ordinary mushroomed ball, to all appearance such as was shot from half the rifles used in that country. There was no clew there, and yet Ike kept it, with a grim idea in the back of his mind suggested by tales which Pete had often told of smuggling and vendettas among the Basques of the border between Spain and France.

It was when the sack was opened, however, that the real sensation appeared to dwarf the excitement over the murder of the sheep-herder. It was found to contain a number of samples of rock in which appeared speckles and nuggets of free gold, or what certainly looked like it. On that point the doubt was settled by sending the samples to an assayer, and his report left nothing to be desired. He estimated the gold content of the ore to be worth from fifty to eighty thousand dollars a ton.

The coroner's inquest, at Maryville, was attended by swarms, who hoped to get from the testimony some clew to the whereabouts of the mine. But many did not wait for that. Before the assayer's report had been received there were prospectors hurrying into the Esmeraldas and raking Shoestring Cañon and the environs. It was generally thought that the Bonanza lay on the southern side of the range, however, and on that side there were many places to search. Pete might have taken almost any route to the top of the divide, and there were very few clews as to just where he had entered the mountains and how he had reached the cañon.

Nor did the inquest develop anything further except the fact that Wallace's cow-puncher, who had ridden back up the cañon after finding Pete, had found the spot where he had been shot, about five miles from the exit on the plain, but had failed to discover anything indicating who had done it. Other searchers also reported failure. There had been burro tracks of some prospector seen at a point about six miles from the cañon, but nothing to show that the owner of them had been in that direction.

The verdict was characteristic. Louisiana's exploit had been noised about; it was known that he was heading for the Esmeraldas when last seen, and the fact that he was a gunman, or reputed to be one, furnished the last bit of evidence to the jurors. No one else had done it, and therefore Louisiana, who had quit the country, must have been the culprit. In any event, he was a bad man and, even if innocent of this, was probably guilty of things just as bad. Therefore a verdict was returned against Louisiana, as the only available suspect.

Ike Brandon, after all, was the only person who cared much about the fate of a

sheep-herder, who was also a foreigner. Every one else was chiefly interested in the gold mine. Ike offered a reward of five hundred dollars, and the obliging sheriff of the county had handbills printed in which, with characteristic directness, Louisiana was named as the suspect.

The mountains swarmed for a time with searchers who sought the gold Pete had found. It remained hidden, however, and, as time passed, interest died out and the "Lunch Rock" was added to the long list of "lost mines," taking its place by the side of the Peg Leg and others.

Ike wrote to Pete's wife in France and sent her his last message. With it went a sample of the ore and the bullet that had killed Pete. Ike reasoned that some of his relatives might wish to take up the hunt and would be fortified by the smashed and distorted bullet.

CHAPTER I

A GENERAL DEMOTED

The general of division, De Launay, late of the French army operating in the Balkans and, before that, of considerable distinction on the western front, leaned forward in his chair as he sat in the Franco-American banking house of Doolittle, Rambaud & Cie. in Paris. His booted and spurred heels were hooked over the rung of the chair, and his elbows, propped on his knees, supported his drooping back. His clean-cut, youthful features were morose and heavy with depression and listlessness, and his eyes were somewhat red and glassy. Under his ruddy tan his skin was no longer fresh, but dull and sallow.

Opposite him, the precise and dapper Mr. Doolittle, expatriated American, waved a carefully manicured hand in acquired Gallic gestures as he expatiated on the circumstances which had summoned the soldier to his office. As he discoursed of these extraordinary matters his sharp eyes took in his client and noted the signs upon him, while he speculated on their occasion.

The steel-blue uniform, which should have been immaculate and dashing, as became a famous cavalry leader, showed signs of wear without the ameliorating attention of a valet. The leather accouterments were scratched and dull. The boots had not been polished for more than a day or two and Paris mud had left stains upon them. The gold-banded képi was tarnished, and it sat on the warrior's hair at an angle more becoming to a recruit of the class of '19 than to the man who had burst his way through the Bulgarian army in that wild ride to Nish which marked the beginning of the end of Armageddon.

The banker, though he knew something of the man's history, found himself wondering at his youthfulness. Most generals, even after nearly five years of warfare, were elderly men, but this fellow looked as much like a petulant boy as anything. It was only when one noted that the hair just above the ears was graying and that there were lines about the eyes that one recalled that he must be close to forty years of age. His features failed to betray it and his small mustache

was brown and soft.

Yet the man had served nearly twenty years and had risen from that unbelievable depth, a private in the Foreign Legion, to the rank of general of division. That meant that he had served five years in hell, and, in spite of that, had survived to be *sous-lieutenant*, *lieutenant*, *capitaine*, and *commandant* during the grueling experience of nine more years of study and fighting in Africa, Madagascar, and Cochin China.

A man who has won his commission from the ranks of the Foreign Legion is a rarity almost unheard of, yet this one had done it. And he had been no garrison soldier in the years that had followed. To keep the spurs he had won, to force recognition of his right to command, even in the democratic army of France, the erstwhile outcast had had to show extraordinary metal and to waste no time in idleness. He was, in a peculiar sense, the professional soldier par excellence, the man who lived in and for warfare.

He had had his fill of that in the last four years, yet he did not seem satisfied. Of course, Mr. Doolittle had heard rumors, as had many others, but they seemed hardly enough to account for De Launay's depression and general seediness. The man had been reduced in rank, following the armistice, but so had many others; and he reverted no lower than lieutenant colonel, whereas he might well have gone back another stage to his rank when the war broke out. To be sure, his record for courage and ability was almost as extraordinary as his career, culminating in the wild and decisive cavalry dash that had destroyed the Bulgarian army and, in any war less anonymous than this, would have caused his name to ring in every ear on the boulevards. Still, there were too many generals in the army to find place in a peace establishment, and many a distinguished soldier had been demoted when the emergency was over.

Moreover, not one that Mr. Doolittle had ever heard of had been presented with such compensation as had this adventurer. High rank, in the French army, means a struggle to keep up appearances, unless one is wealthy, for the pay is low. A lower rank, when one has been unexpectedly raised to unlimited riches, would be far from insupportable, what with the social advantages attendant upon it.

This was what Doolittle, with a kindly impulse of sympathy, was endeavoring tactfully to convey to the military gentleman. But he found him unresponsive.

"There's one thing you overlook, Doolittle," De Launay retorted to his well-meant suggestions. The banker, more used to French than English, felt vaguely startled to find him talking in accents as unmistakably American as had been his

own many years ago, though there was something unfamiliar about it, too—a drawl that was Southern and yet different. “Money’s no use to me, none whatever! I might have enjoyed it—or enjoyed the getting of it—if I could have made it myself—taken it away from some one else. But to have it left to me like this after getting along without it for twenty years and more; to get it through a streak of tinhorn luck; to turn over night from a land-poor Louisiana nester to a reeking oil millionaire—well, it leaves me plumb cold. Anyway, I don’t need it. What’ll I do with it? I can’t hope to spend it all on liquor—that’s about all that’s left for me to spend it on.”

“But, my dear general!” Doolittle found his native tongue rusty in his mouth, although the twenty-year expatriate, who had originally been of French descent, had used it with the ease of one who had never dropped it. “My dear general! Even as a lieutenant colonel, the social advantages open to a man of such wealth are boundless—absolutely boundless, sir! And if you are ambitious, think where a man as young as you, endowed with these millions, can rise in the army! You have ability; you have shown that in abundance, and, with ability coupled to wealth, a marshal’s baton is none too much to hope for.”

De Launay chuckled mirthlessly. “Tell it to the ministry of war!” he sneered. “I’ll say that much for them: in France, to-day, money doesn’t buy commands. Besides, I wouldn’t give a lead two-bit piece for all the rank I could come by that way. I fought for my gold braid—and if they’ve taken it away from me, I’ll not buy it back.”

“There will be other opportunities for distinction,” said Mr. Doolittle, rather feebly.

“For diplomats and such cattle. Not for soldiers. There was a time when I had ambition—there are those who say I had too much—but I’ve seen the light. War, to-day, isn’t what it used to be. It’s too big for any Napoleon. It’s too big for any individual. It’s too big for any ambition. It’s too damn big to be worth while—for a man like me.”

Mr. Doolittle was puzzled and said so.

“Well, I’ll try to make it clear to you. When I started soldiering, it was with the idea that I’d make it a life work. I had my dreams, even when I was a degraded outcast in the Legion. I pursued ’em. They were high dreams, too. They are right in suspecting me of that.

“For a good many years it looked as though they might be dreams that I could realize. I’m a good soldier, if I do say it myself. I was coming along nicely, in

spite of the handicap of having come from the dregs of Sidi-bel-Abbes up among the gold stripes. And I came along faster when the war gave me an opportunity to show what I could do. But, unfortunately for me, it also presented to me certain things neither I nor any other man could do.

“You can’t wield armies like a personal weapon when the armies are nations and counted in millions. You can’t build empires out of the *levy en masse*. You can’t, above all, seize the imagination of armies and nations by victories, sway the opinions of a race, rise to Napoleonic heights, unless you can get advertising—and nowadays a kid aviator who downs his fifth enemy plane gets columns of it while nobody knows who commands an army corps outside the general staff—and nobody cares!

“Where do you get off under those circumstances? I’ll tell you. You get a decoration or two, temporary rank, mention in the *Gazette*—and regretful demotion to your previous rank when the war is over.

“War, Mr. Doolittle, isn’t half the hell that peace is—to a fellow like me. Peace means the chance to eat my heart out in idleness; to grow fat and gray and stupid; to—oh! what’s the use! It means I’m *through*—through at forty, when I ought to be rounding into the dash for the final heights of success.

“That’s what’s the trouble with me. I’m through, Mr. Doolittle; and I know it. That’s why I look like this. That’s why money means nothing to me. I don’t need it. Once I was a cow-puncher, and then I became a soldier and finally a general. Those are the things I know, and the things I am fit for, and money is not necessary to any of them.

“So I’m through as a soldier, and I have nothing to turn back to—except punching cows. It’s a comedown, Mr. Doolittle, that you’d find it hard to realize. But *I* realize it, you bet—and that’s why I prefer to feel sort of low-down, and reckless and don’t-give-a-damnish—like any other cow hand that’s approaching middle age with no future in front of him. That’s why I’m taking to drink after twenty years of French temperance. The Yankees say a man may be down but he’s never out. They’re wrong. I’m down—and I’m out! Out of humor, out of employment, out of ambition, out of everything.”

“That, if you will pardon me, general, is ridiculous in your case,” remonstrated the banker. “What if you have decided to leave the army—which is your intention, I take it? There is much that a man of wealth may accomplish; much that you may interest yourself in.”

De Launay shook a weary head.

“You don’t get me,” he asserted. “I’m burned out. I’ve given the best of me to this business—and I’ve realized that I gave it for nothing. I’ve spent myself—put my very soul into it—lived for it—and now I find that I couldn’t ever have accomplished my ambition, even if I’d been generalissimo itself, because such ambitions aren’t realized to-day. I was born fifty years too late.”

Mr. Doolittle clung to his theme. “Still, you owe something to society,” he said. “You might marry.”

De Launay laughed loudly. “Owe!” he cried. “Such men as I am don’t owe anything to any one. We’re buccaneers; plunderers. We *levy* on society; we don’t owe it anything.

“As for marrying!” he laughed again. “I’d look pretty tying myself to a petticoat! Any woman would have a fit if she could look into my nature. And I hate women, anyway. I’ve not looked sideways at one for twenty years. Too much water has run under the bridge for that, old-timer. If I was a youngster, back again under the Esmeraldas——”

He smiled reminiscently, and his rather hard features softened.

“There was one then that I threatened to marry,” he chuckled. “If they made ’em like her——”

“Why don’t you go back and find her?”

De Launay stared at him. “After twenty years? Lord, man! D’you think she’d wait and remember me that long? Especially as she was about six years old when I left there! She’s grown up and married now, I reckon, and she’d sick the dogs on me if I came back with any such intentions.”

He chuckled again, but his mirth was curiously soft and gentle. Doolittle had little trouble in guessing that this memory was a tender one.

But De Launay rose, picked up a bundle of notes that lay on the table in front of him, stuffed them carelessly into the side pocket of his tunic and pushed the képi still more recklessly back and sideways.

“No, old son!” he grinned. “I’m not the housebroke kind. The only reason I’d ever marry would be to win a bet or something like that. Make it a sporting proposition and I might consider it. Meantime, I’ll stick to drink and gambling for the remaining days of my existence.”

Doolittle shook his head as he rose. “At any rate,” he said, regretfully, “you may draw to whatever extent you wish and whenever you wish. And, if America

should call you again, our house in New York, Doolittle, Morton & Co., will be happy to afford you every banking facility, general."

De Launay waved his hand. "I'll make a will and leave it in trust for charity," he said, "with your firm as trustee. And forget the titles. I'm nobody, now, but ex-cow hand, ex-gunman, once known as Louisiana, and soon to be known no more except as a drunken souse. So long!"

He strode out of the door, swaggering a little. His képi was cocked defiantly. His legs, in the cavalry boots, showed a faint bend. He unconsciously fell into a sort of indefinable, flat, stumping gait, barely noticeable to one who had never seen it before, but recognizable, instantly, to any one who had ridden the Western range in high-heeled boots.

In some indefinable manner, with the putting off of his soldierly character, the man had instantly reverted twenty years to his youth in a roping saddle.

CHAPTER II

MORGAN LA FEE

In the hands of Doolittle, Rambaud & Cie., was a rather small deposit, as deposits went with that distinguished international banking house. It had originally amounted to about twenty thousand francs when placed with them about the beginning of the war and was in the name of Mademoiselle Solange d'Albret, whose place of nativity, as her *dossier* showed, was at a small hamlet not far from Biarritz, in the Basse Pyrenees, and her age some twenty-two years at the present time. Her occupation was given as gentlewoman and nurse, and her present residence an obscure street near one of the big war hospitals. The personality of Mademoiselle d'Albret was quite unknown to her bankers, as she had appeared to them very seldom and then only to add small sums to her deposit, which now amounted to about twenty-five thousand francs in all. She never drew against it.

Such a sum, in the hands of an ordinary Frenchwoman would never have remained on deposit for that length of time untouched, but, if not needed, would have been promptly invested in *rentes*. The unusualness of this fact, however, had not disturbed the bankers and had, in fact, been of so little importance that they had failed to notice it at all. When, therefore, a young woman dressed in a nurse's uniform appeared at the bank and rather timidly asked to see Mr. Doolittle, giving the name of Mademoiselle d'Albret, there was some hesitancy in granting her request until a hasty glance at the state of her account confirmed the statement that she was a considerable depositor.

Mr. Doolittle, informed of her request, sighed a little, under the impression that he was about to be called upon for detailed advice and fatherly counsel in the investment of twenty-five thousand francs. He pictured to himself some thrifty, suspicious Frenchwoman with a small fortune who would give him far more trouble than any millionaire who used his bank, and whose business could and would actually be handled by one of his clerks, whom she might as well see in the first place without bothering him. As well, however, he knew that she would

never consent to see anybody but himself. Somewhat wearily, but with all courtliness of manner, he had her shown into his consultation room.

Mademoiselle d'Albret entered, her nurse's cloak draped gracefully from her shoulders, the little, nunlike cap and wimple hiding her hair, while a veil concealed her face to some extent. Through its meshes one could make out a face that seemed young and pretty, and a pair of great, dark eyes. Her figure also left nothing to be desired, and she carried herself with grace and easy dignity. Mr. Doolittle, who had an eye for female pulchritude, ceased to regret the necessity of catering to a customer's whim and settled himself to a pleasant interview after rising to bow and offer her a chair.

"Mademoiselle has called, I presume, about an investment," he began, ingratiatingly. "Anything that the bank can do in the way of advice——"

"Of advice, yes, monsieur," broke in mademoiselle, speaking in a clear, bell-like voice. "But it is not of an investment that I have need. On the contrary, the money which you have so faithfully guarded for me during the years of the war is reserved for a purpose which I fear you would fail to approve. I have come to arrange with you to transfer the account to America and to seek your assistance in getting there myself."

The account had been profitable to the bank in the years it had lain idle there, the lady was good to look upon and, even if the account was to be lost, he felt benevolent toward her. Besides, her voice and manner were those of a lady, and natural courtesy bade him extend to her all the aid he could. Therefore he smiled acquiescence.

"The transfer of the money is a simple matter," he stated. "A draft on our house in New York, or a letter of credit—it is all one. They will gladly serve you there as we have served you here. But if you wish to follow your money—that, I fear, is a different matter."

"It is because it is different—and difficult—that I have ventured to intrude upon you, monsieur, and not for an idle formality. It is necessary that I get to America, to a place called Eo-dah-o—is it not? I do not know how to say it?"

"Spell it," suggested the tactful Doolittle.

Mademoiselle spelled it, and Doolittle gave her the correct pronunciation with a charming smile which she answered.

"Ah, yes! Idaho! It is, I believe, at some distance from New York, perhaps a night and a day even on the railroad."

“Or even more,” said Doolittle. “Mademoiselle speaks of America, and that is a large country. From New York to Idaho is as far as from Paris to Constantinople—or even farther. But I interrupt. Mademoiselle would go to Idaho, and for what purpose?”

“It is there, I fear, that the difficulty lies,” said mademoiselle with frankness. “It is necessary, I presume, that one have a purpose and make it known?”

“It is not, so far as permission to go is concerned, although the matter of a passport may be difficult to arrange. But there is the further question of passage.”

“And it is precisely there that I seek monsieur’s advice. How am I to secure passage to America?”

Doolittle was on the point of insinuating that a proper use of her charms might accomplish much in certain quarters, but there was something so calmly virginal and pure about the girl as she sat there in her half-sacred costume that instinct conquered cynicism and he refrained. Unattached and unchaperoned as she was, or appeared to be, the girl commanded respect even in Paris. Instead of answering at once he reflected.

“Do you know any one in America?” he asked.

“No one,” she replied. “I am going to find some one, but I do not even know who it is that I seek. Furthermore, I am going to bring that some one to his death if I can do so.”

She was quite calm and matter-of-fact about this statement, and therefore Mr. Doolittle was not quite so astounded as he might otherwise have been. He essayed a laugh that betrayed little real mirth.

“Mademoiselle jests, of course?”

“Mademoiselle is quite serious, I assure you, and not at all mad. I will be brief. Twenty years ago, nearly, my father was murdered in America after discovering something that would have made him wealthy. His murderer was never brought to justice, and the thing he found was lost again. We are Basques, we d’Albrets, and Basques do not forget an injury, as you may know. I am the last of his family, and it is my duty, therefore, to take measures to avenge him. After twenty years it may be difficult, and yet I shall try. I should have gone before, but the war interrupted me.”

“And your fortune, which is on deposit here?” asked the curious Mr. Doolittle.

“Has been saved and devoted to that purpose. My mother left it to me after providing for my education—which included the learning of English that I might be prepared for the adventure. The war is over—and I am ready to go.”

“Hum!” said Doolittle, a little dazed. “It is an extraordinary affair, indeed. After twenty years—to find a murderer and to kill him. It is not done in America.”

“Then I will be the first to do it,” said the young woman, coolly.

“But there is no possibility—there is no possible way in which you could secure passage with such a story, mademoiselle. Accommodations are scarce, and one must have the most urgent reasons before one can secure them. Every liner is a troopship, filled with returning soldiers, and the staterooms are crowded with officers and diplomats. Private errands must yield to public necessities and, above all, such exceedingly private and personal errands as you have described. Instead of allowing you to sail, if you told this story, they would put you under surveillance.”

“Exactly,” said mademoiselle. “Therefore I shall not tell it. It remains, therefore, that I shall get advice from you to solve my dilemma.”

“From me!” gasped the helpless Doolittle; “how can I help solve it?”

Yet, even as he said this, he recalled his client of the previous day and *his* strange story and personality. Here, indeed, were a pair of lunatics, male and female, who would undoubtedly be well mated. And why not? The soldier needed something to jolt him out of his despondency, to occupy his energy—and he was American. A reckless adventurer, no matter how distinguished, was just the sort of mate for this wild woman who was bent on crossing half the earth to conduct a private assassination. Mr. Doolittle, in a long residence in France, had acquired a Gallic sense of humor, a deep appreciation of the extravagant. It pleased him to speculate on the probable consequences of such a partnership, the ex-légionnaire shepherding the Pyrenean wild cat who was yet an aristocrat, as his eyes plainly told him. He had an idea that the American West was as wild and lawless as it had ever been, and it pleased him to speculate on what might happen to these two in such a region. And, come to think about it, De Launay had referred to himself as having been a cowboy at one time, before becoming a soldier. That made it even more deliciously suitable. He also recalled having made a suggestion to the general which had been met with scorn. And yet, the man had said that he would gamble on anything. If it were made what he called a “sporting proposition” he might consider it.

“How can I help solve it?” And even as he said it again, he knew that here was a

possible solution.

“I see no way except that you should marry a returning American soldier,” he said, at last, while she stared at him through her veil, her deep eyes making him vaguely uncomfortable.

“Marry a soldier—an American! Me, Morgan *la fée*, espouse one of these roistering, cursing foreigners? Monsieur, you speak with foolishness!”

“Morgan *la fée*!” Doolittle gasped. “Mademoiselle is——”

“Morgan *la fée* in the hospitals,” answered Solange d’Albret icily. “Monsieur has heard the name?”

“I have heard it,” said Doolittle feebly. He had, in common with a great many other people. He had heard that the poilus had given her the name in some fanatic belief that she was a sort of fairy ministering to them and bringing them good luck. They gave her a devout worship and affection that had guarded her like a halo through all the years of the war. But she had not needed their protection. It was said that a convalescent soldier had once offered her an insult, a man she herself had nursed. She had knifed him as neatly as an apache could have done and other soldiers had finished the job before they could be interfered with. French law had, for once, overlooked the matter, rather than have a mutiny in the army. Doolittle began to doubt the complete humor in his idea, but its dramatic possibilities were enhanced by this revelation. Of course this spitfire would never marry a common soldier, either American or of any other race. He did not doubt that she claimed descent from the Navarrese royal family and the Bourbons, to judge from her name. But then De Launay was certainly not an ordinary soldier. His very extraordinariness was what qualified him in Doolittle’s mind. The affair, indeed, began to interest him as a beautiful problem in humanity. De Launay was rich, of course, but he did not believe that mademoiselle was mercenary. If she had been she would not have saved her inheritance for the purpose of squandering it on a wild-goose chase worthy of the “Arabian Nights.” Anyway De Launay had no use for money, and mademoiselle probably had. However, he had no intention of telling her of De Launay’s situation. He had a notion that Morgan *la fée* would be driven off by that knowledge.

“But, mademoiselle, it is not necessary that you marry a rough and common soldier. Surely there are officers, gentlemen, distinguished, whom one of your charms might win?”

“We will not bring my charms into the discussion, monsieur,” said Solange. “I

reject the idea that I should marry in order to get to America. I have serious business before me, and not such business as I could bring into a husband's family—unless, indeed, he were a Basque. But, then, there are no Basques whom I could marry.”

“I wouldn't suggest a Basque,” said Doolittle. “But I believe there is one whom you could wed without compromising your intentions. Indeed, I believe the only chance you would have to marry him would be by telling him all about them. He is, or was, an American, it is true, but he has been French for many years and he is not a common soldier. I refer to General de Launay.”

“General de Launay!” repeated Solange wonderingly. “Why, he is a distinguished man, monsieur!”

“It would be more correct to say that he *was* a distinguished man,” said Doolittle, smiling at the recollection of the general as he had last seen him. “He has been demoted, as many others have been, or will be, but he has not taken it in good part. He is a reckless adventurer, who has risen from the ranks of the Legion, and yet—I believe that he is a gentleman. He has, I regret to say, taken to—er—drink, to some extent, out of disappointment, but no doubt the prospect of excitement would restore him to sobriety. And he has told me that he might marry—if it were made a sporting proposition.”

“A sporting proposition! *Mon Dieu!* And is such a thing their idea of sport? These Americans are mad!”

“They might say the same of you, it seems to me,” said the banker dryly. “At any rate there it stands. The general might agree as a sporting proposition. Married to the general there should be no difficulty in securing passage to America. After you get to America the matter is in your hands.”

“But I should be married to the general,” exclaimed Solange in protest. Doolittle waved this aside.

“The general would, I believe, regard the marriage merely as an adventure. He does not like women. As for the rest, marriage, in America, is not a serious matter. A decree of divorce can be obtained very easily. If this be regarded as a veritable *mariage de convenance*, it should suit you admirably and the general as well.”

“He would expect to be paid?”

“Well, I can't say as to that,” said Doolittle, smiling as he thought of De Launay's oil wells. “He might accept pay. But he is as likely to take it on for the

chance of adventure. In any event, I imagine that you are prepared to employ assistance from time to time.”

“That is what the money is for,” said Solange candidly. “I have even considered at times employing an assassin. It is a regrettable fact that I hesitate to kill any one in cold blood. It causes me to shudder, the thought of it. When I am angry, that is a different matter, but when I am cold, ah, no! I am a great coward! This General de Launay, would he consider such employment, do you think?”

“Judging from his reputation,” said Doolittle, “I don’t believe he would stop at anything.”

Solange knew something of De Launay and Doolittle now told her more. Before he had finished she was satisfied. She rose with thanks to him and then requested the general’s address.

“I think you’ll find him,” he referred to a memorandum on his desk, “at the café of the Pink Kitten, which is in Montmartre. It is there that he seems to make his headquarters since he resigned from the army.”

“Monsieur,” said Solange, gratefully, “I am indeed indebted to you.”

“Not at all,” said Doolittle as he bowed her out. “The pleasure has been all mine.”

CHAPTER III

A SPORTING PROPOSITION

Louis de Launay, once known as “Louisiana” and later, as a general of cavalry, but now a broken man suffering from soul and mind sickness, was too far gone to give a thought to his condition. Thwarted ambition and gnawing disappointment had merely been the last straw which had broken him. His real trouble was that strange neurosis of mind and body which has attacked so many that served in the war. Jangled nerves, fibers drawn for years to too high a tension, had sagged and grown flabby under the sudden relaxation for which they were not prepared.

His case was worse than others as his career was unique. Where others had met the war’s shocks for four years, he had striven titanically for nearly a score, his efforts, beginning with the terrible five-year service in the *Légion des Etrangers*, culminating in ever-mounting strain to his last achievement and then—sudden, stark failure! He was, as he had said, burned out, although he was barely thirty-nine years old. He was a man still young in body but with mind and nerves like overstrained rubber from which all resilience has gone. 55

His uniform was gone. Careless of dress or ornamentation, he had sunk into roughly fitting civilian garb of which he took no care. Of all his decorations he clung only to the little red rosette of the Legion of Honor. Half drunk, he lolled at a table in a second-class café. He was in possession of his faculties; indeed, he seldom lost them, but he was dully indifferent to most of what went on around him. Before him was stacked a respectable pile of the saucers that marked his indebtedness for liquor.

When the cheerful murmur of his neighbors suddenly died away, he looked around, half resentfully, to note the entrance of a woman.

“What is it?” he asked, irritably, of a French soldier near him.

The Frenchman was smiling and answered without taking his eyes from the woman, who was now moving down the room toward them.

“Morgan *la fée*,” he answered, briefly.

“Morgan—what the deuce are you talking about?”

“It is Morgan *la fée*,” reiterated the soldier, simply, as though no other explanation were necessary.

De Launay stared at him and then shifted his uncertain gaze to the figure approaching him. He was able to focus her more clearly as she stopped to reply to the proprietor of the place, who had hastened to meet her with every mark of respect. Men at the tables she passed smiled at her and murmured respectful greetings, to which she replied with little nods of the head. Evidently she was a figure of some note in the life of the place, although it also seemed that as much surprise at her coming was felt as gratification.

She presented rather an extraordinary appearance. Her costume was the familiar one of a French Red Cross nurse, with the jaunty, close-fitting cap and wimple in white hiding her hair except for a few strands. Her figure was slender, lithe and graceful, and such of her features as were visible were delicate and shapely; her mouth, especially, being ripe and inviting.

But over her eyes and the upper part of her face stretched a strip of veiling that effectually concealed them. The mask gave her an air of mystery which challenged curiosity.

De Launay vaguely recalled occasional mention of a young woman favorably known in the hospitals as Morgan *la fée*. He also was familiar with the old French legend of Morgan and the Vale of Avalon, where Ogier, the Paladin of Charlemagne, lived in perpetual felicity with the Queen of the Fairies, forgetful of earth and its problems except at such times as France in peril might need his services, when he returned to succor her. He surmised that this was the nurse of whom he had heard, setting her down as probably some attractive, sympathetic girl whom the soldiers, sentimental and wounded, endowed with imaginary virtues. He was not sentimental and, beholding her in this café, although evidently held in respect, he was inclined to be skeptical regarding her virtue.

The young woman seemed to have an object and it was surprising to him. She exchanged a brief word with the maître, declined a proffered seat at a table, and turned to come directly to that at which De Launay was seated. He had hardly time to overcome his stupid surprise and rise before she was standing before him. Awkwardly enough, he bowed and waited.

Her glance took in the table, sweeping over the stacked saucers, but, behind the

veil, her expression remained an enigma.

She spoke in a voice that was sweet, with a clear, bell-like note.

“Le Général de Launay, is it not? I have been seeking monsieur.”

“Colonel, if mademoiselle pleases,” he answered. Then suspicion crept into his dulled brain. “Mademoiselle seeks me? Pardon, but I am hardly a likely object _____”

She interrupted him with an impatient wave of a well-kept hand. “Monsieur need not be afraid. It is true that I have been seeking him, but my motive is harmless. If Monsieur Doolittle, the banker, has told me the truth——”

De Launay’s suspicions grew rapidly. “If Doolittle has been talking, I can tell you right now, mademoiselle, that it is useless. What you desire I am not disposed to grant.”

Mademoiselle caught the meaning of the intonation rather than any in the words. Her inviting mouth curled scornfully. Her answer was still bell-like but it was also metallic and commanding.

“Sit down!” she said, curtly.

De Launay, who, for many years had been more used to giving orders than receiving them, at least in that manner, sat down. He could not have explained why he did. He did not try to. She sat down opposite him and he looked helplessly for a waiter, feeling the need of stimulation.

“You have doubtless had enough to drink,” said the girl, and De Launay meekly turned back to her. “You wonder, perhaps, why I am here,” she went on. “I have said that Monsieur Doolittle has told me that you are an American, that you contemplate returning to your own country——”

“Mademoiselle forgets or does not know,” interrupted De Launay, “that I am not American for nearly twenty years.”

“I know all that,” was the impatient reply. She hurried on. “I know *monsieur le général*’s history since he was a légionnaire. But it is of your present plans I wish to speak, not of your past. Is it not true that you intend to return to America?”

“I’d thought of it,” he admitted, “but, since they have adopted prohibition——” He shrugged his shoulders and looked with raised eyebrows at the stack of saucers bearing damning witness to his habits.

She stopped him with an equally expressive gesture, implying distaste for him

and his habits or any discussion of them.

“But Monsieur Doolittle has also told me that monsieur is reckless, that he has the temperament of the gamester, that he is bored; in a word, that he would, as the Americans say, ‘take a chance.’ Is he wrong in that, also?”

“No,” said De Launay, “but there is a choice among the chances which might be presented to me. I have no interest in the hazards incidental to——”

Then, for the life of him, he could not finish the sentence. He halfway believed the woman to be merely a *demimondaine* who had heard that he might be a profitable customer for venal love, but, facing that blank mask above the red lips and firm chin, sensing the frozen anger that lay behind it, he felt his convictions melting in something like panic and shame.

“Monsieur was about to say?” The voice was soft, dangerously soft.

“Whatever it was, I shall not say it,” he muttered. “I beg mademoiselle’s pardon.” He was relieved to see the lips curve in laughter and he recovered his own self-possession at once, though he had definitely dismissed his suspicion.

“I am, then a gambler,” he prompted her. “I will take risks and I am bored. Well, what is the answer?”

Mademoiselle’s hands were on the table and she now was twisting the slender fingers together in apparent embarrassment.

“It is a strange thing I have to propose, perhaps. But it is a hazard game that monsieur may be interested in playing, an adventure that he may find relaxing. And, as monsieur is poor, the chance that it may be profitable will, no doubt, be worthy of consideration.”

De Launay had to revise his ideas again. “You say that Doolittle gave you your information?” She agreed with a nod of the head.

“Just what did he tell you?”

Mademoiselle briefly related how Doolittle, coming from his interview with De Launay to hear her own plea for help, had laughed at her crazy idea, had said that it was impossible to aid her, and had finally, in exasperation at both of them, told her that the only way she could accomplish her designs was by the help of another fool like herself, and that De Launay was the only one he knew who could qualify for that description. He—De Launay—was reckless enough, gambler enough, ass enough, to do the thing necessary to aid her, but no one else was.

“And what,” said De Launay, “is this thing that one must do to help you?” It seemed evident that Doolittle, while he had told something, had not told all.

She hesitated and finally blurted it out at once while De Launay saw the flush creep down under the mask to the cheeks and chin below it. “It is to marry me,” she said.

Then, observing his stupefaction and the return of doubt to his mind, she hurried on. “Not to marry me in seriousness,” she said. “Merely a marriage of a temporary nature—one that the American courts will end as soon as the need is over. I must get to America, monsieur, and I cannot go alone. Nor can I get a passport and passage unaided. If one tries, one is told that the boats are jammed with returning troops and diplomats, and that it is out of the question to secure passage for months even though one would pay liberally for it.

“But monsieur still has prestige—influence—in spite of that.” Her nod indicated the stack of saucers. “He is still the general of France, and he is also an American. It is undoubtedly true that he will have no difficulty in securing passage, nor will it be denied him to take his wife with him. Therefore it is that I suggest the marriage to monsieur. It was Monsieur Doolittle that gave me the idea.”

De Launay was swept with a desire to laugh. “What on earth did he tell you?” he asked.

“That the only way I could go was to go as the wife of an American soldier,” said mademoiselle. “He added that he knew of none I could marry—unless, he said, I tried Monsieur de Launay. You, he informed me, had just told him that the only marriage you would consider would be one entered into in the spirit of the gambler. Now, that is the kind of marriage I have to offer.”

De Launay laughed, recalling his unfortunate words with the banker to the effect that the only reason he’d ever marry would be as a result of a bet. Mademoiselle’s ascendancy was vanishing rapidly. Her naïve assumption swept away the last vestiges of his awe.

“Why do you wear that veil?” he asked abruptly.

She raised her hand to it doubtfully. “Why?” she echoed.

“If I am to marry you, is it to be sight unseen?”

“It is merely because—it is because there is something that causes comment and makes it embarrassing to me. It is nothing—nothing repulsive, monsieur,” she

was pleading, now. “At least, I think not. But it makes the soldiers call me——”
“Morgan *la fée*?”

“Yes. Then you must know?” There was relief in her words.

“No. I have merely wondered why they called you that.”

“It is on account of my eyes. They are—queer, perhaps. And my hair, which I also hide under the cap. The poor soldiers ascribe all sorts of—of virtues to them. Magic qualities, which, of course, is silly. And others—are not so kind.”

In De Launay’s mind was running a verse from William Morris’ “Earthly Paradise.” He quoted it, in English:

“The fairest of all creatures did she seem;
So fresh and delicate you well might deem
That scarce for eighteen summers had she blessed
The happy, longing earth; yet, for the rest
Within her glorious eyes such wisdom dwelt
A child before her had the wise man felt.”

“Is that it?” he murmured to himself. To his surprise, for he had not thought that she spoke English, she answered him.

“It is not. It is my eyes; yes, but they are not to be described so flatteringly.” Yet she was smiling and the blush had spread again to cheeks and chin, flushing them delightfully. “It is a superstition of these ignorant poilus. And of others, also. In fact, there are some who are afraid.”

“Well,” said De Launay, “I have never had the reputation of being either ignorant or afraid. Also—there is Ogier?”

“What?”

“Who plays the rôle of the Danish Paladin?”

Mademoiselle blushed again. “He is not in the story this time,” she said.

“I hardly qualify, you would say. Perhaps not. But there is more. Where is Avalon and what other names have you? You remember

“Know thou, that thou art come to Avalon,
That is both thine and mine; and as for me,
Morgan le Fay men call me commonly
Within the world, but fairer names than this

I have——

“What are they?”

“I am Solange d’Albret, monsieur. I am from the Basses Pyrenees. A Basque, if you please. If my name is distinguished, I am not. On the contrary, I am very poor, having but enough to finance this trip to America and the search that is to follow.”

“And Avalon—where is that? Where is the place that you go to in America?”

She opened a small hand bag and took from it a notebook which she consulted.

“America is a big place. It is not likely that you would know it, or the man that I must look for. Here it is. The place is called ‘Twin Forks,’ and it is near the town of Sulphur Falls, in the State of Idaho. The man is Monsieur Isaac Brandon.”

In the silence, she looked up, alarmed to see De Launay, who was clutching the edge of the table and staring at her as though she had struck him.

“Why, what is the matter?” she cried.

De Launay laughed out loud. “Twin Forks! Ike Brandon! Mademoiselle, what do you seek in Twin Forks and from old Ike Brandon?”

Mademoiselle, puzzled and alarmed, answered slowly.

“I seek a mine that my father found—a gold mine that will make us rich. And I seek also the name of the man that shot my father down like a dog. I wish to kill that man!”

CHAPTER IV

HEADS! I WIN!

De Launay turned and called the waiter, ordering cognac for himself and light wine for mademoiselle.

“You have rendered it necessary, mademoiselle,” he explained. Mademoiselle’s astounding revelation and the metallic earnestness of murder in her voice alike took him aback. He saw that her sweet mouth was set in a cruel line and her cameo chin was firm as a rock. But her homicidal intentions had not affected him as sharply as the rest of it.

Mademoiselle took her wine and sipped it, but her mouth again relaxed to scornful contempt as she saw him toss off the fiery liquor. She was somewhat astonished at the effect her words had had on the man, but she gathered that he was now considering her bizarre proposal with real interest.

The alcohol temporarily enlivened De Launay.

“So,” he said, “Avalon is at Twin Forks and I am to marry you in order that you may seek out an enemy and kill him. There was also word of a gold mine. And your father—d’Albret! I do not recall the name.”

“My father,” explained Solange, “went to America when I was a babe in arms. He was very poor—few of the Basques are rich—and he was in danger because of the smuggling. He worked for this Monsieur Brandon as a herder of sheep. He found a mine of gold—and he was killed when he was coming to tell about it.”

“His Christian name?”

“Pedro—Pierre.”

“H’m-m! That must have been French Pete. I remember him. He was more than a cut above the ordinary Basco.” He spoke in English, again forgetting that mademoiselle spoke the language. She reminded him of it.

“You knew my father? But that is incredible!”

“The whole affair is incredible. No wonder you have the name of being a fairy! But I knew your father—slightly. I knew Ike Brandon. I know Twin Forks. If I had made up my mind to return to America, it is to that place that I would go.”

It was mademoiselle’s turn to be astonished.

“To Twin Forks?”

“To Ike Brandon’s ranch, where your father worked. It must have been after my time that he was killed. I left there in nineteen hundred, and came to France shortly afterward. I was a cow hand—a cowboy—and we did not hold friendship with sheepmen. But I knew Ike Brandon and his granddaughter. Now, tell me about this mine and your father’s death.”

Mademoiselle d’Albret again had recourse to her hand bag, drawing from it a small fragment of rock, a crumpled and smashed piece of metal about the size of one’s thumb nail and two pieces of paper. The latter seemed to be quite old, barely holding together along the lines where they had been creased. These she spread on the table. De Launay first picked up the rock and the bit of metal.

He was something of a geologist. France’s soldiers are trained in many sciences. Turning over the tiny bit of mineral between his fingers, he readily recognized the bits of gold speckling its crumbling crystals. If there was much ore of that quality where French Pete had found his mine, that mine would rank with the richest bonanzas of history.

The bit of metal also interested him. It had been washed but there were still oxydized spots which might have been made by blood. It was a soft-nosed bullet, probably of thirty caliber, which had mushroomed after striking something. His mouth was grim as he saw the jagged edges of metal. It had made a terrible wound in whatever flesh had stopped it.

He laid the two objects down and took the paper that mademoiselle handed to him. It seemed to be a piece torn from a paper sack, and on it was scrawled in painful characters a few words in some language utterly unknown to him.

“It is Basque,” said mademoiselle, and translated: ““My love, I am assassinated! Farewell, and avenge me! There is much gold. The good Monsieur Brandon will _____””

It trailed off into a meaningless, trembling line.

The other was a letter written on ruled paper. The cramped, schoolboyish characters were those of a man unused to much composition and the words were

the vernacular of the ranges.

“Dear madam,” it began, “I take my pen in hand to write you something that I sure regrets a whole lot. Which I hope you all bears up under the blow like a game woman, which your late respected husband sure was game that a way. There ain’t much I can say to break the news, ma’am, and I can’t do nothing, being so far away, to show my sympathy. Your husband has done passed over. He was killed by some ornery hound who bushwhacked him somewheres in the hills, and who must have been a bloody killer because Pete, your husband, sure didn’t have no enemies, and there wasn’t no one that had any reason to kill him. He was coming home from the Esmeraldas with his sheep which we was allowing to winter close to the ranch instead of in the desert to see if feeding them would pay and some murdering gunman done up and shot him with a thirty-thirty soft nose, which makes it worse. I’m sending the slug that done it.

“Pete was sure a true-hearted gent, ma’am, and we was all fond of him spite of his being a Basco. If we could have found the murderer we would sure have stretched him a plenty but there wasn’t no clew.

“Pete had found a gold mine, ma’am, and the specimens he had in his war bags was plenty rich as per the sample I am sending you herewith. He tried to tell me where it was but he was too weak when we found him. He said he wanted us to give you half of it if we found it and we sure would do that though it don’t look like we got much chance because he couldn’t tell where it was. The boys have been looking but they haven’t found it yet. If they do you can gamble your last chip they will split it with you or else there will be some more funerals around hereaways. But it ain’t likely they will find it, I got to tell you that so’s you won’t put your hopes on it and be disappointed.

“I am all broke up about Pete, and if there is anything I can do to help don’t you hesitate to let me know. I was fond of Pete, ma’am, and so was my granddaughter, which he made things for her and she sure doted on him. He was a good hombre.”

The letter was signed “I. Brandon.”

De Launay mused a moment. “Is that all?” he asked finally.

“It is all,” said mademoiselle. “But there is a mine, and, especially, there is the man who killed him.”

De Launay looked at the date on the letter. It was October, 1900.

“After nineteen years,” he reminded her, “the chances of finding either the mine

or the man are very remote. Perhaps the mine has been found long ago.”

“Monsieur,” replied the girl, and her voice was again metallic and hard, “my mother received that letter. She put it away and treasured it. She hoped that I would grow up and marry a Basque, who would avenge her husband. She sent me to a convent so that I might be a good mate for a man. When she died she left me money for a *dot*. She had saved and she had inherited, and all was put aside for the man who should avenge her husband.

“But the war came before I was married, and afterward there was little chance that any Basque would take the quarrel on himself. It is too easy for the men to marry now that they are so scarce, and it is very difficult for one like me to find a husband. Besides, I have lived in the world, monsieur, and, like many others, I do not like to marry as though that were all that a woman might do. I do not see why I cannot go to America, find this mine and kill this man. The money that was to be my portion will serve to take me there and pay those who will assist me.”

“You desire to find the mine—or to kill the man?”

“Both. I do not like to be poor. It is an evil thing, these days, to be a poor woman in France. Therefore I wish to find the mine and be rich, for, if I cannot marry, wealth will at least make life pleasant for me. But I wish to find that man, more than the mine.”

“And if I marry you, I will be deputized to do the butchery?”

“Monsieur mistakes me,” Solange spoke scornfully. “I can do my own avenging. Monsieur need not alarm himself.”

De Launay smiled. “I don’t think I’m alarmed. In fact, I am not sure I wouldn’t be willing to do it. Still, this vendetta seems to be rather old for any great amount of feeling on your part. How old were you when your father was killed?”

“Two years.”

De Launay laughed again, but choked it off when he noted the angry stiffening of mademoiselle’s figure. Somehow, her veiled countenance was impressive of lingering, bitter emotions. She was a Basque, and that was a primitive race. She was probably bold enough and hardy enough to fulfill her mission. She had plenty of courage and self-reliance, as he knew.

“The adventure appeals,” he told her, soberly enough, though the fumes of cognac were mounting again in his brain. “I am impelled to consider it, though

the element of chance seems remote. It is rather a certainty that you will fail. But what is my exact part in the adventure?"

"That rests with you. For my part, all I require is that you secure for me the right to go to America. I can take care of myself after that."

"And leave me still married?"

"The marriage can be annulled as soon as you please after we arrive."

"I am afraid it will hardly be as easy as that. To be sure, in the State of Nevada, where you are going, it should be easy enough, but even there it cannot be accomplished all at once. In New York it will be difficult. And how would I know that you had freed me if you left me behind?"

"If it pleases you you may go with me." He caught the note of scorn again. In fact, the girl was evidently feeling a strain at having to negotiate with him at all. She was proud, as he guessed, and the only reason she had even considered such an unusual bargain was her contempt for him. He was one who, when he might have remained respected and useful, had deliberately thrown away his chances to become a sot and vagabond.

"But you will understand that this marriage is—not a real marriage. It gives you no right over me. If you so much as dare once to presume——" She was flaming with earnest threat, and he could well imagine that, if he ventured a familiarity, she would knife him as quickly as look at him.

"I understand that. You need have no fear. I was a gentleman once and still retain some of the instincts. Then I am employed to go with you on this search? And the remuneration?"

"I will pay the expenses. I can do no more than that. And if the mine is found, you shall have a full share in it. That would be a third."

"If I am to have a full share it would seem only fair that I contribute at least my own expenses. I should prefer to do so. While my pay has not been large, it has been more than an unmarried soldier needs to spend and I have saved some of it."

"Then," said mademoiselle in a tired voice, "you have decided that you will go?"

De Launay ordered and tossed off another drink and Solange shuddered. His voice was thickening and his eyes showed the effects of the liquor, although he retained full possession of his faculties.

“A sporting proposition!” he said with a chuckle. “It’s all of that and more. But still, I’m curious about one thing. This Morgan *la fée* business. If I am to wed a fairy I’ll at least know why they call her one. I’ll take on no witches sight unseen.”

Solange shrank a little. “I do not understand,” she said, faltering. Her expectations had been somewhat dashed.

De Launay spun a coin into the air and leaned forward as it clashed on the marble top of the table.

“Heads I go, tails I don’t!” he said, and clapped his hand over it as he looked at mademoiselle. “And if I go, I’ll see why they call you Morgan *la fée*!”

“Because of my coloring,” said mademoiselle, wearily. “I have told you.”

“But I have not seen. Shall I lift my hand, mademoiselle, with that understanding?”

Solange stared at him through the veil and he looked back at her mockingly. Angry and depressed at the same time, she nodded slowly, but her stake was large and she could not refrain from bending forward with a little intake of the breath as he slowly lifted his hand from the coin. Then she sighed deeply. It was heads.

“Mademoiselle,” he said with a bow, “I win! You will lift your veil?”

Solange nodded. To her it seemed that *she* had won. Then, with no sign of anxiety or embarrassment she bent her head slightly, slipped the coif back from her hair with one hand and lifted the veil with the other, sweeping them both away from her head with that characteristic toss that women employ on such occasions. Then she raised her face and looked full at him.

He stared critically, and remained staring, but not critically. He had seen a good many women in his time, and many of them had been handsome. Some had been very beautiful. None of them had ever had much of an effect upon him. Even now he did not stop to determine in his mind whether this woman was beautiful as others had been. Her beauty, in fact, was not what affected him, although she was more than pretty, and her features were as perfect as an artist’s dream.

As she had said, it was her coloring that was extraordinary. He had seen sharp contrasts in his time, women with black hair and light-blue or gray eyes, women with blond hair and brown eyes, but he had never seen one with that mass of almost colorless, almost transparent hair, scintillant where the light fell upon it,

black in shadow where the rolls of it cut off the light, nor had he seen such hair in such sharp contrast with eyes that were large and black as night and as deep as pools. The thing would have been uncanny and disturbing if it had not been that her skin was as fair as her hair, white and delicate. As it was, the whole impression was startlingly vivid and yet, after the first shock, singularly fascinating. The strange mixture of extreme blondness and deep coloration seemed to fit a nature that was both fiery and deep.

De Launay reflected that one might well call her a fairy. In many primitive places that combination would have won her the name of having the evil eye. In a kinder land it gave her gentler graces.

“Are you satisfied, monsieur?” asked Solange, with a sneer. As he nodded, soberly, she dropped the veil and restored her cap. The people in the café had looked on with respectful and yet eager curiosity, a murmur of affectionate comment running about the tables.

“I’m quite satisfied,” he repeated again, as he tossed a note on the table to satisfy his account. Solange’s mouth curled scornfully as she noted again the stack of saucers indicating his habits. “I’m going to marry Morgan *la fée*, the Queen of Avalon, and I’m going to enlist in her service to do her bidding, even to unlicensed butchery where necessary. Mademoiselle, lead on!”

Solange led on, but her head was high and her face expressed an extreme disdain for the mercenary who had signed on with her.

CHAPTER V

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

De Launay expressed himself as quite willing to look after most of the details of the affair, and Solange, although capable, being more or less ignorant, was willing to leave them to him, although with some misgiving. The sight of that stack of saucers in the café of the Pink Kitten remained to haunt her with distaste for the whole adventure. She distrusted De Launay, recalling some of the more lurid tales she had heard of his exploits. In spite of everything, he had been a légionnaire, and légionnaires could hardly be purified even in the fires of war. Before he arrived at her apartment to go with her to the *mairie* of that *arrondissement*, she was to suffer further misgiving. Ahead of him arrived a gorgeous bouquet of lilies of the valley and orange blossoms, and they were not artificial flowers, either. When he arrived, looking much more respectable than she had expected, his mustache even twisted jauntily and his clothes pressed to neatness, she met him with accusation.

“Is it monsieur that I have to thank for—these?” she indicated the flowers with expressive and disdainful hands. De Launay stared at them vacantly as he stood in the door.

“I suppose it must have been,” he said, meekly. “I am forgetful, mademoiselle. You must make allowances for a broken soldier if my—vagaries—occasionally offend you.”

“It is in bad taste, to say the least, to bedeck the bride in such a ceremony,” she said cuttingly. “If I must hire a husband, he need not, at least, forget decency and make me conspicuous. Remember that.”

“The flowers,” said De Launay, “are as if they had never been. I dismiss them from the earth. With another drink or two I will cease to recall that such things as flowers exist. Mademoiselle will command me!”

Solange tossed the offending blossoms on the floor and walked out ahead of him. He followed at her side but a step behind, and she stalked with face turned

forward out to the street and toward the *mairie*. Yet, in spite of all precautions some wind of her intentions must have got about, for more than one old woman or wounded soldier spoke to her and uttered a blessing and good wishes as she walked along. To all of them she returned greetings in kind, thanking them soberly, but with a lip that trembled. De Launay, rolling behind, was the recipient of curious and doubtful glances, as the man who was taking their Morgan *la fée* from them. Yet here and there a soldier recognized him and came to a stiff salute, and when this was the case a murmur informing others ran about, and all doubt seemed to die, the greetings growing more cheerful and the blessings being addressed to both of them. This annoyed Solange more than the flowers had done.

“Is it that I am honored by having this mercenary drunkard for a husband?” she said to herself. “*Mon Dieu!* One would think so!”

Yet she could find nothing really offensive in his attitude to the affair, unless that he was almost too respectful. She suspected that he had been drinking and that his air was due to the exaggeration induced by liquor—or else, and that was worse—he was deliberately, with drunken humor, making a burlesque of his very deference.

The signing of the contract and the ceremony before the *maire* were successfully completed and De Launay turned to her with a deep bow. The *maire*, puzzled at the utterly emotionless quality of this wedding, congratulated them formally, and Solange acknowledged it with stiff thanks and a smile as stiff and mirthless. But it was to De Launay that the official showed the deepest respect, and that angered her again.

Her pride was restored somewhat after they had left the *mairie* and were on their way back to her rooms. A squat, swarthy individual, in the dingy uniform of the French marines, doffed his cap and stepped up to them, speaking to Solange in French, tinged with a broad Breton accent.

“And is it true, Morgan *la fée*,” he asked, ducking his head, “that this man has been married to you?”

“Why, yes, it is true, Brebon,” she answered, kindly. The man looked searchingly into her face, observing the coldness of it.

“If it is by your will, mademoiselle,” he answered, “it is well. But,” and he swung his lowering head on its bull neck toward De Launay, “if this man who has taken you should ever make you regret, you shall let me know, Morgan *la fée*! If he causes you a single tear, I shall make sausage meat out of him with a

knife!”

Solange shook her head in protest, but just behind her she heard a low laugh from De Launay.

“But, *mon brave*,” said he, “you would find this one a tough swine to carve!”

The Breton stared at him like a sullen and dangerous bull and moved away, saying no more. But Solange felt cheered. There were some who regarded her ahead of this soldier of fortune whom she had hired to masquerade as her husband.

She had little to cheer her in the next few days before she took the train for Le Havre. In the neighborhood where her marriage had become known, the fact that De Launay had left her at her door and came to see her only occasionally and then stayed but a moment was a fruitful subject of comment. What sort of a marriage was this! Suspicion began, gradually, to take the place of confidence in her. The women that had been her worshiping friends now spoke behind her back, hinting at some scandal. Nasty tales began to circulate as feminine jealousy got the upper hand. In the presence of soldiers these tongues were silent, but there were other males in the quarter who were not soldiers. Big, beefy Achille Marot, who kept the butcher shop on the corner had never been one, except in the reserve, where he had done some police duty behind the front. And Marot was a bully, foul of mind and foul of mouth. The whispers of the women were meat and drink to him. Solange had seen fit to resent in a practical manner some of his freedoms. Her *poilu* friends had nearly wrecked his shop for him on that occasion. But now she was married—this was said with a suggestive raise of the shoulders and eyebrows—and the *poilus* were not so much in evidence.

“Ah! what have I always said to you about this one!” Marot remarked as Solange passed his shop on her way to her rooms one day. He was looking out at her and smirking at Madame Ricot, the neighborhood gossip and scold. “Is this what one calls a marriage? Rather is it that such a marriage indicates that a marriage was necessary—and arranged conveniently, is it not? For observe that this broken adventurer who, as I know, was kicked out of the army in disgrace, is not a real husband at all, as every one may see. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the affair has been arranged to hide something, is it not?”

A hand that was like steel closed on the beefy neck of the butcher and a calm voice behind him spoke in his ear.

“Now here is a word for you, my friend, from De Launay, the *légionnaire*, and

you will do well to remember it! A tongue that is evil will win you an evil end and words that are not true will result in your throat being cut before you know it. Realize that, Marot, my friend, and say again that De Launay was kicked out of the army!”

“Death of a dog!” sputtered the butcher, twisting in the iron grasp on his neck. “I will slit thy belly——”

“Thou wilt do nothing but root in the mud as is thy nature,” said De Launay and kicked him vigorously into the gutter where he did, indeed, plow the filth with his nose. Madame Ricot uttered a shrill shriek for the police, and Solange, who had been unconscious of it all, turned about to see De Launay standing on the sidewalk brushing his hands while the butcher rolled in the mud. At this moment a gendarme came running up.

“Take that carrion and lock him up!” said De Launay, calmly. “I accuse him of public indecency, spreading scandal and criminal slander. He has said that I, the General de Launay, was kicked out of the army for unmentioned crimes. I will prefer charges against him in the morning.”

“*Monsieur le général*, it shall be done,” said the gendarme, with a smart salute. He grabbed the groveling butcher and hoisted him from his wallow. “Come along with me, Marot! I have long had my eye on thee! And is there a charge against the woman, my general?”

Madame Ricot was gaping wide-mouthed and silent at the unexpected result of her appeal to the forces of the law. And now she shrank fearfully back toward the gathering crowd.

“There is no charge—as yet,” said De Launay. “But she is suspected of being a procuress and a vile scold. If it is she who has been injuring respected reputations, I shall soon know it, and then——”

“I shall be at your service, my general,” the gendarme assured him, and, with another salute, departed, jerking the roaring Marot with him. De Launay sauntered on, with his rolling walk, toward Solange, who turned and walked away from him so that he did not overtake her until they had come to her apartment.

“There is entirely too much gossip in this quarter,” said De Launay, casually, as she wheeled about at the entrance to her rooms. “It is just as well that you are getting out of it.”

“It is just as well,” agreed Solange, angrily. “For if I remain here much longer

the gossip that you arouse will ruin me.”

“Again,” said De Launay, rather dryly, “I apologize.”

Solange was left to feel at fault. She knew that she had been unjust, but De Launay’s casual ways and his very indifferent deference angered her. Yet it could not last much longer since they were to take a train for Le Havre that evening and sail upon the following day. De Launay had called regarding the final arrangements.

Her passports had been secured and her passage on the *Astarte*, of the Blue Star line, was arranged for. How this had been done she did not inquire, remaining in ignorance of efforts spent by De Launay in securing the intercession of the French and American military authorities in order that she might have suitable accommodations on the crowded liner, which was being used as a troopship. A high dignitary of an allied nation had had to postpone his sailing in order that Madame de Launay might travel in a first-class stateroom.

Even so, the girl, concerned chiefly with her own adventure, and strange to the conditions existing, suspected nothing. The little stateroom was none too luxurious, for the *Astarte* was not one of the best boats, and four or five years of war service had not improved her. And she had no notion that De Launay, even for such comfort as this, had paid an exorbitant price out of his own pocket. He had given her the rate of the second-cabin berth, a dingy little inside cubby-hole, which he himself occupied.

The voyage was long and slow and dull. The swarming troops and military men crowded the ship to embarrassing fullness and Solange kept mostly to her cabin. She saw little of De Launay, who had not the run of the upper decks as she had, though his rank was recognized and he was made free of the lounge where the military men congregated. She heard somewhat of him, however, and what she heard angered her still more. It was chiefly in the line of gossip and conjecture as to why Madame de Launay, who seemed to be distinguished because she was Madame de Launay, should be traveling alone, first class, while the famous soldier shared a stuffy hole in the wall with a Chicago merchant. The few women aboard, nurses, Y. M. C. A. workers, welfare workers on war missions, picked up the talk among the officers and passed their curiosity on to Solange through stewardesses and maids. Every one seemed to think it strange, and Solange acknowledged that it was strange—stranger than they thought. But the thing that rankled was the fact that the assiduous care of the stewardess, her very obsequiousness, seemed to emanate from De Launay. It was because she was De

Launay's wife that she was a figure of importance—although she pictured him as a discredited mercenary who was even now, probably, indulging his bestial appetite for liquor in the officers' lounge and boasting of his exploits to a congenial audience.

Her one consoling thought was that it could not last much longer. True, New York would not mean the last of him since he was to accompany her to her destination, but that should not take long. Once at Sulphur Falls, which she understood to be her final railroad station, he could be relegated to his proper place.

Something like this did happen, though not in the measure she anticipated. They landed in New York on a chill, rainy day, and De Launay appeared at the gangway with his usual rolling gait, as though half intoxicated, eyes half closed and indifferent. His bow was almost mocking, she thought, with the flash of irritation that he always aroused in her. Other passengers looked at him curiously and at herself with some wonder, whispers running among them. Behind her veil she flushed, realizing that her own personality was not so much the subject of interest as his. She was uncomfortably aware that he was a striking figure, tall and handsome in spite of his careless demeanor and slouching walk. It was all the more reprehensible that such a man should make so little of himself.

But De Launay led her through the customs with a word that worked like magic and soon had her in a taxicab. He took her to a small and good hotel, not at all conspicuous, and saw that she was properly taken care of and supplied with American currency. Then, as she turned to follow the bell boy to her rooms, he bowed again. But she hesitated a moment.

"May I ask," she said, with some contrition roused by his care of her, "where you are going?"

"To my usual haunts, mademoiselle," he answered, carelessly. "But I shall be within reach. To-morrow afternoon the train leaves for the West. I will see that everything goes well."

"See that it goes well with you," she answered, a little tartly, "if not for your own sake, then for mine."

"Things go—as they go, with me," he answered, with a shrug. Solange turned away, but she felt somewhat more kindly toward him.

In part this was due to the fact that she was no longer overshadowed by him. The hotel clerks knew nothing of him. As soon as he passed without the zone of

military activities, he became nothing and no one. They only knew that they had been liberally tipped to afford Madame de Launay every service and comfort, and, as her appearance was striking and distinguished, they rendered the service with an impressive enthusiasm. From this point on De Launay took his rightful place as a mere appanage.

When they left New York Solange was apparently in full control and De Launay a mere courier. Used to short European trips, it did not occur to her that the price for which she secured drawing-room accommodations on the Twentieth Century Limited was ridiculously low, and as De Launay had proved capable of handling such matters, and she was a stranger, she gladly and unquestioningly left such things in his hands. He, himself, had a berth in some obscure part of the train and remained there. The maid and the porter of her car hovered around her with solicitude, and she became very favorably impressed with the kindliness and generosity of America, extended, apparently, without thought of reward.

At Chicago De Launay again showed himself in what she supposed was his true light. He had seen her to a hotel for the two or three hours they had to wait there and had escorted her back to her train again. While she was settling herself in her compartment she chanced to look out of the window before the train left the station and perceived her escort conversing with an individual who was not prepossessing. It was a short, broad man, dressed roughly, wearing boots covered by his trousers and with a handkerchief knotted about his neck. He wore a wide-brimmed, high-crowned felt hat, old and battered, its brim curled disreputably at all angles. She perceived that, after a few words together, this fellow and De Launay appeared to be on the best of terms, shaking hands cordially, conversing with much laughter and an occasional slap on the back. Finally the man, in the shelter of a truck loaded with baggage, produced a bottle from his hip pocket and offered it to De Launay who, with a preliminary salute, lifted it to his mouth. After which he wiped the neck of it with his hand and passed it back, the man duplicating his action.

The train was about to start and, with a few hilarious farewells, they parted and De Launay rolled in her direction while the other tramp strolled away at a gait very much like the general's. Two of a kind, she thought, bitterly; two ruffians who were hail-fellow-well-met—and she was married to one of them! A soldier of France, a distinguished general, to descend to this level! It was almost inconceivable.

But the train started and the long journey began.

Hour after hour the landscape flashed past the windows. Day faded to night, and Solange slept as best she could on the reeling train. In the morning she awoke to pass another weary time of gazing from the windows at the endless checkerboard of prairie farms rolling past, divided into monotonous squares by straight, dusty roads, each with its house and big red barn forming an exact replica of every other. She ate and dozed, tried to read a magazine but found the English more than usually difficult to understand, though ordinarily she read it with facility. Now her thoughts were in French and they persisted in coming back to her mission and to the man who accompanied her.

Another long, almost endless day of blatant sun and baked, brown prairie, passing by almost imperceptible degrees into wide plains, flat and dry, cut by wire fences here and there, but no longer checkerboarded in a maddening monotony of pattern. No longer did the houses and red barns succeed one another at exact intervals. In fact they seemed to have almost disappeared and had changed their character, such of them as she saw. They were rough, unpainted board affairs, for the most part, with here and there a more pretentious edifice. But in any case they were scarce and far apart. Low, grass-roofed dugouts also were to be seen at times, but, generally speaking, the view presented almost nothing but an endless vista of rolling, baked plain, covered with scattering grass and dusty gray sage.

And then, far ahead, a dim blue line against the horizon, the mountains appeared. When she awoke in the morning they were rolling majestically through wild gorges under towering peaks clad in snow. Pines and firs shaded the slopes, and the biting, rare air of the peaks burned her lungs. She forgot De Launay, forgot the depression that had grown upon her with the realization of the immensity into which she was plunging, and felt her spirit soaring in exhilaration and hopes of success. Mountain born and bred, she reacted buoyantly to the inspiration of the environment. The preposterous nature of her quest, a realization of which had been growing upon her, as the endless miles unrolled before her, was forgotten. She felt at home and at ease in the rugged hills, capable of doing anything she set out to do, no longer fettered with the binding restrictions of civilization and no longer bound by the cold laws of probability.

She wanted to summon De Launay, to point out to him the glories of the landscape and to let its purity and strength sink into him for the salvation of his manhood. But he remained aloof, lost, she surmised, in the buffet, drinking illicit liquor with disreputable boon companions.

Then, in time, they passed the mountain rampart, though they never again got

entirely out of sight of it, and descended into other desolate plains, broken here and there by patches of green and fertile land where villages and farms stood. Beside a leaden, surging inland sea, across a vast plain of alkali, plunging through enormous gorges cut out of the solid, towering rock, they entered mountains again, and again shot out onto barren plains, now, however, rusty brown and rough with broken and jagged lava. Another night was descending when, with defiant shrieks of the whistle, the train shot out upon a vast bench and, with flickering electric lights flashing past the windows, and glass reflecting back its blazing stack, it rolled with tolling bell into a station. The porter appeared.

“Sulphuh Falls, ma’am! Hoyeah’s whah you gits off!”

Then De Launay lurched into view behind the porter and she felt a sudden revulsion against the thrill of interest and anticipation that had seized her.

CHAPTER VI

WHERE THE DESERT HAD BEEN

Solange awoke in the bustling, prosperous environment of Sulphur Falls, nestled in the flats below the cañon of the Serpentine, with a feeling of ease and comfort. She had expected to find some wild, frontier village, populated by Indians and cowboys, a desperate and lawless community, and, instead, encountered a small but luxurious hotel, paved streets, shops, people dressed much as they had been in New York. She knew nothing of the changes that had taken place with the building of the great irrigation dam and the coming of the war factories which belched smoke back at the foot of the cañon. She did not realize that, twenty years ago, there had been no town, nothing but limitless plains on which cattle and sheep grazed, a crude ferry and a road house. It was beyond her present comprehension that in a dozen years a city could have sprung up harboring twenty thousand souls and booming with prosperity. Nor did she reflect upon the possible consequences these unknown facts might have upon her search.

Everything was strange to her, and yet everything was what she was accustomed to. Comfort and even luxury surrounded her, and the law stalked the streets openly in the person of a uniformed policeman. That fact, indeed, spelled a misgiving to her, for, where the law held sway, a private vengeance became a different thing from what she had imagined it to be. Only De Launay's careless gibe as he had left her at the hotel held promise of performance. "To-morrow we'll start our private butchery," he had said, and grinned. But even that gibe hinted at a recklessness that matched her own and gave her comfort now.

De Launay, coming into the glittering new town utterly unprepared for the change that had taken place, had felt the environment strike him like a blow. He saw people like those on Broadway, walking paved sidewalks in front of plate glass under brilliant electric lights. He had come back to seek rest for his diseased nerves in the limitless ranges of his youth and this was what he found.

He had turned and looked back at the frowning cañon through which the train had come from the northeast. There were the mountains, forest clad and cloud capped, as of old. There was the great, black lava gulch of the Serpentine. It looked the same, but he knew that it was changed.

Smoke hung above the cañon where tall chimneys of nitrate plant and smelters belched their foulness against the blue sky. In the forests the loggers were tearing and slashing into all but the remnant of the timber. Down the gloomy gulch cut out of the lava ran a broad, white ribbon of concrete road. Lastly, and primary cause of all this change, where had once been the roaring falls now sprang a gigantic bow of masonry, two hundred feet in height, and back of it the cañon held a vast lake of water where once had run the foaming Serpentine. From the dam enormous dynamos took their impulses, and from it also huge ditches and canals led the water out and around the valley down below.

Where the lonely road house had stood at the ford across the Serpentine, and the reckless range riders had stopped to drink and gamble, now stood the town, paved with asphalt and brick, jammed with cottages and office buildings, theaters, factories, warehouses, and mills. Plate glass gleamed in the sun or, at night, blazed in the effulgence of limitless electricity.

Around the town, grown in a few years to twenty thousand souls, stretched countless acres of fenced and cultivated land, yielding bountifully under the irrigating waters. From east and west long trains of nickel-plated Pullmans pulled into a granite station.

The people spoke the slang of Broadway and danced the fox trot in evening clothes.

Southward, where the limitless desert had been, brown or white with alkali, one beheld, as far as eye could reach, orderly green patches of farmland, fenced and dotted with the dainty houses of the settlers.

But no! There was something more, beyond the farms and beyond the desert. It was a blue and misty haze on the horizon, running an uneven and barely discernible line about the edges of the bright blue sky. It was faint and undefined, but De Launay knew it for the Esmeralda range, standing out there aloof and alone and, perhaps, still untamed and uncivilized.

He felt resentful and at the same time helpless. To him it seemed that his last chance to win ease of mind and rest from the driving restlessness had been taken away from him. Only the mountains remained to offer him a haven, and those might be changed as this spot was.

The natural thing to do was to drown his disappointment in drink, and that is what he set out to do. He left Solange safely ensconced in the shiny, new hotel, whose elevators and colored waiters filled him with disgust and sought the darker haunts of the town.

With sure instinct for the old things, if they still existed, he hunted up a “livery and feed barn.” He found one on a side street, near a lumber yard and not far from the loading chutes which spoke of a considerable traffic in beef cattle. He noted with bitterness a cheap automobile standing in front of the place.

But there were horses in the stalls, horses that lolled on a dropped hip, with heads down and eyes closed. There were heavy roping saddles hanging on the pegs, and bridles with ear loops and no throat latches. If the proprietor, one MacGregor, wore a necktie and a cloth cap, he forgave him for the sake of the open waistcoat and the lack of an outer coat.

MacGregor was an incident of little importance. One of more consequence was a good horse that roamed the open feed yard at the side of the barn. De Launay, seedy and disreputable, still had a look about him that spoke of certain long dead days, and MacGregor, when he was asked about the horse, made no mistake in concluding that he had to deal with one who knew what he was about.

The horse was MacGregor’s, taken to satisfy a debt, and he would sell it. The upshot of the affair was that De Launay bought it at a fair price. This took time, and when he finally came out again to the front of the barn it was late afternoon.

Squatted against the wall, their high heels planted under them on the sloping boards of the runway, sat two men. Wide, flapping hats shaded their faces. They wore no coats, although the November evenings were cool and their waistcoats hung open. Overalls of blue denim, turned up at the bottoms in wide cuffs, hid all but feet and wrinkled ankles of their boots which were grooved with shiny semicircles around the heels, where spurs had dented them.

One of them was as tall as De Launay, gaunt and hatchet faced. His hair was yellowish, mottled with patches of grayish green.

The other was sturdy, shorter, with curly, brown hair.

The tall one was humming a tune. De Launay recognized it with a shock of recollection. “Roll on, my little doggy!”

Without a word he sat down also, in a duplicate of their pose. No one spoke for several minutes.

Then, the shorter man said, casually, addressing his remarks to nobody in particular.

“They’s sure a lotta fresh pilgrims done hit this here town.”

The tall one echoed an equally casual chorus.

“They don’t teach no sort of manners to them down-East hobos, neither.”

De Launay stared impassively at the road in front of them.

“You’d think some of them’d sense it that a gent has got a right to be private when he wants to be.”

“It’s a —— of a town, nohow.”

“People even run around smellin’ of liquor—which is plumb illegal, Sucatash.”

“Which there are some that are that debased they even thrives on wood alcohol, Dave.”

Silence settled down on them once more. It was broken this time by De Launay, who spoke as impersonally as they.

“They had real cow hands hereaways, once.”

A late and sluggish fly buzzed in the silence.

“I reckon the sheep eat ’em outa range and they done moved down to Arizona.”

The gaunt Sucatash murmured sadly:

“Them pilgrims is sure smart on g’ography an’ history.”

“An’ sheep—especially,” said the one called Dave.

“*Ca ne fait rien!*” said De Launay, pronouncing it almost like “sinferien” as he had heard the linguists of the A. E. F. do. The two men slowly turned their heads and looked at him apparently aware of his existence for the first time.

Like MacGregor, they evidently saw something beneath his habiliments, though the small mustache puzzled them.

“You-all been to France?” asked Dave. De Launay did not answer direct.

“There was some reputed bronk peelers nursin’ mules overseas,” he mused. “Their daddies would sure have been mortified to see ’em.”

“We didn’t dry nurse no mules, pilgrim,” said Sucatash. “When did you lick Hindenburg?”

De Launay condescended to notice them. "In the battle of *vin rouge*," he said. "I reckon you-all musta won a round or two with the *vin* sisters, yourselves."

"You're sure a-sayin' something, old-timer," said Dave, with emotion. For the first time he saw the rosette in De Launay's buttonhole. "You done a little more'n café fightin' though, to get that?"

De Launay shrugged his shoulders. "They give those for entertainin' a politician," he answered. "Any cow hands out of a job around here?"

Both of the men chuckled. "You aimin' to hire any riders?"

"I could use a couple to wrangle pilgrims in the Esmeraldas. More exactly, there's a lady, aimin' to head into the mountains and she'll need a couple of packers."

"This lady don't seem to have no respect for snow and blizzards, none whatever," was the comment.

"Which she hasn't, bein' troubled with notions about gold mines and such things. She needs taking care of."

"Ridin' the Esmeraldas this time o' year and doin' chores for Pop all winter strikes me as bein' about a toss-up," said the man called Sucatash. "I reckon it's a certainty that Pop requires considerable labor, though, and maybe this demented lady won't. If the wages is liberal——"

"We ought to see the lady, first," said Dave. "There's some lady pilgrims that couldn't hire me with di'monds."

"The pay's all right and the lady's all right. She's French."

"A mad'mo'selle?" they echoed.

"It's a long story," said De Launay, smiling. "You'd better see her and talk it over. Meantime, this prohibition is some burdensome."

"Which it ain't the happiest incumbrance of the world," agreed Sucatash. "They do say that the right kind of a hint will work at the Empire Pool Rooms."

"If they have it, we'll get it," asserted De Launay, confidently. "You-all point the way."

The three of them rose by the simple process of straightening their legs at the knees, and walked away.

CHAPTER VII

MAID MARIAN GROWN UP

The Empire Pool Room was an innocent enough place to the uninitiate. To those who had the confidence of the proprietor it was something else. There were rooms upstairs where games were played that were somewhat different from pool and billiards. There was also a bar up there and the drinks that were served over it were not of the soft variety. It seemed that Sucatash and Dave MacKay were known here and had the entrée to the inner circles.

De Launay followed them trustfully. The only thing he took the trouble to note was at a rack in front of the place where—strange anachronism in a town that swarmed with shiny automobiles—were tethered two slumberous, moth-eaten burros laden with heavy packs, miners' pan, pick and bedding.

"Prospector?" he asked, indicating the dilapidated songsters of the desert.

The two cow hands looked at the beasts, identifying them with the facility of their breed.

"Old Jim Banker, I reckon. In for a wrastlin' match with the demon rum. Anything you want to know about the Esmeraldas he can tell you, if you can make him talk."

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"Old Jim Banker? Old-timer, is he?"

"Been a-soakin' liquor and a-dryin' out in the desert hereaways ever since fourteen ninety-two, I reckon. B'en here so long he resembles a horned toad more'n anything else." This from Sucatash.

De Launay paused inside the door. "I wonder. Are there any more old-timers left hereaways?"

"Oh, sure. There's some that dates back past the Spanish War. I reckon 'Snake' Murphy—he tends bar for Johnny the Greek, who runs this honkatonk—he's one of 'em. Banker's another. You remember when them Wall Street guys hired

‘Panamint Charlie’ Wantage to splurge East in a private car scatterin’ double eagles all the way and hoorayin’ about the big mine he had in Death Valley?”

“No,” said De Launay. “When was that?”

“Back in nineteen eight.”

“I was in Algeria then. I’d never heard. But I remember Panamint. He and Jim Banker were partners, weren’t they?”

“They was.” Sucatash looked curiously at De Launay, wondering how a man who was in Algeria came to know so much about these old survivals. “Leastways, I’ve heard tell they was both of them prospectin’ the Esmeraldas a whole lot in them days and hangin’ together. But Panamint struck this soft graft and wouldn’t let Jim in on it, so they broke up the household. You know—or maybe you don’t—that Panamint was finally found dead in a cave in Death Valley and there was talk that Banker followed him there and beefed him, thinkin’ he really had a mine. Nothin’ come of it except to make folks a little dubious about Jim. He never was remarkable for popularity, nohow, so it don’t amount to much.”

“And Snake Murphy: he used to keep the road house at the ford over the river, didn’t he?”

Once more Sucatash, fairly well informed on ancient history himself, eyed De Launay askance.

“Which he might have. That’s before my time, I reckon. I was just bein’ weaned when Louisiana was run out of the country. My old man could tell you all about it. He’s Carter Wallace, of the Lazy Y at Willow Spring.”

“I knew him,” said De Launay.

“You knowed my old man?”

“But maybe he’d not remember me.”

Sucatash sensed the fact that De Launay intended to be reticent. “Dad sure knows all the old-timers and their histories,” he declared. “Him and old Ike Brandon was the last ranchers left this side the Esmeraldas, and since Ike checked in a year ago he’s the last survivor. There’s a few has moved into town, but mostly the place is all pilgrims and nesters.”

They had climbed the stairs and come into the hidden sanctum of Johnny the Greek, and De Launay looked about curiously, noting the tables and the

scattering of customers about the place, rough men, close cropped, hard faced and sullen of countenance, most of them, typical of the sort of itinerant labor that was filling the town with recruits and initiates of the I. W. W. There were one or two who were of cleaner strain, like the two young cowmen. Behind the bar was a red-faced, shifty-eyed man, wearing a mustache so black as to appear startling in contrast to his sandy hair. De Launay eyed him curiously, noting with a secret smile that his right arm appeared to be stiff at the wrist. He made no comment, however, but followed the two men to the bar where the business of the day began. It consisted of imbibing vile whisky served by the stiff-armed Snake Murphy.

But De Launay still had something on his mind. "You say Ike Brandon's dead?" he asked. "What became of his granddaughter?"

"Went to work," said Sucatash. "Dave, where's Marian Pettis?"

"Beatin' a typewriter fer 'Cap' Wilding, last I heard," said Dave.

"She was a little girl when I knew her," said De Launay, his voice softening a little with a queer change of accent into a Southern slur. Snake Murphy, who was polishing the rough bar in front of him, glanced quickly up, as though hearing something vaguely familiar. But he saw nothing but De Launay's thoughtful eyes and sober face with its small, pointed mustache.

"'Scuse me, gents," he murmured. "What'll it be?"

"A very little girl," said De Launay, absently looking into and through Murphy. "A sort of little fairy."

The lanky Sucatash looked at him askance, catching the note of sentiment. "Yeah?" he said, a bit dryly. "Well, folks change, you know. They grow up."

"Yes," said De Launay.

"And this Marian Pettis, she done growed up. I ain't sayin' nothin' against a lady, you understand, but she ain't exactly in the fairy class nowadays, I reckon."

De Launay, somewhat to his surprise, although he sensed the note of warning and dry enlightenment in Sucatash's words, felt no shock. He had had a sentimental desire to see if the girl of six had fulfilled the promise of her youth after nineteen years, had even dreamed, in his soberer moments, of coming back to her to play the rôle of a prince, but nevertheless, he found himself philosophically accepting the possibility hinted at by Sucatash and even feeling a vague sort of relief.

“Who’s Wilding?” he asked. They told him that he was a young lawyer of the town, an officer of their regiment during the war. They seemed to think highly of him.

De Launay had postponed his intended debauch. In spite of mademoiselle’s conviction, his lapses from sobriety had been only occasional as long as he had work to do, and this occasion, after the information he had gathered, was one calling for the exercise of his faculties.

“If you-all will hang around and herd this here desert rat, Banker, with you when you can find him, and then call at the hotel for Mademoiselle d’Albret, I’ll look up this lawyer and his stenographer. I have to interview her.”

He left them then and went out, a bit unsteady, seedy, unprepossessing, but carrying under his dilapidated exterior some remains of the man he had been.

He reached Wilding’s office and found the man, a young fellow who appeared capable and alert. He also found, with a distinct shock, the girl who had occupied a niche in his memory for nineteen years. He found her with banged and docked hair, rouged and bepowdered, clad in georgette and glimmering artificial silk, tapping at a typewriter in Wilding’s office. He had seen Broadway swarming with replicas of her.

His business with Wilding took a little time. He explained that mademoiselle might have need of his legal services and certainly would wish to see Miss Pettis. The lawyer called the girl in and to her De Launay explained that mademoiselle was the daughter of her grandfather’s former employee and that she would wish to discuss with her certain matters connected with the death of French Pete. The girl swept De Launay with hard, disdainful eyes, and he knew that she was forming a concept of mademoiselle by comparison with his own general disreputableness.

“Oh, sure; I jus’ as soon drop in on this dame,” she said. “One o’ these Frog refygees, I s’pose. Well, believe me, she’s come a long way to get disappointed if she thinks I’m givin’ any hand-outs to granddad’s pensioners. I got troubles of my own.”

“We’ll be at the hotel, Miss Pettis and I,” said Wilding. “That will do, Miss Pettis.”

The girl teetered out on her spiky heels, with a sway of hips.

De Launay turned back to the lawyer. “I’ve a little personal business you might attend to,” he said. Wilding set himself to listen, resignedly, imagining that this

bum would yield him nothing of profit.

In ten minutes he was staring at De Launay with amazement that was almost stupefaction, fingering documents as though he must awake from sleep and find he had been dreaming. De Launay talked on, his voice slightly thick, his eyes heavy, but his mind clear and capable.

Wilding went with him to a bank and, after their business there was finished, shook hands in parting with a mixture of astonishment, disapproval and awe.

De Launay, having finished the more pressing parts of his business, made straight for Johnny the Greek's. The two burros still stood there, eyes closed and heads hanging. He walked around them before going in. A worn, dirty leather scabbard, bursting at the seams, slanted up past the withers of one brute, and out of its mouth projected the butt of a rifle. The plate was bright with wear, and the walnut of the stock was battered and dull with age.

De Launay scratched the chin of the burro, was rewarded by the lazy flopping of an ear and then went in to his delayed orgy.

He had received a shock, as he realized he would, and for the moment all thought of Solange and his responsibility to her had vanished. He had come back home after twenty years, seeking solace in the scenes he had known as a boy, seeking, with half-sentimental memory, a little girl with bright hair and sweet face. He had come to find a roaring, artificial city on the site of the range, the friends of his youth gone, the men he had known dying out, his very trade a vanishing art. Instead of a fairy maiden, sweet and demure, a grown-up child as he had vaguely pictured her, he had found a brazen, painted, slangy, gum-chewing flapper, a modern of moderns such as would have broken old Ike Brandon's heart—as it doubtless had. The last of the old-timers were a bootlegging bartender and a half-crazy and wholly vicious prospector.

Writhing under the sting of futility and disappointment, even the rotten poison served by Johnny the Greek appealed to him. His old neurosis, almost forgotten in the half-tolerant, half-amused interest in Mademoiselle d'Albret's adventure which had occupied his activities during the past weeks, revived with redoubled force. Sick, shaken, and disgusted, he strode through the pool room and, with deliberation masking his avid desire for forgetfulness, climbed the stairs to the hidden oasis presided over by his old enemy, Snake Murphy.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

Mademoiselle was having a series of enlivening shocks. First came Wilding, with Miss Pettis. He was received by Solange in the mezzanine gallery of the hotel and she learned, for the first time, that De Launay was sending her a lawyer to transact her business for her. This made her angry, his assuming that she needed a lawyer, or, even if she did, that he could provide her with one. However, as she needed a divorce from her incubus, and Wilding practiced also in the Nevada courts, she thought better of her first impulse to haughtily dismiss him. As for Wilding, he began to conclude that he had gone crazy or else had encountered a set of escaped lunatics when he beheld Solange, slender and straightly tailored, but with hair hidden under a close-fitting little turban and face masked by a fold of netting.

Marian Pettis was another shock. The extraordinary De Launay, whom she had supposed lost in some gutter, and without whose aid she had been puzzled how to proceed on her quest, was evidently very much on the job. Here was a starting point, at least.

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Although, behind her mask, her face registered disapproval of the girl, she welcomed her as cordially as possible. In her sweet, bell voice, she murmured an expression of concern for her grandfather and, when Marian bluntly said, "He's dead," she endeavored to convey her sorrow. To which Miss Pettis, staring at her with hard, bold eyes, as at some puzzling freak, made no reply, being engaged in uneasily wondering what "graft" the Frenchwoman was "on." Marian disliked being reminded of her grandfather's demise, having been largely responsible for it when she had run away with a plausible stranger who had assured her that she had only to present herself at Hollywood to become instantly famous as a moving-picture star, a promise that had sadly miscarried.

"But it was not so much of your grandfather as of my father that I wished to see you," mademoiselle explained, ignoring Marian's lack of response. "As for

Monsieur Wilding, it is later I will require his services, though it may be that he can aid me not only in procuring a divorce from this husband, but in another matter also, Miss Pettis, and perhaps, Monsieur Wilding, you know how my father was murdered?"

Wilding shook his head but Marian nodded at once.

"Gee, yes!" she said. "I was a kid when he was croaked, but I remember it all right. There was a guy they called Louisiana, and he was one of those old-time gunmen, but at that he was some kid believe me! He took a shot at a fellow here in Sulphur Falls—that was before there was any town here at all—and they was givin' him the gate outa the neighborhood. Going to lynch him if they caught him, I guess. I don't remember much of it except how this guy looks, but I've heard the old man tell about it.

"He come ridin' out to our place all dressed up like a movie cow-puncher and you'd never have dreamed there was a mob about three jumps behind him. He sets in with us and takes a great shine to me. I was quite a doll in those days they tell me." She tossed her head as much as to say that she was still able to qualify for the description.

"Believe me, he was a regular swell, and you'd never in the world a thought he was what he turned out to be. Delaney, his name was, or something like that. Well, he plays with me and when he goes away I cried and wanted him to stay. I remember it just as vivid! He had on these chaps—leather pants, you know—and a Stetson slanting on his head, and a fancy silk neckerchief which he made into comical dolls and things. Oh! he sure made a hit with Marian!

"He swore he was comin' back, like young Lochinvar, and marry me some day, and I was all tickled to think he would do it.

"Then, would you believe it, the murdering villain rides away about half an hour before the mob comes and goes south toward the mountains. Next day or so, we pick up your father, shot something terrible, and this awful 'Louisiana' Delaney had done it, in cold blood and just to be killing something."

"Ah!" Mademoiselle stiffened and quivered. Her voice was like brass. "In cold blood, you say? Then he had no provocation? He was not an enemy of my father?"

"Naw. Your father didn't have no enemies. So far as I know, this Louisiana didn't even know him. He was a cattleman and they hated the sheepmen, you know, and used to fight them. Then, he was one of these gunmen, always

shooting some one, and they used to be terrible. They'd kill some one just for the fun of it—to sort of keep in practice.”

Mademoiselle shuddered, envisioning some bloodthirsty, evil thing, unspeakably depraved. But it was momentary. She spoke again in her metallic voice.

“That is well to know. I will look for this Louisiana.”

“You ain’t likely to find him. He never was seen or heard of around here no more. I’ve heard granddad call him ‘the last of the gunmen,’ because the country was settling up and getting civilized then. One thing sure, he never made good on that Lochinvar sketch, I can promise you.”

“It is no matter. He will come back—or I will follow him. It is of another matter I would talk. There was something of a mine that my father had found.”

“I’ve heard of that,” said Wilding. “It’s quite a legend around here. The Lunch Rock mine, they call it, and Jim Banker, the prospector, looks for it every year.”

“But he ain’t found it——”

A bell boy passed, singing out: “Call for Mad’mo’selle Dalbray! Call fer Mad’mo’selle Dalbray!” Mademoiselle rose and beckoned to him.

“Three men in the lobby wish to see yuh, miss!” the boy told her. “Said Mr. Delonny sent ’em.”

“Monsieur de Launay! What next? Well, show them up here.”

A few moments later Sucatash and Dave Mackay stalked on their high heels up the stairs and into the alcove of the mezzanine balcony, holding their broad hats in their hands. Sucatash gulped as mademoiselle’s slender figure confronted him, and Dave’s mouth fell open.

Behind them lurched another man, slinking in the background.

“What is it, messieurs?” asked Solange, her voice once more clear and sweet. The cow-punchers blushed in unison.

“This here Mr. Delonny done sent us here to see you, ma’am. He allows you-all wants a couple of hands for this trip you’re takin’ into the Esmeraldas. He likewise instigates us to corral this here horned toad, Banker, who’s a prospector, because he says you’ll want to see him about some mine or other, and, Banker, he don’t know nothing about nothing but lookin’ for mines: which he ain’t never found a whole lot, I reckon, none whatever.”

Solange smiled and her smile, even with veiled face, was something to put these

bashful range riders at their ease. Both of them felt warmed to their hearts.

"I am very glad to see you," she said. "It is true that I require help, and I shall be glad of yours. It is kind of you to enter my employ."

Dave uttered a protest. "Don't you mention it, mad'moiselle. Sucatash and me was both in France and, while we can't give that there country any rank ahead of the U. S. A., we hands it to her frank, that any time we can do anything fer a mad'moiselle, we does it pronto! We're yours, ma'am, hide, hair an' hoofs!"

"Which we sure are," agreed Sucatash, not to be outdone. "That's whatever!"

"And here is this minin' sharp," said Dave, turning about and reaching for the shrinking Banker. "Come here, Jim, and say howdy, if you ain't herded with burros so long you've forgotten human amenities that a way. Mad'mo'selle wants to talk to you."

Banker emerged from behind them. He, too, held his hat in hand, an incredibly stained and battered felt atrocity. His seamed face was nut brown under constant exposure to the sun. His garments were faded nondescripts, and on his feet were thick-soled, high-lacing boots. He gave an impression of dry dinginess, like rawhide, and his eyes were mean and shifty. He might have been fifty or he might have been older; one could not tell.

Mademoiselle was uncertain. She hardly knew enough to question this queer specimen, and so she turned to Marian Pettis.

"Miss Pettis, can you explain to him? I can hardly tell him what we wish to know. And, if the mine is found, half of it will be yours, you know."

"Mine! Lord sakes, I ain't counting on it. You gotta fat chance to find it. This bird, here, has been searchin' for it ever since the year one and he ain't found it. Say, Banker, this is Mad'mo'selle Dalbray. She's the daughter of that French Pete that was killed——"

"Hey?" said Banker, sharply.

"Ah, you know the yarn. You been huntin' his mine since Lord knows when. This lady is lookin' for it and she wants some dope on how to go about findin' it."

"An she expects me to tell her?" cried Banker, in a falsetto whine. "Yuh reckon if I knowed where it was I wouldn't have staked it long ago? I don't know nothin' about it."

“Well, you know the Esmeraldas, old Stingin’ Lizard,” growled Sucatash. “You can tell her what to do about gettin’ there.”

“I can’t tell her nothin’ no more than you can,” said Banker. “She’s got Ike Brandon’s letters, ain’t she? He told her where it was, didn’t he? What’s she comin’ to me fer? I don’t know nothin’.”

“Were you here when my father was killed?” Solange asked, kindly. She felt sorry for the old fellow.

“Hey! What’s that? Was I here? No’m, I wasn’t here! I was—I reckon I was over south of the range, out on the desert. I don’t know nothin’ about the killin’.”

He was looking furtively at her veil, his eyes shifting away and back to it, awed by the mystery of the hidden eyes. He was like a wild, shy animal, uneasy in this place and among these people so foreign to his natural environment.

Solange sighed. “I am sorry, monsieur,” she said. “I had hoped you could tell me more.”

He broke in again with his whining voice. “It was this here Louisiana, every one says.”

“Louisiana! Yes——” Solange’s tones became fierce and she leaned closer to the dry desert rat, who shrank from her. “And when I find him—when I find this man who shot my father like a dog——”

Her voice was tense and almost shrill, cutting like steel.

“I shall kill him!”

The dim, veiled face was close to Banker’s. He raised his corded, lean hand to the corded, lean throat as though he was choking. He stared at her fixedly, his shifty eyes for once held steady. There was horror and fear in the back of them. He put one foot back, shifted his weight to it, put the other back, then the first again, slowly retreating backward, with his stricken eyes still on her. Then he suddenly whirled about and scuttled down the stairs as though the devil were after him.

Solange remained standing, puzzled.

“That is queer,” she said. “Why is he frightened? I did not mean to startle him. I suppose he is shy.”

“No. Just locoed, like all them prospectors,” said Sucatash. “Furthermore, he’s ornery, ma’am. Probably don’t like this talk of killin’. They say he beefed

Panamint Charlie, his partner, some years ago and I reckon he's a mite sensitive that a way."

"He doesn't seem to know where the mine is," said Solange. "Nor do you, mademoiselle?"

"Me?" said Marian, airily. "If I knew where that mine was, believe me, you'd be late looking for it. I'd have been settled on it long ago."

"I wish," said Solange, "that I knew what to do. Perhaps, if this unspeakable De Launay were here——"

"I can telephone the Greek's and see if he's there," suggested MacKay. Solange assented and he hurried to a telephone.

"It ain't likely he knows much that will help, mad'mo'selle," said Sucatash, also eager to aid, "but my old man was around here when these hostilities was pulled off, and it's possible he might help you. He could tell you as much as any one, I reckon."

"Your father?"

"Yes, ma'am. I recommend that you get your outfit together, except fer hosses, hire a car to take it out and start from our ranch at Willow Spring. It's right near the mountains and not far from Shoestring Cañon, which it's likely you'll have to go that way to get into the hills. And you'll be able to get all the hosses you want right there."

"That sounds as though it might be the wise thing to do," said Wilding.

Solange turned to him. "That is true. I thank Monsieur Sucatash. And, Monsieur Wilding, there is one thing you can do for me, besides the arrangements for that divorce. Can you not search the records to find out what is known of my father's death and who killed him?"

"But it appears that the killer was Louisiana."

"Yes—but who is Louisiana? Where did he go? That is what I must find out. Oh! If this depraved De Launay were of any benefit, instead of being a sorrow and disgust to me——"

At this moment Dave MacKay reappeared. Solange turned to him eagerly. "Did you find him, monsieur?"

"I sure did," said Dave, with disgust. "Leastways, I located him. That animated vat of inebriation has done went and landed in jail."

CHAPTER IX

BEHIND PRISON BARS

A somewhat intoxicated cow-puncher, in from the mountain ranges north of the town, intrigued De Launay when he returned to Johnny the Greek's. To be exact, it was not the cow-puncher, who was merely a gawky, loud-mouthed and uncouth importation from a Middle Western farm, broken to ride after a fashion, to rope and brand when necessary and to wield pliers in mending barbed wire, the sort of product, in fact, that had disillusioned De Launay. It was his clothes that the ex-légionnaire admired.

They were clothes about like those worn by Sucatash and Dave Mackay. De Launay could have purchased such clothes at any one of a dozen shops, but they would have been new and conspicuous. The fellow wore a wide-brimmed hat, the wear of which had resulted in certain picturesque sags that De Launay considered extremely artistic. His boots were small and fairly new, and not over adorned with ornamentation. There was also a buckskin waistcoat which was aged and ripened. The other accessories were unimportant. Such things as spurs, bridle, and saddle De Launay had bought when he acquired a horse.

De Launay had imbibed enough of the terrible liquor served by Snake Murphy to completely submerge his everyday personality. He retained merely a fixed idea that he wished to return as far as possible in spirit to the days of nineteen years ago. To his befuddled mind, the first step was to dress the part. He was groping after his lost youth, unable to realize that it was, indeed, lost beyond recovery; that he was, in hardly a particular, the wild lad who had once ridden the desert ranges.

The more he drank, the firmer became the notion that, to him, instead of to this imitation of the real thing, rightfully belonged these insignia of a vanishing fraternity. He considered ways and means, rejecting one after another. He vaguely laid plans to wait until the fellow went to his quarters for the night, and then break in and steal his clothes. A better plan suggested itself; to ply him with

drink until unconscious and then drag him somewhere and strip him. This also did not seem practical. Then he thought of inducing him to gamble and winning all his possessions, but a remnant of sense deterred him. De Launay, though he gambled recklessly, never, by any chance, won. In fact, his losings were so monotonous that the diversion had ceased to be exciting and he had abandoned it.

Finally, having reached a stage where the effort to think was too much for him, he did the obvious thing and offered to buy the fellow's clothes. The cow-puncher was almost as drunk as De Launay and showed it much more. He was also belligerent, which De Launay never was. Furthermore, he had reached the stage where he was suspicious of anything out of the ordinary. He thought De Launay was ridiculing him.

"Sell you my clo'es! Say, feller, what you givin' me?"

A bullet-headed, crop-haired, and lowering laborer, who was leaning against the bar, uttered a snorting laugh.

"Lamp de guys wit' de French heels an' de one wit' de sissy eyebrow on 'is lip, would youse? Dey's a coupla heroes wat's been to France; dey gets dem habits dere."

The sensitive cow hand glared about him, but the leering toughs who echoed their spokesman's laughter were not safe to challenge. There were too many of them. De Launay stood alone and, to him as to the others, that little pointed mustache was a mark of affectation and effeminacy.

"You better pull yer freight before I take a wallop at yuh," he remarked, loudly.

"Tell 'im to go git a shave, bo," suggested the bullet-headed man.

"I'll singe the eyebrow offa him myself if he don't git outa here," growled the cow hand, turning back to his liquor.

De Launay went back to his table and sat down. He brooded on his failure, and to him it seemed that he must have that hat, that waistcoat and those boots at any cost. The others in the room snickered and jeered as they eyed his sagging figure and closed eyes.

He finally got up and lurched out of the room. The door opened on a narrow stairway leading down to a sort of pantry behind the main billiard parlor on the ground floor. The stairway was steep and dark, and the landing was small and only dimly lighted by a dusty, cobwebbed square of window high up in the outer

wall.

De Launay sat on the top step and resumed his brooding, his head sunk on his arms, which were folded on his knees. He felt a deep sense of injury, and his sorrow for himself was acute. He was only half conscious of his sufferings, but they were dully insistent, above the deadening influence of the liquor. There were some things he wanted and they continually ran through his mind in jumbled sequence. There was a pair of high heels, then there was a sort of vision of limitless, abandoned plain covered with yellowing grass and black sage clumps, and surmounted with a brilliant blue sky. Following this was a confused picture of a blackened, greasy waistcoat from which a dark, fathomless pair of eyes looked out. He wondered how a waistcoat could have a pair of eyes, and why the eyes should hold in them lights like those that flashed from a diamond.

Men came up the stairs and crowded roughly past him. He paid them no heed. Occasionally other men left the hidden barroom and went down. These were rougher. One of them even kicked him in passing. He merely looked up, dully took in the figure and sank his head again on his arms. Inside, newcomers advised Snake Murphy to go out and throw the bum into the street. As this might have led to inquiries, Snake decided to leave well enough alone until dark.

Finally the cow-puncher, well loaded with more liquor than he could comfortably carry, decided to take an uncertain departure. He waved a debonair and inclusive farewell to all those about him, teetered a bit on his high heels, straddled an imaginary horse, and, with legs well apart and body balanced precariously, tacked, by and full, for the door.

Reaching it, he leaned against it, felt for the knob, turned it, carefully backed away from the door and opened it. Holding the edge, he eased himself around it and, balancing on the outer side, closed it again with elaborate care. Then he took a tentative step and lifted his hand from its support.

The next moment he tripped over De Launay and fell over his head, turning a complete flip.

De Launay came out of his trance with a start to find a hundred and seventy pounds of cow-puncher sprawling in his lap and clinging about his neck. His dull eyes, gummy with sleep, showed him a hat of sorts, a greasy waistcoat——

Calmly he took the cowboy by the neck and raised him. The fellow uttered a cry that was choked. De Launay pulled off his hat and substituted his own on the rumpled locks of the young man. He then swung him about as though he were a child, laid him over his knees and stripped from him his waistcoat.

His own coat was tossed aside while he wriggled into the ancient garment. He held the cowboy during this process by throwing one leg over him, around his neck, and clamping his legs together. The cowboy uttered muffled yells of protest.

He hauled the fellow's boots off without much trouble, but when it came to removing his own shoes there was a difficulty which he finally adjusted by rising, grasping the man by the neck again—incidentally shutting off his cries—and depositing him on the top step, after which he sat upon him.

It took only a second to rip the laces from his shoes and kick them off. Then he started to pull on the boots. But the noise had finally aroused those inside and they came charging out.

Fortunately for De Launay, Snake Murphy and his cohorts were so surprised to see the pose of the late guests that they gave him a moment of respite. He had time to get off of the cowboy and stamp the second boot on his foot. Then, with satisfaction, he turned to face them.

They answered the cowboy's protesting shout with a charge. De Launay was peaceful, but he did not intend to lose his prize without a fight. He smote the first man with a straight jab that shook all his teeth. The next one he ducked under, throwing him over his shoulder and down the stairs. Another he swept against the wall with a crash.

They were over him and around him, slugging, kicking, and pushing. He fought mechanically, and with incredible efficiency, striking with a snaky speed and accuracy that would have amazed any one capable of noting it. But they were too many for him. He was shoved from the step, crowded back, stumbling downward, losing his balance, struggling gamely but hopelessly, until, like Samson, he fell backward, dragging with him a confused heap of his assailants, who went bumping down the stairs in a squirming, kicking mass.

They brought up at the bottom, striking in all directions, with De Launay beneath, missing most of the destruction. The stair well was dark and obscure, but at the bottom was a narrow space where the battle waged wildly. De Launay managed to get to his hands and knees, but over him surged and swept a murmurous, sweating, reeking crowd who struck and battered each other in the gloom.

The door into the billiard parlor burst open and Johnny the Greek and reënforcements rushed on the scene. But Johnny, not knowing what the fight was about and not being able to find out—the outraged cowboy had thrust himself

before a hostile fist in the start of the encounter and now lay unconscious at the top of the stairs—proceeded to deal with what he imagined was impartiality. He simply added his weight to the combat. This naturally increased the confusion.

Such pandemonium was bound to attract attention. Still unable to comprehend the reason of the whole affair, De Launay was crawling between legs and making a more or less undamaged progress to the door, while his enemies battered one another. He had almost reached it, and was rising to his feet, when a new element was injected into the riot. A couple of uniformed policemen threw themselves into the mêlée.

De Launay saw only the uniforms. His wrath surged up. What were policemen doing in this country of range and sheriffs? What had they to do with the West? They stood for all that had come to the country, all the change and innovation that he hated.

He expressed his feelings by letting the first policeman have it on the point of the jaw. The second he proceeded to walk over, to beat back and to drive through the door, out into the big room and clear to the sidewalk. The man resisted, swinging his mace, but he found De Launay a cold, inhumanly accurate and swift antagonist, whom it was difficult to hit and impossible to dodge. Twice he was knocked down, and twice he leaped up, swinging his mace at a head that was never there when the club reached its objective.

The policeman whom De Launay had first knocked down had arisen quickly and, seeing his Nemesis now pursuing his comrade, ran to the rescue. De Launay could avoid a club in the hands of the man in front of him but that wielded by the man behind was another matter. It fell on his head just as he was driving the other policeman through the door into the street. It was a shrewd blow and he went to the ground under it.

While they waited for the patrol wagon, the two policemen tried to gather information about the cause of the fight, but they found Johnny the Greek somewhat reticent. The cowboy still was upstairs, held there by Snake Murphy. The others were more or less confused in their ideas. Johnny was chiefly anxious that the police should remove the prisoner and refrain from any close inquiry into the premises, so he merely stated that the fellow had come in drunk and had made an attack on some of the men playing pool. His henchman was seeing to it that the robbed and wronged cowboy had no opportunity to tell a story that would send the police upstairs.

Half conscious and wholly drunk, De Launay was carted to Sulphur Falls'

imposing stone jail, where he was duly slated before a police sergeant for drunkenness, assault and battery, mayhem, inciting a riot, and resisting an officer in the performance of his duty. Then he was led away and deposited in a cell. Here he went soundly to sleep.

In the course of time he began to dream. He dreamed that he was on a raft which floated on a limitless sea of bunch grass, alkali and sagebrush, where the waves ran high and regularly, rocking the raft back and forth monotonously and as monotonously throwing him from side to side and against a mast to which he clung. Right in front of the raft, floating in the air above the waves, drifted a slender, veiled figure, and through the veil sparkled a pair of eyes which were bottomless and yet held the colors of the rainbow in their depths. Above this figure, which beckoned him on, and after which the raft drifted faster and faster, was a halo of sparkling hair, which caught and broke up the light into prismatic colors.

The raft sailed faster and faster, rotating in a circle until it was spinning about the ghostly figure, which grew more and more distinct as the raft gyrated more crazily. Raft, desert, waves and sky became confused, hazy, fading out, but the figure stood there as he opened his eyes and the stanchion thumped him in the ribs.

His sleep and his liquor-drugged mind came back to him and he found himself lying on his bunk in a cell, while Solange stood before him and a turnkey poked him in the ribs and rocked him to wake him up.

Sick, bruised and battered, he raised himself, swung his feet to the floor and sat up on the edge of the bed. He tried to stand, but his head swam and he became so dizzy that he feared to fall.

“Don’t get up,” said Solange, icily.

The turnkey went to the door. “I reckon he’s all right now, ma’am. You got half an hour. If he gets rough just holler and we’ll settle him.”

“Is the charge serious?” asked Solange.

“It ought to be. He’s a sure-enough hard case. But a fine and six months on the rocks is about all he’ll get.”

De Launay looked up sullenly. The turnkey made a derisive, threatening motion and, grinning, slammed the door behind him, locking it.

De Launay licked his dry lips. There was a pitcher of water on a stand and he

seized it, almost draining it as he gulped the lukewarm stuff down his sizzling throat.

It strengthened and revived him. He got up from the bed and stood aside. Solange stood like a statue, but her eyes scorched him through her veil.

“So this is what a general of France has come to,” she said. Words and tone burned him like fire. He said nothing, but motioned to the bed as the only seat in the cell.

He picked up the hat, the battered thing that had brought on this disaster, from the floor and, stooping, felt the sharp throb of his half-fractured skull. His weakened nerves reacted sharply, and he uttered a half-suppressed cry, raising his hand to the lump on his cranium.

Solange started. “They have hurt you?” she said, sharply.

De Launay took hold of himself again.

“Nothing to speak of,” he answered, gruffly. “Will you sit down?”

She sat down, then. Through her veil he could not tell what her expression was, but he was uneasily conscious of the black pools that lurked there, searching his scarred soul to its depths, and finding it evil. He was in no condition to meet her, half drugged with stale alcohol, shaken to his inmost being by reaction against the poisoning of weeks, jumpy, imaginative, broken of mind and body.

His eyes did not meet hers squarely. They shifted, sidelong and bloodshot. But she might have read in them something of despair, something of sullenness, something of shame, but mostly she could have seen a plea for mercy, and perhaps she did.

If so, she did not yield to the plea—at first. In a cold, steely voice she told him what he was. In incisive French she rebaptized him a coward, a beast, a low and disgusting thing. Her voice, curiously beautiful even in rage, cut and dissected him and laid him bare.

She painted for him what a gentleman and a soldier should be and contrasted with it what he was. She sketched for him all the glory and the fame of the men who had led the soldiers of France, neither sparing nor exalting, but showing them to be, at least, men who had courage and command of themselves or had striven for it. She contrasted them with his own weakness and supineness and degradation. Then, her voice softening subtly, she shifted the picture to what he had been, to his days of unutterable lowness in the Legion, the five years of

brutal struggle, fiercely won promotion. His gaining of a commission, the *cachet* of respectability, his years of titanic struggle and study and work through the hardly won grades of the army.

She made him see himself as something glorious, rising from obscurity to respect and influence; made him see himself as he knew he was not; made him see his own courage, which he had; his ability, which he also had; and, what it had not, great pride, noble impulses, legitimate ambition. When she painted the truth, he did not respond, but when she pictured credits he did not deserve he winced and longed to earn them.

“And, after all this,” she said wearily, at last, “you descend—to this? It would seem that one might even gauge the depths from which you rose by the length and swiftness of the fall. Is it that you have exhausted yourself in the effort that went before?”

De Launay stared at the floor with dull eyes.

“What would you expect of a légionnaire?” he muttered.

“Nothing!” she cried, angrily. “Nothing from the légionnaire! But, in the name of God, cannot one expect more than this from the man who wears the médaille militaire, the grand cross of the legion, who won a colonelcy in Champagne, a brigade at Verdun, a division at the Chemin des Dames, and who, as all know, should have had an army corps after the Balkan campaign? From such a man as that, from him, monsieur, one expects everything!”

De Launay twisted the unfortunate hat in his hands and made no reply for some minutes. Solange sat on the bed, one knee crossed over the other and her chin resting in her hand, supported on her elbow. Her head was also bent toward the floor.

“Mademoiselle,” said De Launay, at last, “I think you have guessed the trouble with me.” His manner had reverted to that of his rank and class, and she looked up in instant reaction to it. “I am all that you say except what is good. There is no doubt of that. I have been a soldier for nineteen years; have made it the work of my life, in fact. I know nothing else—except, perhaps, a little of a passing, obsolete trade of this fading West you see around you. I had hoped to win—had won, I thought, place and distinction in that profession. You know what happened. Perhaps I did not deserve more. Perhaps it was necessary to reduce us all. Perhaps I was wrong in despairing. But I had won my way by effort, mademoiselle, that exhausted me. I was too tired to take up again the task of battering my way up through the remaining ranks.

“There was nothing left to me. There is nothing for me to do. There is no one who can use me unless it be some petty state which needs mercenaries. I have served my purpose in the world. Why should I not waste the rest of my time?”

Solange nodded. “Then what you need is an object?” she said, reflectively. “Work?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I have no need of money. And why should I work, otherwise? I know nothing of trade, and there are others who need the rewards of labor more than I.”

“Philanthropy—service?”

At this he grinned. “I am not a sentimentalist, but a soldier. As for service—I served France until she had no further use for me.”

“Marriage; a family?”

He laughed, now. “I am married. As for the love that is said to mitigate that relation, am I the sort of man a woman would care for?”

Solange straightened up, and then rose from the bunk. She came and stood before him.

“If neither love, ambition nor money will stir you,” she said. “Still, you may find an incentive to serve. There is chivalry.”

“I’m no troubadour.”

“Will you serve me?” she asked abruptly. He looked at her in surprise.

“Am I not serving you?”

“You are—after your own fashion—which I do not like. I wish your service—need it. But not this way.”

He nodded slowly. “I will serve you—in any way you wish,” he said.

Solange smiled under the veil, her mouth curving into beautiful lines.

“That is better. I shall need you, monsieur. You cannot, it is clear, serve me effectively by being thrown into jail for months. I must find the mine and the man who killed my father before that.”

De Launay shook his head. “You expect to find the mine and the man, after nineteen years?”

“I expect to make the attempt,” she replied, calmly. “It is in the hands of God,

my success. Somehow, I feel that I shall succeed, at least in some measure, but the same premonition points to you as one who shall make that success possible. I do not know why that is.”

“Premonition!” said De Launay, doubtfully. “Still—from Morgan *la fée*, even a premonition——”

The shrouding mask was turned upon him with an effect of question as he paused.

“Is entitled to respectful consideration,” he ended. He sat thoughtfully a minute, his throbbing head making mental action difficult. “I see no hope of tracing the man—but one. Have you that bullet, mademoiselle?”

She took it out of the hand bag, shivering a little as she handed it to him.

“It is common—a thirty caliber, such as most hunters use. Yet it is all the clew you possess. As for the mine, there seems to be only one hope, which is, to retrace as closely as possible, the route taken by your father before he was shot. May I keep this?”

She nodded her assent, and he put it in his pocket. Solange was relieved to be rid of it.

“And now,” he added, “I must get out of here.”

CHAPTER X

THE GET-AWAY

“If you need money—to pay the fine,” began Solange, doubtfully. He shook his head.

“I have a fancy to do this in my own way; the old-time way,” he said. “As for money, you will have need of all you possess. The cowboy, Sucatash, is a type I know. You may take a message to him for me, and I think he will not refuse to help.”

He gave her rapidly whispered instructions, her quick mind taking them in at once.

“And you,” he finished, “when you are ready to start, will gather your outfit at Wallace’s ranch near Willow Spring. From there is only one way that you can go to follow your father’s trail. He must have come out of the Esmeraldas through Shoestring Cañon, therefore you must go into them that way. I will be there when you come.”

Solange turned to the door and he bowed to her. She shook the grating and called for the turnkey. As she heard him coming she swung round and, with a smile, held out her hand to the soldier. His sallow face flushed as he took it. Her hand clung to his a moment and then the door swung open and she was gone. 141

De Launay took the bullet from his pocket and held it in his hand. He sat on his bunk and weighed the thing reflectively, balancing it on his palm. It was just such a bullet as might have been shot from any one of a hundred rifles, a bullet of which nothing of the original shape remained except about a quarter of an inch of the butt.

He wondered if, after nineteen years, there remained any one who had even been present when French Pete was found dying.

As for the mine, that was even more hopeless. No one had seriously attempted any prolonged search for the murderer, he assumed, knowing the region as it had

been. Homicides were not regarded as seriously as in later days and a Basco sheep-herder's murder would arouse little interest. The mine, however, was a different thing, as he knew by the fact that even recent arrivals had heard of it. It was certain that, throughout all these years there had been many to search for it and the treasure it was supposed to hold. Yet none had found it.

Solange's premonition made him smile tolerantly. Still, he was pledged to the search, and he would go through with it. They would not find it, of course, but there might be some way in which he could make up the disappointment to her. He thought he could understand the urge that had led her on the ridiculous quest. A young, pretty, but portionless girl, with just enough money to support life in France for a few years, hopeless of marriage in a country where the women outnumbered the men by at least a million, would have a bleak future before her. He could guess that her high, proud spirit would rebel, on the one hand, at the prospect of pinching poverty and ignoble work and, on the other, from the alternative existence of the *demimondaine*.

Here, in America, she might have a chance. He could see to it that she did have a chance. With those eyes and that hair and her voice, the stage would open its arms to her, and acting was a recognized and respectable profession. There might be other opportunities, also.

But the vendetta she would have to drop. In the Basses Pyrénées one might devote a life to hunting vengeance, but it wouldn't do in the United States. If she found the man, by some freak of chance, what would she do with him? To expect to convict him after all these years was ridiculous, and it was not likely that he would confess. Though she might be certain, the only thing left to her would be the taking of the law into her own hands; and that would not do. He did not doubt her ability or her willingness to kill the man. He knew that she would do it, and he knew that she must not be allowed to do it. He shuddered to think of her imprisoned in some penitentiary, her bright hair cropped and those fathomless eyes looking out on the sun through stone walls and barred windows; her delicate body clothed in rough, shapeless prison garments. If there was to be any killing, she must not do it.

She would insist on vengeance! Very well, he had promised to serve her; he had no particular object in life; he was abundantly able to kill; he would do her killing for her.

Having settled this to his satisfaction and feeling a certain complacent pleasure in the thought that, if the impossible happened, he could redeem himself in her

eyes by an act that would condemn him in the eyes of every one else, he lay down on his bunk and went to sleep again.

In the morning he was aroused by the turnkey and brought out of his cell. A couple of officers took charge of him and led him from the jail to the street, across it and down a little way to the criminal court building. Here he was taken into a large room just off the courtroom, to await his preliminary hearing.

The rest was almost ridiculously simple. He had had no plan, beyond a vague one of breaking from his guardians when he was led back to the jail. But he formed a new one almost as soon as he had seated himself in the room where the prisoners were gathered.

He was placed on a long bench, the end of which was near a door leading to the corridor of the building. A door opposite led into the dock. A number of prisoners were seated there and two men in uniform formed a guard. One of them spent practically all his time glancing through the door, which he held on a crack, into the courtroom.

The other was neither alert nor interested. The officer who had brought De Launay, and who, presumably, was to make the charge against him, remained, while his companion departed.

Among those gathered in the room were several relatives or friends of prisoners, lawyers, and bondsmen, who went from one to another, whispering their plans and proposals. One, a bulbous-nosed, greasy individual, sidled up to him and suggested that he could furnish bail, for a consideration.

De Launay's immediate guard, at this moment, said something to the uniformed policeman who sat near the center of the room. The other glanced perfunctorily in De Launay's direction and nodded, and the man stepped out into the hall.

De Launay whispered an intimation that he was interested in the bail suggestion. He arose and led the bondsman off to one side, near the outer door, and talked with him a few moments. He suggested that the man wait until they discovered what the bail would be, and said he would be glad to accept his services. He had money which had not been taken from him when he was searched.

The bondsman nodded his satisfaction at netting another victim and strolled away to seek further prey. De Launay calmly turned around, opened the outer door and walked into the corridor.

He walked rapidly to the street entrance, out to the sidewalk, and down the street. At the first corner he turned. Then he hurried along until he saw what he

was looking for. This was Sucatash, lounging easily against a lamp-post while De Launay's horse, saddled and equipped, stood with head hanging and reins dangling just before him at the curb.

A close observer would have noticed that a pair of spurs hung at the saddle horn and that the saddle pockets bulged. But there were no close observers around.

De Launay came up to the horse while, as yet, there had been not the slightest indication of any hue and cry after him. This he knew could obtain for only a short time, but it would be sufficient.

Sucatash, against the lamp-post, lolled negligently and rolled a cigarette. He did not even look at De Launay, but spoke out of a corner of his mouth.

"How'd you make it, old-timer?"

"Walked out," said the other, dryly.

"Huh? Well, them blue bellies are right bright, now. You'll find pack hosses and an outfit at the spring west of the Lazy Y. Know where it is?"

De Launay nodded as he felt the cinch of the horse's saddle.

"But how the deuce will you get them there? It's nearly ninety miles."

"We got a telephone at pa's ranch," said Sucatash, complacently. "Better hit the high spots. There's a row back there, now."

De Launay swung into the saddle. "See you at Shoestring, this side the Crater," he said, briefly. "Adios!"

"So long," said Sucatash, indifferently. De Launay spurred the horse and took the middle of the road on a run. Sucatash looked after him reflectively.

"That hombre can ride a whole lot," he remarked. "He's a sure-enough, stinging lizard, I'll say. Walked out! Huh!"

A few moments after De Launay had rounded a corner and disappeared with his ill-gotten habiliments, excited policemen and citizens came rushing to where Sucatash, with nothing on his mind but his hat, strolled along the sidewalk.

"Seen an escaped prisoner? Came this way. Wasn't there a horse here a minute ago?" The questions were fired at him in rapid succession. Sucatash was exasperatingly leisurely in answering them.

"They was a hoss here, yes," he drawled.

"Was it yours?"

“Not that I know of,” answered Sucatash. “Gent came along and forked it. I allowed it was hisn and so I didn’t snub him down none. Was he the gent you was lookin’ for?”

“Which way did he go?”

“He was headin’ south-southeast by no’th or thereabouts when I last seen him,” said Sucatash. “And he was fannin’ a hole plumb through the atmosphere.”

They left the unsatisfactory witness and rushed to the corner around which De Launay had vanished. Here they found a man or two who had seen the galloping horse and its rider. But, as following on foot was manifestly impossible, one of them rushed to a telephone while others ran back to get a police automobile and give chase.

De Launay, meanwhile, was riding at a hard pace through the outlying streets of the town, heading toward the south. The paved streets gave way to gravel roads, and the smoke of the factories hung in the air behind him. Past comfortable bungalows and well-kept lawns he rushed, until the private hedges gave place to barbed-wire fences, and the cropped grass to fields of standing stubble.

The road ran along above and parallel to the river, following a ridge. To one side of it the farms lay, brown and gold in their autumn vesture. At regular intervals appeared a house, generally of the stereotyped bungalow form.

De Launay had passed several of these when he noticed, from one ahead of him, several men running toward the road. He watched them, saw that they gesticulated toward the cloud of dust out of which he rode, and turned in his saddle to open the pockets back of the cantle. From one he drew belt and holster, sagging heavily with the pistol that filled it. From the other he pulled clips loaded with cartridges. Leaving the horse to run steadily on the road he strapped himself with the gun.

The men had reached the road and were lined up across it. One of them had a shotgun and others were armed with forks and rakes. They waved their weapons and shouted for him to stop. He calmly drew the pistol and pulled his horse down in the midst of them.

“Well?” he asked as they surged around him. The man with the shotgun suddenly saw the pistol and started to throw the gun to his shoulder.

“We got him!” he yelled, excitedly.

“Got who?” asked De Launay. “You pointing that gun at me? Better head it

another way.”

His automatic was swinging carelessly at the belligerent farmer. The man was not long in that country, but he was long enough to know the difference between a shotgun and an automatic forty-five. He lost his nerve.

“We’re lookin’ for an escaped convict,” he muttered. “Be you the feller?”

“Keep on looking,” said De Launay, pleasantly. “But drop that gun and those pitchforks. What do you mean by holding up a peaceable man on the highroads?”

The rattled farmer and his cohorts were bluffed and puzzled. The automatic spoke in terms too imperative to be disregarded. Capturing escaped prisoners was all very well, but when it involved risks such as this they preferred more peaceful pursuits. The men backed away, the farmer let the shotgun drop to the ground.

“Pull your freight!” said De Launay, shortly. They obeyed.

He whirled his horse and resumed his headlong flight. He had gained fifty yards when the farmer, who had run back to his gun, fired it after him. The shot scattered too much to cause him any uneasiness. He laughed back at them and fled away.

Other places had been warned also, but De Launay rushed past them without mishap. The automatic was a passport which these citizens were eager to honor, and which the police had not taken into account. To stop an unarmed fugitive was one thing, but to interfere with one who bristled with murder was quite another.

A new peril was on his trail, however. He soon heard the distant throb of a motor running with the muffler open. Looking back along the road, he could see the car as it rounded curves on top of the ridge. All too soon it was throbbing behind him and not half a mile away.

But he did not worry. Right ahead was a stone marker which he knew marked the boundary of Nevada. Long before the car could reach him he had passed it. He kept on for two or three hundred yards at the same pace while the car, forging up on him, was noisy with shouts and commands to stop. He slowed down to a trot and grinned at the men who stood in the car and pointed their revolvers at him. His pistol was dangling in his hand.

“You gents want me?” he asked, pleasantly. His former captor sputtered an oath.

“You’re shoutin’ we want you,” he cried. “Get off that horse and climb in here, you——”

De Launay’s voice grew hard and incisive.

“You got a warrant for my arrest?”

“Warrant be hanged! You’re an escaped prisoner! Climb down before we let you have it!”

“That’s interesting. Where’s your extradition papers?”

The officer shrieked his commands and imprecations, waving his pistol. De Launay grinned.

“If you want to test the law, go ahead,” he said. “I’m in Nevada as you know very well. If you want to shoot, you may get me—but I can promise that *I’ll* get you, too. The first man of you that tightens a trigger will get his. Go to it!”

An officer who is on the right side of the law is thereby fortified and may proceed with confidence. If he is killed, his killer commits murder. But an officer who is on the wrong side of the law has no such psychological reënforcement. He is decidedly at a disadvantage. The policemen were courageous—but they faced a dilemma. If they shot De Launay, they would have to explain. If he shot them, it would be in self-defense and lawful resistance to an illegal arrest. Furthermore, there was something about the way he acted that convinced them of his intention and ability. There were only three of them, and he seemed quite confident that he could get them all before they could kill him.

The officer who had been his guardian thought of a way out.

“There’s a justice of the peace a mile ahead,” he said. “We’ll just linger with you until we reach him and get a warrant.”

“Suit yourselves,” said De Launay, indifferently. “But don’t crowd me too closely. Those things make my horse nervous.”

They started the car, but he galloped easily on ahead, turning in his saddle to watch them. They proceeded slowly, allowing him to gain about forty yards. The officer thought of shooting at him when he was not looking, but desisted when he discovered that De Launay seemed to be always looking.

They had proceeded only a short distance when De Launay, without warning, spurred his horse into a run, swinging him at the same time from side to side of the road. Turned in his saddle, he raised his hand and the staccato rattle of his

automatic sounded like the roll of a drum. The startled officers fired and missed his elusive form. They had their aim disarranged by the sudden jolt and stoppage of the car. De Launay had shot the two front tires and a rear one to pieces.

The discomfited policemen saw him disappearing down the road in a cloud of dust from which echoed his mocking laugh and a chanted, jubilant verse that had not been heard in that region for nineteen years:

“My Louisiana! Louisiana Lou!”

CHAPTER XI

JIM BANKER HITS THE TRAIL

When Jim Banker, the prospector, hurried from the hotel, he was singularly agitated for a man merely suffering from the shyness of the desert wanderer in the presence of a pretty woman. His furtive looks and the uneasy glances he cast behind him, no less than the panicky character of his flight, might have aroused further question on the part of those he left, had they been in a position to observe the man.

He made no pause until he had gained the comparative seclusion of Johnny the Greek's place, which he found almost deserted after the riot of which De Launay had been the center. Johnny had succeeded in getting rid of the officers without the discovery of his illicit operations, and Snake Murphy was once more in his place ready to dispense hospitality. Few remained to accept it, however, the imminent memory of the police having frightened all others away. A liberal dispensation of money and the discovery that De Launay's coat and shoes were of excellent make and more valuable than those he had lost, had secured the silence of the man whom De Launay had robbed, and he had departed some time since.

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Banker sidled into the upstairs room and made his way to the end of the bar, where he called huskily for whisky. Having gulped a couple of fiery drinks, he shivered and straightened up, his evil eyes losing their look of fright.

"Say, Murph," he whispered, hoarsely. "They's the devil to pay!"

"How come?" asked Murphy, yawning.

"You remember French Pete, who was killed back in nineteen hundred?"

"The Basco? Sure I do. I got a reminder, hain't I? Louisiana done shot me up before he went out an' beefed Pete—if he did beef him."

"*If* he did? Whatever makes you say that? If he *didn't*—who did?" Jim blurted out the question in a gasp, as though fairly forcing utterance of the words.

Murphy flicked a sidelong look at him and then bent his absent gaze across the room.

“Oh—I dunno. Never knew Louisiana to use a rifle, though. The dare-devil! I can hear him now, ridin’ off a-laughin’ and a-chortlin’

“Back to Whisky Chitto; to Beau Regarde bayou;
To my Louisiana—Louisiana Lou.

“Remember the feller’s singin’, Jim?”

The few men in the place had turned startled eyes as Murphy whined the doggerel ballad nasally. It was strange to them, but Banker shivered and shrank from the grinning bartender.

“Stop it, yuh darn fool! yuh gi’ me the creeps! W’at’s the matter with everything to-day? Everywhere I go some one starts gabblin’ about mines and French Pete an’ this all-fired—Louisiana! It’s a damn good thing there ain’t any more like him around here.”

“W’at’s that about mines—an’ French Pete? Yuh was the one that mentioned *him*.”

Banker leaned confidentially nearer. “Snake, d’yuh think old Ike Brandon didn’t know where the mine was?”

Snake regarded him contemptuously. “Yuh reckon Ike would have lived and died pore as a heifer after a hard winter if he’d a knowed? You’re loco, Jim: plumb, starin’, ravin’ loco!”

But Jim only leaned closer and dropped his voice until it was almost inaudible.

“Maybe so. But did you or any one else ever know what language them Bascos talks?”

“French, I reckon,” said Snake, indifferently.

“French, no, sir! Charlie Grandjean, that used to ride fer Perkins & Company was French and he told me once that they didn’t talk no French nor nothin’ like it. They talks their own lingo and there ain’t nobody but a Basco that knows this Basco talk.”

“Well,” said Snake, easily. “What’s the answer? I’ll bite.”

“French Pete’s gal has lit in here all spraddled out an’ lookin’ fer French Pete’s mine,” croaked Banker, impressively. Snake was owlshly dense.

“His gal? Never knew he had a gal.”

“He had one, a plenty: sort of a gashly critter like a witch, with teeth all same like a lobo. Kind ’at’d stick a knife in yuh quick as look at yuh.”

“I reckon I won’t go sparkin’ her none, then. Well, how’s this here Basco lady with the enchantin’ ways allow she’s goin’ to find Pete’s mine?”

“That’s what I’m askin’ yuh? How’s she goin’ to find it? Yuh reckon she comes pirootin’ out here all the way from Basco regions just on the hunch that she can shut her eyes an’ walk to it?”

“Maybe—if she’s full o’ witchcraft. I reckon she stands as good a chance that a way as any one does. Drink up and ferget it, Jim.”

“I been a-thinkin’, Snake. Brandon didn’t know where it was. But maybe Pete leaves a writin’, say, which he tells Ike to send to his folks. It’s in Basco, see, and Ike can’t read it nor nobody else, so they sends it to this Basco place and the gal gits it. If that ain’t right why ever does this Basco lady come a-runnin’ out here?”

“If it is right, why does she delay all these years?” asked Snake, pertinently.

“Which yuh ain’t seen her, Snake. I makes a guess this gal ain’t more’n risin’ two or three years when she gets that Basco note. She has to grow up, and when she gets big enough the war done come along and keeps her holed up until now. Yuh can gamble she knows where that mine was.”

Snake pondered this theory thoughtfully. “Yuh may be right at that,” he admitted, an expression of wonder passing over his features. “But yuh been to see her? What she say about it?”

“Huh! She was askin’ *me* if I knowed where it was. But that was just a blind to put me off’n the track—an’ she probably wanted to make sure no one else had found it. She was quizzin’ that Pettis girl, too, makin’ sure Ike hadn’t told *her* nothin’.”

“Yuh may be right,” admitted Snake again. “God-dlemighty! Yuh reckon she’ll find it?”

Jim leered evilly at him. “No, I don’t reckon she will. But she might help *me* find it.”

“Howzzat?” Snake was startled.

“I gotta have a grubstake, Snake. How about it?”

“Jest outline this here project, Jim. Let me git the slant on it.”

The two heads, one slick and black, though with streaks of gray, the other shaggy, colorless, and unkempt, came together and a growl of hoarse and carefully guarded whispers murmured at that end of the bar. After ten minutes' talk, Snake went to the safe and returned with a roll of bills and a piece of paper, pen, and ink. He laboriously made out a document, which Banker as laboriously signed. Then Snake surrendered the money and the two rascals shook hands.

Banker at once became all furtive activity. For a few hours he slunk from store to store, buying necessities for his trip. By nighttime he was ready, and before the moon had risen in the cold November sky he was hazing his burros southward toward the Nevada line.

Although he was mounted on a fairly good horse, his progress was necessarily slow, as he had to accommodate his pace to that of the sedate burros. He was in no hurry, however. With true, desert-born patience, he plodded along, making camp that night about ten miles from Sulphur Falls. The following day he resumed his snaillike pace, crawling out of the fertile valley to the grasslands beyond, and so on and on until the night found him in the salt pan and the alkali. He passed the Brandon ranch at Three Creek, long since sold and now occupied by a couple of Basques who had built up from sheep-herding for wages until they now owned and ran a fair flock of sheep. Here he did not stop, hazing his burros past as though he had suddenly acquired a reason for haste. When Twin Forks was a couple of miles to the rear he reverted to his former sluggish pace.

The next day was a repetition. He plodded on stolidly, making without hesitation for some spot which was ahead of him. Finally, that evening, he made camp about three miles north of Wallace's Lazy Y Ranch, near Willow Spring, and not very far from the gap in the wall of the Esmeraldas which marked the entrance to Shoestring Creek and Cañon.

The next morning he did not break camp, but lolled around all day until about three o'clock in the afternoon. At that time his acute ears caught the murmur of a motor long before the car came in sight in the rolling ground.

When it passed he was sitting stolidly by his camp fire, apparently oblivious to his surroundings. He did not seem to look up or notice the car, but, in reality, not a detail of it escaped him. He saw the occupants turn and look at him and heard their comments, though the words escaped him.

He muttered an imprecation, strangely full of hate and, in the manner of lonely desert rats, grumbled in conversation with himself.

“I gotta do it. She never come all this way without he told her somethin’. Fer all I know he might ha’ seen more’n I thought. An’ she’d do what she said, quicker’n look at yuh. She ain’t right, nohow. Why don’t she show her face? An’ Charlie Grandjean says them Basques is uncanny, that a way. She *knows*! There ain’t no gettin’ around it. Even if he never told her, she *knows*!”

The car had passed and he now openly looked after it, mouthing and muttering. He had observed the driver, a hired chauffeur from the town, and he deduced that the car was going back. Indeed, there was no road by which it could have gone into the mountains at this point. He saw that young Wallace, nicknamed Sucatash from the color of his hair, and Dave MacKay, another of the Lazy Y riders, were in the car with their saddles, and that the veiled Basque girl was seated with them, while her luggage was piled high between the seats.

“Goin’ to git hosses and outfit at Wallace’s and go in from there. Course, they’ll have to go into Shoestring. It’s the only way. They’ll stop at Wallace’s and it’ll take a day to git the cavvy up and ready. They’ll be movin’ day after to-morrow ’nless they want to git caught in the snow. Proves she knows right where to go or she wouldn’t head in there this time o’ year.”

He gloomed some more.

“That girl ain’t right. She’s one o’ these here hypnotis’, er a medium, er some kind o’ witch. But she ain’t goin’ to git away with it. She ain’t goin’ to git the best of old Jim Banker after nineteen years. She ain’t goin’ to git her knife into Jim. No more’n old Panamint did. I fixed *him*—an’ I’ll fix her, too. Old Betsy’s still good fer a couple a’ hunderd yards, I reckon. I’ll let her lead me to it—er maybe I’ll git a chance to ketch her alone.”

This thought gave him pleasure for a while and he mumbled over it for an hour or two. Then he ate his evening meal and went to sleep. In his sleep he moaned a good deal and tossed about, dreaming of mysterious, ghostlike, veiled figures which threatened him and mocked him.

The next day he remained where he was. About noon he was puzzled at the sight of another motor car northward bound. He recognized in the driver the lawyer who had been present when he had been interviewed by the French girl, but he did not know what brought him there. Manifestly, he was on the way back to Sulphur Falls, and Banker finally concluded that he had been to Maryville, the county seat south of the Esmeraldas, on some legal business. In this he was right, though he could not guess what the business was nor how it favored his own designs.

On the following day he resumed his march. Now he followed the trail of the motor car which had brought Solange until he came opposite Wallace's ranch. From here he took up another trail, that of a considerable train of pack horses and three saddle animals. It led straight to the steep gully in the rim of the Esmeraldas, where Shoestring Creek cut its way to the plain.

He noted, but hardly considered, an older trail that underlay this one. It was of a rider and two pack animals who had passed a day or two before.

CHAPTER XII

A REMINDER OF OLD TIMES

Much cheered and encouraged by his late adventures with the forces of law and order, De Launay fared onward to the south where the dim line of the Esmeraldas lay like a cloud on the horizon. He was half conscious of relief, as though something that had been hanging over his head in threat had been proved nonexistent. He did not know what it was and was content for the time being to bask in a sort of animal comfort and exhilaration arising out of his escape into the far-stretching range lands. Here were no fences, no farms, no gingerbread houses sheltering aliens more acquainted with automobiles than with horses. He had passed the last of them, without interruption even from the justice of the peace who lived along the road. As a matter of fact, De Launay had left the road as soon as the fences permitted and had taken to the trackless sage.

Even after nineteen years or more his knowledge and instinct held good. Unerringly he seized upon landmarks and pushed his way over unmarked trails that he recalled from his youth. Before the sun set that evening he had ridden up to the long-remembered ranch at Twin Forks and swung from his saddle, heedless of two or three fierce mongrel sheep dogs that leaped and howled about him.

The door that opened on the little porch, once hung with vines, but now bare and gray, opened and a stolid, dark foreigner appeared. He answered De Launay's hail in broken English, but the légionnaire's quick ear recognized the accent and he dropped into French. The man at once beamed a welcome, although the French he answered in was almost as bad as his English.

He and his brother, he told De Launay, while assisting him to put up his horse, were two Basques who had come out here fifteen years ago and had worked as herders until they had been able to save enough to go into business for themselves. They had gradually built up until, when Ike Brandon had died, they were in a position to buy his ranch. All of this was interesting to the soldier.

The first flush of his plunge into old scenes had faded out, and he was feeling a little lonely and depressed, missing, queerly enough, his occasional contact with mademoiselle. It came over him, suddenly, as he chattered with the Basque, in the kindly French tongue that was more familiar to him than his native English, that the vague dread that had been lifted had had to do with what he might expect at Brandon's ranch. That dread had vanished when he had encountered Miss Pettis. That was queer, too, for his recent debauch had been the product of sharp disappointment at finding her, as well as the country, so changed from what he had expected. Then why should he now feel as though a load were lifted from his mind since he had seen her and found her utterly wanting in any trait that he regarded as admirable? He did not know, and for the time being he did not pause to inquire. With the directness born of long training in arms, he had a mission to pursue and he gave his thought to that.

The obvious thing was to question the Basque as to long-ago events. But here he drew blank. Neither this man nor his brother knew anything but vague hearsay, half forgotten. They had, it is true, known the story of Pierre d'Albret and his murder, and had looked for his mine as others had, but they had never found it and were inclined to doubt that it had ever existed.

"Monsieur," said the hospitable Basque, as he set an incomprehensible stew of vegetables and mutton on the table before the hungry De Launay, "these stories have many endings after so many years. It was long after D'Albret was killed that we came into this country. It was spoken of at the time as a great mystery by some, and by others it was regarded as a settled affair. One side would have it that a man who was a desperado and a murderer had done it, while others said that it would never be known who had shot him. There is only this that I know. A man named Banker, who spends all his time searching for gold, has spent year after year in searching the Esmeraldas for D'Albret's mine and, although he has never found it, he still wanders in the hills as though he believed that it would be found at last. Now, why should this Banker be so persistent when others have abandoned the search long ago?"

"I suppose because it is his business, as much as he has any, to search for gold wherever there is prospect of finding it," said De Launay, carelessly.

"That may be so," said the Basque, doubtfully, "As for me, I do not believe that the mine was in the Esmeraldas at all. I have looked, as others have, and have never seen any place where D'Albret might have dug. I have been through Shoestring Cañon many times and have seen every foot of its surface. If D'Albret came through the cañon, as he must have done, he must have left some

sign of his digging. Yet who has ever found such indications?”

“Perhaps he covered it up?”

“Perhaps! I do not know. The man, Banker, searches, not only in the cañon but also throughout the range. And as he searches, he mutters to himself. He is a very strange man.”

“Most prospectors, especially the old ones, are strange. The loneliness goes to their heads.”

“That is true, monsieur, and it is the case with herders, as we have known. But Banker is more than queer. Once, when we were with our flocks in the Esmeraldas, we observed, one evening, a fire at some distance. My brother went over to see who it was and to invite him to share our camp if he were friendly. He came upon the man, Banker, crouched over his fire and talking to himself. He seemed to be listening to something, and he muttered strange words which my brother could not understand. Yet my brother understood one phrase which the man repeated many times. It was, as he told me, something like ‘I will find it. I will find it. I will find the gold.’ But he also spoke of everybody dying, and my brother was uneasy, seeing his rifle lying close at hand. He endeavored to move away, but made some noise and the man heard him. He sprang to his feet with a cry of fear and shot with his rifle in the direction of my brother. Fortunately he did not hit him and my brother fled away. In the morning we found that Banker had departed in great haste during the night as though he feared some attack.”

“H’m,” said De Launay, “that’s rather strange. But these old desert rats get strange attacks of nerves. They become very distrustful of all human beings. He was frightened.”

“He may have been—indeed—he was. Nevertheless, the man Banker is a violent man and very evil. When he is about, we go carefully, my brother and I. If Pierre d’Albret was shot for no reason, what is to prevent us, who are also Basques, from being treated in the same way?”

“By Banker? Nonsense!”

“Nonsense it may be, monsieur. Yet I do not know why it may not have been some one like Banker who shot D’Albret. But I talk too much to you because you are French.”

He became reticent after that, and De Launay, who, whatever he may have thought of the man’s opinions, did not intend to make a confidant of him, allowed the subject to drop. He slept there that night, feeling reasonably safe

from pursuit, and in the morning went on his way.

But again, as he rode steadily across the alkali and sage, the lightness of heart that had long been unfamiliar, came back to him. He found himself looking back at his vague sentiment for the little girl of the years gone by and the strange notion that he must come back to her as he had so lightly promised. He had had that notion in the full belief that she must have developed as she had bade fair to do. It had been a shock to find her as she was, but, after the shock, here was that incomprehensible feeling of relief. He had not wanted to find her, after all!

But why had he not? At this point he found his mind shifting to mademoiselle's vivid and contrasting beauty and uttered a curse. He was getting as incorrigibly sentimental as a girl in her teens! This recurring interest in women was a symptom of the disease he had not yet shaken off. The cure lay in the fresh air and the long trail.

He pushed on steadily and rapidly, shutting his mind to everything but the exigencies of the trail. In the course of time he rode into Willow Spring, and, cautiously pushing his way into the cottonwoods and willows that marked the place, found everything there as he had arranged with Sucatash Wallace. There were few tracks of visitors among the signs left by cattle and an antelope, except the prints of one mounted man who had led two horses. The two horses he found hobbled beside the spring, and with them were a tarpaulin-covered pile of provisions, bedding, and utensils, together with packsaddles. A paper impaled on a willow twig near by he pulled down, to find a message written on it.

"Two pack outfits according to inventory. Compliments of J. B. Wallace. Return or send the price to Lazy Y Ranch when convenient. Asking no questions but wishing you luck."

He chuckled over this, with its pungent reminder of ancient days when unhesitating trust had been a factor in the life of the range. Old man Wallace, at the behest of his son, turning over to an unknown stranger property of value, seeking not to know why, and calmly confident of either getting it back or receiving payment for it, was a refreshing draft from his youth. De Launay inspected his new property, found it all that he could wish and then set about his preparations for the night.

On the next day he saddled up early, after a meal at daybreak, but he did not start at once. Instead, while smoking more than one thoughtful cigarette, he turned over and over in his mind the problem that confronted him. He had pledged himself to help Solange in her search, but, rack his brains as he would, he could

come to no conclusion about it except that it was simply a hopeless task. There was no point from which to start. People who remembered the affair were few and far between. Even those who did could have no very trustworthy recollections. There would have been an inquest, probably, and that would have been conducted in Maryville, east and south of the mountains. But would there be any record of it in that town? Recalling the exceedingly casual and informal habits of minor-elected officials of those days, he greatly doubted it. Still, Maryville offered him his only chance, as he saw it.

It took him all of that day and a part of the next to head around the Esmeraldas, across the high plateau into which it ran on the east and down to the valley in which Maryville lay. Here he found things changed almost as much as they had at Sulphur Falls, although the town had not grown in any such degree. The atmosphere, however, was strange and staidly conventional. Most of the stores were brick instead of wood with false fronts. The sidewalks were cement instead of boards. The main street was even paved. A sort of New England respectability and quietness hung over it. There was not a single saloon, and the drone of the little marble in the roulette wheel was gone from the land. Even the horses, hitched by drooping heads to racks, were scarce, and their place was taken by numerous tin automobiles of popular make and rusty appearance.

An inquiry at the coroner's office developed the fact that there were no records reaching back beyond nineteen hundred and eight and the official could not even tell who had had the office in nineteen hundred.

De Launay, who had expected little success, made a few more inquiries but developed nothing. There were few in the town who had lived there that long, and while nearly all had heard something or other of the murdered Basque and his lost mine, they set it down to legend and shrugged their shoulders skeptically. The affairs of those who lived north of the Esmeraldas were not of great concern to the inhabitants of Maryville at any time and especially since the Falls had grown and outshadowed the place. All business of the country now went that way and none came over the barrier to this sleepy little place. In actual population it had fallen off.

Seeking for signs of the old general store that he recalled he found on its site a new and neat hardware establishment, well stocked with agricultural implements, automobile parts, weapons, and household goods. He wandered in, but his inquiry met the response that the original proprietor had long retired and was now living on a ranch south of the railroad. De Launay looked over the stock of weapons and asked to see an automatic pistol. The clerk laid an army

model forty-five on the counter and beside it another of somewhat similar appearance but some distinct differences.

“A Mauser,” he explained. “Lot of them come in since the war and it’s a good gun.”

“Eight millimeter!” said De Launay, idly picking up the familiar pistol. “It’s a good gun but the ball’s too light to stop a man right. And the shells are an odd size. Might have some difficulty getting ammunition for it out here.”

“None around here,” said the clerk. “Plenty of those guns in the country. Most every store stocks all sizes nowadays. It ain’t like it used to be when every one shot a thirty, a thirty-eight, a forty-five-seventy, or a forty-five-ninety. Nowadays they use ’em all, Ross & Saugge, Remingtons, Springfields, Colts; and the shells run all the way from seven millimeter up through twenty-fives, eight millimeter, thirty, .303, thirty-two, thirty-five, thirty-eight and so on. You can get shells to fit that gun anywhere you go.”

“Times have changed then,” said De Launay, idly. “I can remember when you couldn’t introduce a new gun with an odd caliber because a man couldn’t afford to take a chance on being unable to get the shells to fit it. Still, I’ll stick to the Colt. Let me have this and a couple of boxes of shells. And a left-hand holster,” he added.

There was nothing to keep him longer in the town since he saw no further prospect of getting any news, and his agreement to meet Solange necessitated his heading into the mountains if he were to be there on time. So, at the earliest moment, he got his packs on and started out of town, intending to cross the range from the south and come down into the cañon. The weather was showing signs of breaking, and if the snow should set in there might be difficulty in finding the girl.

That evening he camped in the southern foothills of the range just off the trail that mounted to the divide and plunged again down into Shoestring Cañon. Next day he resumed his ride and climbed steadily into the gloomy forests that covered the slopes, sensing the snow that hovered behind the mists on the peaks and wondering if Solange would plunge into it or turn back. He rather judged of her that a little thing like snow would not keep her from her objective.

But while the snow held off on this side of the mountains he knew that it might well have been falling for a day or two on the other side. When he came higher he found that he had plunged into it, lying thick on the ground, swirling in gusts and falling steadily. He did not stop for this but urged his horses steadily on until

he had come to the windswept and comparatively clear divide and headed downward toward the cañon.

CHAPTER XIII

AT WALLACE'S RANCH

The efficient Sucatash reported back to Solange the details of De Launay's escape, making them characteristically brief and colorful. Then, with the effective aid of MacKay, he set out to prepare for the expedition in search of the mine.

Neither Sucatash nor Dave actually had any real conviction that Solange would venture into the Esmeraldas at this time of year to look for a mine whose very existence they doubted as being legendary. Yet neither tried to dissuade her from the rash adventure—as yet. In this attitude they were each governed by like feelings. Both of them were curious and sentimental. Each secretly wondered what the slender, rather silent young woman looked like, and each was beginning to imagine that the veil hid some extreme loveliness. Each felt himself handicapped in the unwonted atmosphere of the town and each imagined that, once he got on his own preserves, he would show to much better advantage in her eyes.

Sucatash was quite confident that, once they got Solange at his father's ranch, they would be able to persuade her to stay there for the winter. Dave also had about the same idea. Each reasoned that, in an indeterminate stay at the ranch, she would certainly, in time, show her countenance. Neither of them figured De Launay as anything but some assistant, more or less familiar with the West, whom she had engaged and who had been automatically eliminated by virtue of his latest escapade.

Solange, however, developed a disposition to arrange her own fate. She smiled politely when the young men gave awkward advice as to her costuming and equipment, but paid little heed to it. She allowed them to select the small portion of her camping outfit that they thought necessary at this stage, and to arrange for a car to take it and them to Wallace's ranch. They took their saddles in the car and sent their horses out by such chance riders as happened to be going that way.

The journey to Wallace's ranch was uneventful except for a stop at the former Brandon ranch at Twin Forks, where Solange met the Basco proprietors, and gave her cow-puncher henchmen further cause for wonder by conversing fluently with them in a language which bore no resemblance to any they had ever heard before. They noted an unusual deference which the shy mountaineers extended toward her.

There was a pause of some time while Solange visited the almost obliterated mound marking the grave of her father. But she did not pray over it or manifest any great emotion. She simply stood there for some time, lost in thought, or else mentally renewing her vow of vengeance on his murderer. Then, after discovering that the sheepmen knew nothing of consequence concerning these long-past events, she came quietly back to the car and they resumed the journey.

Finally they passed a camp fire set back from the road at some distance and the cow-punchers pointed out the figure of Banker crouched above it, apparently oblivious of them.

"What you all reckon that old horned toad is a-doin' here?" queried Dave, from the front seat. "Dry camp, and him only three mile from the house and not more'n five from the Spring."

"Dunno," replied Sucatash. "Him bein' a prospector, that a way, most likely he ain't got the necessary sense to camp where a white man naturally would bog down."

"But any one would know enough to camp near water," said Solange, surprised.

"Yes'm," agreed Sucatash, solemnly. "Any one would! But them prospectors ain't human, that a way. They lives in the deserts so much they gets kind of wild and flighty, ma'am. Water is so scarce that they gets to regardin' it as somethin' onnatural and dangerous. More'n enough of it to give 'em a drink or two and water the Jennies acts on 'em all same like it does on a hydrophoby skunk. They foams at the mouth and goes mad."

"With hydrophobia?" exclaimed the unsophisticated Solange.

"Yes'm," said Sucatash. "Especially if it's deep enough to cover their feet. Yuh see, ma'am, they gets in mortal terror that, if they nears enough water to wet 'em all over, some one will rack in and just forcibly afflict 'em with a bath—which 'ud sure drive one of 'em plumb loco."

"I knows one o' them desert rats," said Dave, reminiscently, "what boasts a plenty about the health he enjoys. Which he sure allows he's lived to a ripe old

age—and he *was* ripe, all right. This here venerableness, he declares a whole lot, is solely and absolutely due to the undisputable fact that he ain't never bathed in forty-two years. And we proves him right, at that."

"What!" cried the horrified Solange. "That his health was due to his uncleanliness? But that is absurd!"

"Which it would seem so, ma'am, but there ain't no gettin' round the proof. We all doubts it, just like you do. So we ups and hog ties the old natural, picks him up with a pair of tongs and dips him in the crick. Which he simply lets out one bloodcurdlin' yell of despair and passes out immediate."

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Solange, fervently. "*Quels farceurs!*"

"Yes'm," they agreed, politely.

Then Solange laughed and they broke into sympathetic grins, even the solemn Sucatash showing his teeth in enjoyment as he heard her tinkling mirth with its bell-like note.

Then they forgot the squatting figure by its camp fire and drove on to the ranch.

This turned out to be a straggling adobe house, shaded by cottonwoods and built around three sides of a square. It was roomy, cool, and comfortable, with a picturesqueness all its own. To Solange, it was inviting and homelike, much more so than the rather cold luxury of hotels and Pullman staterooms. And this feeling of homeliness was enhanced when she was smilingly and cordially welcomed by a big, gray-bearded, bronzed man and a white-haired, motherly woman, the parents of young Sucatash.

The self-contained, self-reliant young woman almost broke down when Mrs. Wallace took her in charge and hurried her to her room. They seemed to know all about her and to take her arrival as an ordinary occurrence and a very welcome one. Sucatash, of course, was responsible for their knowledge, having telephoned them before they had started.

Before Solange reappeared ready for supper, Sucatash and Dave had explained all that they knew of the affair to Wallace. He was much interested but very dubious about it all.

"Of course, she'll not be going into the mountains at this time o' year," he declared. "It ain't more than a week before the snow's bound to fly, and the Esmeraldas ain't no place for girls in the winter time. I reckon that feller you-all helped get out o' jail and that I planted hosses for won't more than make it across

the range before the road's closed. I hope it wasn't nothin' serious he was in for, son."

"Nothin' but too much hooch an' rumplin' up a couple of cops," said his son, casually. "Not that I wouldn't have helped so long as he was in fer anything less than murder. The mad'mo'selle wanted him out, yuh see."

"S'pose she naturally felt responsible fer him, that a way," agreed Wallace. "Reckon she's well rid o' him, though. Don't sound like the sort o' man yuh'd want a young girl travelin round with. What was he like?"

"Tall, good-lookin', foreign-appearin' hombre. Talked pretty good range language though, and he sure could fork a hoss. Seemed to have a gnawin' ambition to coil around all the bootleg liquor there is, though. Outside o' that, he was all right."

"De Launay? French name, I reckon."

"Yeah, I reckon he'd been a soldier in the French army. Got the idea, somehow."

"Well, he's gone—and I reckon it's as well. He won't be botherin' the little lady no more. What does she wear a veil for? Been marked any?"

Sucatash was troubled. "Don't know, pop. Never seen her face. Ought to be a sure-enough chiquita, if it's up to the rest of her. D'jever hear a purtier voice?"

The old man caught the note of enthusiasm. "Yuh better go slow, son," he said, dryly. "I reckon she's all right—but yuh don't really know nothin'."

"Shucks!" retorted his son, calmly. "I don't have to know nothin'. She can run an iron on me any time she wants to. I'm lassoed, thrown an' tied, a'ready."

"Which yuh finds me hornin' in before she makes any selection, yuh mottled-topped son of a gun!" Dave warmly put in. "I let's that lady from France conceal her face, her past and any crimes she may have committed, is committin' or be goin' to commit, and I hereby declares myself for her forty ways from the Jack, fer anything from matrimony to murder."

"Shucks," said the old man, "you-all are mighty young."

"Pop," declared the Wallace heir, solemnly, "this here French lady is clean strain and grades high. Me and Dave may be young, but we ain't making no mistake about her. She has hired herself a couple of hands, I'm telling you."

Solange appeared at this moment, coming in with Mrs. Wallace, who was smiling in an evident agreement with her son. Mr. Wallace, while inclined to

reserve judgment, had all the chivalry of his kind and stepped forward to greet her. But he paused a little uncertainly as he noticed that she had removed her veil. For a moment he looked at her in some astonishment, her unusual coloring affecting him as it did all those who observed it for the first time. The first glance resulted in startlement and the feeling that there was something uncanny about her, but as the deep eyes met his own and the pretty mouth smiled at him from beneath the glinting pale halo of her hair, he drew his breath in a long sigh of appreciation and admiration. His wife, looking at him with some deprecation, as though fearing an adverse judgment, smiled as his evident conquest became apparent. Standing near him the two boys stared and stared, something like awe in their ingenuous faces.

“Ma’am,” said Wallace, in his courtly manner, “we’re sure proud to welcome you. Which there ain’t many flowers out hereaways, and if there was there wouldn’t be none to touch you. It sure beats me why you ever wear a veil at all.”

Solange laughed and blushed. “*Merci, monsieur!* But that is exquisite! Still, it is not all that flatter me in that way. There are many who stare and point and even some who make the sign of the evil eye when they see this impossible ensemble. And the women! *Mon Dieu!* They ask me continually what chemist I patronize for the purpose of bleaching my hair.”

“Cats!” said Mrs. Wallace, with a sniff.

CHAPTER XIV

READY FOR ACTION

The fact that Solange ate heartily and naturally perhaps went far to overcome the feeling of diffidence that had settled on the Wallace rancheria. Perhaps it was merely that she showed herself quite human and feminine and charmingly demure. At any rate, before the meal was over, the Wallaces and Dave had recovered much of their poise and the two young men were even making awkward attempts at flirtation, much to the amusement of the girl.

Mr. Wallace, himself, although retaining a slight feeling that there was something uncanny about her, felt it overshadowed by a conviction that it would never do to permit her to go into the hills as she intended to do. He finally expressed himself to that effect.

“This here mine you’re hunting for, mad’mo’selle,” he said. “I ain’t goin’ to hold out no hopes to you, but I’ll set Dave and my son to lookin’ for it and you just stay right here with ma and me and make yourself at home.”

Solange smiled and shook her head. She habitually kept her eyes lowered, and perhaps this was the reason that, when she raised them now and then, they caught the observer unawares, with the effect of holding him startled and fascinated.

“It is kind of you, monsieur,” she said. “But I cannot stay. I am pledged to make the hunt—not only for the mine but for the man who killed my father. That is not an errand that I can delegate.”

“I’m afraid there ain’t no chance to find the man that did that,” said Wallace, kindly. “There ain’t no one knows. It might have been Louisiana, but if it was, he’s been gone these nineteen years and you’ll never find him.”

Solange smiled a little sadly and grimly. “We Basques are queer people,” she said. “We are very old. Perhaps that is why we feel things that others do not feel. It is not like the second sight I have heard that some possess. Yet it is in me

here.” She laid her hand on her breast. “I feel that I will find that man—and the mine, but not so strongly. It is what you call a—a hunch, is it not?”

Wallace shook his head dubiously, but Solange had raised her eyes and as long as he could see them he felt unable to question anything she said.

“And it is said that a murderer always returns, sooner or later, to the scene of his crime, monsieur. I will be there when he comes back.”

“But,” said Mrs. Wallace, gently, “it is not necessary for you to go yourself. Indeed, you can’t do it, my dear!”

“Why not, madame?”

“Why—why—— But, mad’mo’selle, you must realize that a young girl like you can’t wander these mountains alone—or with a set of young scamps like these boys. They’re good boys, and they wouldn’t hurt you, but people would talk.”

Solange only shrugged her shoulders. “Talk! Madame, I am not afraid of talk.”

“But, my dear, you are too lovely—too—— You must understand that you can’t do it.”

“It’d sure be dangerous,” said Wallace, emphatically. “We couldn’t allow it, nohow. Even my son here—I wouldn’t let you go with him, and he’s a good boy as they go. And there’s others you might meet in the hills.”

Solange nodded. “I understand, monsieur. But I am not afraid. Besides, am I not to meet my husband on this Shoestring Cañon where we must first go?”

Simultaneously they turned on her. “Your *husband!*” It was a cry of astonishment from the older people and one of mingled surprise and shock from the boys. Solange smiled and nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “Monsieur de Launay, whom you rescued from the jail. He is my husband and it is all quite proper.”

“It ain’t proper nohow,” muttered Sucatash. “That bum is her husband, Dave!”

“I don’t get this, quite,” said Wallace.

Then Solange explained, telling them of the strange bargain she had made with De Launay and something of his history. The effect of the story was to leave them more doubtful than ever, but when Wallace tried to point out that she would be taking a very long chance to trust herself to a man of De Launay’s character and reputation, she only spread her hands and laughed, declaring that she had no fear of him. He had been a soldier and a gentleman, whatever he was now.

Wallace gave it up, but he had a remedy for the situation, at least in part.

“Son,” he said, abruptly, “you and Dave are hired. You-all are goin’ to trail along with this lady and see that she comes out all right. If she’s with her husband, there ain’t no cause for scandal. But if this De Launay feller gets anyways gay, you-all just puts his light out. You hear me!”

“You’re shoutin’, pop. Which we already signs on with mad’mo’selle. We hunts mines, murderers, or horned toads for her if she says so.”

Solange laughed, and there was affection in her mirth.

“That is splendid, messieurs. I cannot thank you.”

“You don’t need to,” growled Dave. “All we asks is a chance to slay this here husband of yours. Which we-all admires to see you a widow.”

After that Solange set herself to question Wallace regarding her father’s death. But he could tell her little she did not know.

“We never knows who killed him,” he said, after telling how Pierre d’Albret had been found, dying in his wagon, with a sack of marvelously rich ore behind him. “There was some says it was Louisiana, and a coroner’s jury over to Maryville brings in a verdict that a way. But I don’t know. Louisiana was wild and reckless and he could sure fan a gun, but he never struck me as bein’ a killer. Likewise, I never knows him to carry a rifle, and Brandon says he didn’t have one when he went out past his ranch. Course, he might have got hold of Pete’s gun and used that, but if he did how come that Pete don’t know who kills him?”

“The main evidence against Louisiana lays with old Jim Banker, the prospector. He comes rackin’ in about a week later and says he sees Louisiana headin’ into Shoestring Cañon about the time Pete was shot. But the trailers didn’t find his hoss tracks. There was tracks left by Pete’s team and some burro sign, but there wasn’t no recent hoss tracks outside o’ that.”

“You say Jim Banker says he saw him?” demanded Sucatash.

“Yes.”

“Huh! That’s funny. Jim allows, down in Sulphur Falls, that he don’t know nothin’ about it. Says he was south of the range, out on the desert at the time.”

“Reckon he’s forgot,” said Wallace. “Anyway, if it was Louisiana, he’s gone and I reckon he won’t come back.”

“I think it could not have been any one else,” said Solange, thoughtfully. “What

kind of man was this—this Louisiana?”

“Tall, good-lookin’ young chap, slim and quick as a rattler. He’d fool you on looks. Came from Louisiana, and gets his name from that and from a sort of coon song he was always singin’. Something about ‘My Louisiana—Louisiana Lou!’ Don’t remember his right name except that it was something like Delaney. Lew Delaney, I think.”

“He was a dangerous man, you say?”

“Well—he was sure dangerous. I’ve seen some could shake the loads out of a six-gun pretty fast and straight, but I never saw the beat of this feller. Them things gets exaggerated after a time, but if half of what they tell of this fellow was true, he was about the boss of the herd with a small gun.

“Still, he never shoots any one until he mixes with Snake Murphy and that was Snake’s fault. He was on the run with some of Snake’s friends after him when this happens. That’s how come he was down here.”

In the morning Solange appeared, dressed for the range. The two young men, who had been smitten by her previously, when she had been clad in the sort of garments they had seen on the dainty town girls, were doubly so when they saw her now. Slim and delicate, she wore breeches and coat of fair, soft leather and a Stetson, set over a vivid silk handkerchief arranged around her hair like a bandeau. The costume was eminently practical, as they saw at once, but it was also picturesquely feminine and dainty. It had the effect of raising her even higher above ordinary mortals. If it had been any other who wore it they would have contemptuously set her down as a moving-picture heroine and laughed behind her back. But Solange set off the costume and it set her off. Besides, it was not new, and had evidently been subjected to severe service.

CHAPTER XV

THE SHERIFF FINDS A CLEW

"Miss Pettis," Captain Wilding remarked to his office attendant, a day or two after he had been summoned to meet Solange and had heard her rather remarkable story, "I'll have to be going to Maryville for a day or two on this D'Albret case. I don't believe there will be anything to discover regarding the mine and the man who killed her father, but, in case we do run into anything, I'd like to be fortified with whatever recollection you may have of the affair."

"I don't know a thing except what I told the dame," said Marian, rather sullenly. "This guy Louisiana bumps the old man off after he leaves our place. Pete was comin' in and was goin' to take granddad in with him on the mine, but he can't even tell where it was except that it was somewhere along the way he had come. You got to remember that I was just a kid and I don't rightly remember anything about it except that this Louisiana was some little baby doll, himself. His looks were sure deceiving."

"Well, how old was he at this time?"

"Oh, pretty young, I guess. Not much more than a kid. Say that French dame has a crust, hasn't she, comin' in here after all these years, swellin' round with her face covered as if she's afraid her complexion wouldn't stand the sun, and expectin' to run onto that mine, which, if she did find it would be as much mine as it is hers. And who's this Delonny guy she's bringin' with her? Looks to me like a bolshevik anarchist or a panhandler."

"Humph!" said Wilding, musingly. "He's nothing like that. Fact is, she's got a gold mine right there, and she wants to divorce it. Now, you're sure Louisiana did this and that he left the country? Ever hear what became of him?"

"Nary a word," said the girl, indifferently. "I reckon everybody has forgotten him around here except Snake Murphy, who works for Johnny the Greek. Snake used to know this guy, and it was for shootin' him that Louisiana was run out of the country. Fact is, I've heard most of what I know from Snake."

“I’d better interview him, I suppose,” said Wilding.

“If you can get any info out of him as to where that mine is you ought to tell me as quick as that French dame,” said Marian. “Believe me, I’m needing gold mines a lot more than she does. She ain’t so hard up that she can’t go chasing around the country and livin’ at swell hotels and hiring lawyers and things while I got to work for what I get. Anyway, half of that mine belongs to me.”

“The mine belongs to whoever finds it,” said Wilding. “It was never filed on, and any claim D’Albret might have had was lost at his death. In any event, I imagine that it has been so long ago that the chance of locating it now is practically nonexistent.”

“Me, too,” said Marian. “Unless——” and she paused.

“Unless what?”

“Whatever brings this dame clear over from France to look for a mine after twenty years? D’you reckon that any one in their sober senses would squander money on a thing like that if they didn’t have some inside info as to where to look? Seems to me this Frog lady must have got some tip that we haven’t had.”

“Perhaps she has,” said Wilding. “In fact, she would hardly come here, as you say, with nothing definite to go on. But I’m not interested in the mine. What I want to know is where this Louisiana went after he left here.”

“Maybe Snake Murphy knows,” said Marian.

Wilding was inclined to agree with her. At least no other source of information appeared to offer any better prospects, so with some distaste he sought out Murphy at the pool room. He began by tactfully remarking about the changes from the old times, to which Murphy agreed.

“You’ve lived here since before the Falls was built, haven’t you, Murphy?” asked Wilding, after Snake had expressed some contempt for new times and new ways.

“Me!” said Snake, boastfully. “Why, when I come here there wasn’t anything here but sunshine and jack rabbits. I *was* the town of Sulphur Falls. I run a ferry and a road house down here when there wasn’t another place within five miles in any direction.”

“You knew the old-timers, then?”

“Nobody knew them any better. They all had to stop at my place whenever they

were crossin' the river. There wasn't no ford."

Wilding leaned over and grew confidential.

"Snake," he said, in a low tone, "I've heard that you know something about this old-time gunman, Louisiana, and the killing of French Pete back about the first of the century. Is there anything in that?"

Snake eyed him coolly and appraisingly before he answered.

"There seems to be a lot of interest cropping up in this Louisiana and French Pete all of a sudden," he remarked. "What's the big idea?"

"I'm looking for Louisiana," said Wilding.

"And not fer French Pete's mine?"

"No interest at all in the mine," Wilding assured him. "I've got an idea that Louisiana could be convicted of that murder if we could lay hands on him."

"Well, you're welcome to go to it if you want," said Snake, dryly. He held up his stiffened right wrist and eyed it cynically. "But, personally, if it was me and I knowed that Louisiana was still kickin', I'd indulge in considerable reflection before I went squanderin' around lookin' to lay anything on him. This here Louisiana, I'm free to state, wasn't no hombre to aggravate carelessly. *I* found that out."

"How?" Wilding asked.

"Oh, it was my own fault, I'll admit at this day. There was a lady used to frequent my place who wasn't any better than she should be. She took a grudge against Louisiana and, bein' right fond of her at the time, I was foolish enough to horn in on the ruction. I'll say this for Louisiana: he could just as well have beefed me complete instead of just shootin' the derringer out of my fist the way he done. Takin' it all together, I'd say he was plumb considerate."

"He was a bad man, then?"

"Why, no, I wouldn't say he was. He was a rattlesnake with a six-shooter, but, takin' it altogether, he never run wild with it. Not until he beefs French Pete—that is, if he did down him. As for me, I never knew anything about that except what I was told because I was nursin' a busted wrist about that time. All I know was that the boys that hung around here was after him for gettin' me and that he headed out south, stoppin' at Twin Forks and then goin' on south toward the mountains. Nobody ever saw him again, and from that day to this he ain't never

been heard of.”

“Looks like he had some reason better than shooting you up to keep going and never come back, don’t it?”

“It looks like it. But I don’t know anything about it. Might have been that he was just tired of us all and decided to quit us. Anyhow, if there’s anything rightly known about it I reckon it’ll be over at Maryville. There’s where they held the inquest at the time.”

Snake evidently knew nothing more than he had told and Wilding again decided that his only chance of gaining any real information would be at Maryville. Accordingly, he got an automobile and started for that somnolent village on the next day.

After arriving at the little town, he spent two or three days in preliminary work looking toward filing the petition for mademoiselle’s divorce and arranging to secure her nominal residence in Nevada. Not until this had been accomplished did he set out to get information regarding the long-forgotten Louisiana.

His first place of call was the coroner’s office. A local undertaker held the position at this time and he had been in the country no more than ten years. He knew nothing of his predecessors and had few of their records, none going back as far as this event.

“There seems to be a lot of curiosity cropping up about this old murder,” he volunteered, when Wilding broached the subject. “Another man was in here yesterday asking about the same thing. Tall, good-looking fellow, dressed like a cowman and wearing a gun. Know him?”

Wilding asked a few further details and recognized the description as that of De Launay. This satisfied him, as he had no doubt that mademoiselle’s nominal husband was employed on the same errand as himself. So he merely stated that it was probably the man in whose interests he was working.

“Well, I didn’t know anything about him and didn’t discuss the matter with him. Fact is, I never heard of the murder so I couldn’t tell him much about it.”

“Still, I’m sure there was an inquest at the time,” said Wilding.

“There probably was, but that wouldn’t mean any too much. In the old days the coroner’s juries had a way of returning any old verdict that struck their fancies. I’ve heard of men being shot tackling some noted gun fighter and the jury bringing in a verdict of suicide because he ought to have known better than to

take such a chance. Then it's by no means uncommon to find them laying a murder whose perpetrator was unknown or out of reach against a Chinaman or Indian or some extremely unpopular individual on the theory that, if he hadn't done this one, he might eventually commit one and, anyway, they ought to hang him on general principles and get rid of him. This was in 1900, you say?"

"About then."

"That doesn't sound early enough for one of the freak verdicts. Still, this country was still primitive at that time, and they might have done almost anything. Anyway there are no coroner's records going back to that date, so I'm afraid that I can't help you or your client."

Wilding was discouraged, but he thought there might still be a chance in another direction, although the prospects appeared slim. Leaving the coroner he sought out the sheriff's office and encountered a burly individual who welcomed him as some one to relieve the monotony of his days. This man was also a newcomer, or comparatively so. He had fifteen years of residence behind him. But he, too, knew nothing of French Pete's murder.

"To be sure," he said, after reflecting, "I've heard something about it and I have a slight recollection that I've run onto it at some time. There used to be considerable talk about the mine this here Basco had found and many a man has hunted all over the map after it. But it ain't never been found. I've heard that he was shot from ambush by a gunman, and his name might have been Louisiana. Seems to me that whoever shot him must have done it because he had found the mine, and since the mine ain't ever been discovered it looks like the murderer must have wanted its secret to remain hidden. That looks reasonable, don't it?"

"There might be something in it," admitted Wilding.

"Well, if that's the case, it's just as reasonable to figure that, if it was a white man that shot him, he'd come back in time to locate the mine. But he ain't ever done it. Then I'd say that proves one of two things: either it wasn't no white man that shot him or if it was the man was himself killed before he could return. Ain't that right?"

"But if not a white man who would have done it?"

"Indians," said the sheriff, solemnly. "Them Indians don't want white men ringing in here and digging up the country where they hunt. Back in those days I reckon there was heaps of Indians round here and most likely one of them shot him. But, come to think of it, the files may have a record of it in 'em. We'll go

and look.”

Wilding followed him, still further convinced that he was on a hopeless search. The sheriff went into the office and led the way up to an unlighted second-story room, hardly more than an attic where, in the dust and gloom, slightly dissipated by the rays of a flashlight, he disclosed several boxes and transfer cases over which he stooped.

“Nineteen hundred. It wouldn’t be in one of these transfer cases because I know they didn’t have no such traps in those days. One of these old boxes might have something. Lend a hand while I haul them out.”

The two of them hauled out and opened two or three boxes before they found one the papers in which seemed to be dated in the years before and after nineteen hundred. This they carried downstairs and soon were busy in pawing over the dusty, faded documents. The search produced only one thing. The sheriff came upon it and held it up just as they were giving up hope. Then, with Wilding eagerly leaning over his shoulder, he read it slowly.

REWARD!

The sheriff of Esmeralda County, State of Nevada, hereby offers a reward of FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS for the capture, dead or alive, and evidence leading to the conviction of Lewis Delaney, alias Louisiana Lou, alias Louisiana, who is wanted for the murder, on October 18, 1900, of Peter Dalbray, commonly known as French Pete, at a point near the entrance of Shoestring Cañon in Township 42 N., Range 5 East. This reward is guaranteed and authorized by Isaac Brandon, of Twin Forks, Nevada.

DESCRIPTION!

Just short of six feet, slim, quick, regular features, age about nineteen or twenty years, smooth face, brown hair, gray eyes. Dressed when last seen in open flap chaps, silver conchas, blue shirt. Boss of the Range Stetson, wearing wide belt with conchas and holster stamped with sunflowers. Carried a

black rubber-handled Colt .41-caliber gun with which he is very expert. Has probably picked up a 30-30 rifle, Winchester or Marlin, since last seen, with which he committed the crime. Speaks with slight Southern accent. Police of all cities notified.

“That,” said the sheriff, reluctantly, “seems to dispose of my Indian theory. They wouldn’t have offered any such reward if they hadn’t been pretty sure they had the right man. But it’s equally sure that they never caught him or we’d have some record of it. On my second theory then, he’s either dead, or else he’d have come back to locate that mine, or else he’s been taken up for some other crime and has been serving time somewhere.”

Wilding took the faded, yellow handbill with its crude printing. “It looks that way,” he said. “Evidently they couldn’t get a photograph of him, and the description seems to be vague except as to his weapons and accouterments.”

“That’s the way with them old-timers. They didn’t pay so much attention to a man’s looks as to his saddle and horse and gun. But if it’ll do you any good take it along. It’s outlawed as far as the reward’s concerned, so I don’t reckon I’ll go hunting this fellow. The county wouldn’t pay me, and old Brandon’s been dead a year or more.”

The lawyer had to be satisfied with this, and, indeed, it seemed to settle the matter fairly conclusively. His business having been completed, he got out his automobile and once more headed back for Sulphur Falls.

That evening he drew up at Wallace’s ranch and there found Solange about to start into the mountains. He stayed the night, and delivered to her the handbill after telling her what he had done regarding the divorce and the search for the murderer. Solange listened to the first part of it with slight interest. Her desire to be free of De Launay had lost its force lately and she found herself somewhat indifferent. As Wilding formally laid down the procedure she would have to go through she even found herself vaguely regretting that she had moved so promptly in that matter. Somehow, in this land of strangers, kind and sympathetic as they had been, she felt that her search was hopeless without some more intimate help. The tall soldier, broken and desperate as he seemed to be, was closer to her than any one else and she felt that, if she should lose him, her plight would be forlorn. As she had last seen him standing in his cell, making his quiet promise of service to her, he appeared to be a rock on which she could

lean. To her mind came back the stories she had heard of him, the wild and stormy tale of his rise from an outcast of the Légion des Etrangers to a high and honored place in the French army. He had done wonderful things and had overcome tremendous obstacles. Such a man could still do marvels, and it was marvels that one must do to help her in her search.

Some inborn superstition of her native mountains worked upon her. In his absence the things which had prejudiced her against him faded while the smooth efficiency and ease of her journey to this distant land was recalled, with the realization that that comfort and speed must have been due entirely to him whom she had thought spending his time in drunken carouses. He had brought her so far, to the very threshold of what she sought, and, if he should now abandon her, that threshold must remain uncrossed. De Launay had taken on some of the attributes of a guardian angel, a jinni who alone could guide her to the goal she sought. And she was about to divorce him, to cut the slight tie that bound him to her.

This was her feeling when Wilding showed her the handbill, and the ancient, faded poster carried instant conviction to her that she was at last on the trail of the murderer. When the lawyer repeated the sheriff's deductions as to Louisiana's death or detention, she merely shook her head. Although the description carried little meaning to her she seemed to envision a figure, sinister and evil, something to seek and something to find. Or something that De Launay would surely find!

She went out to where the two young men were working with the pack outfit and horses which had been brought in for their journey.

"My friends," she said soberly, "we must hurry and be gone to-morrow. I have a feeling that we shall find this man. But it will be with Monsieur de Launay's help. I do not know why but I feel that he will bring us to the man. We must rejoin him as soon as possible."

"All right," said Sucatash, shortly. Dave muttered, "Damn De Launay!" But they both turned back to their work and hastened their preparations.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE SOLITUDES OF THE CANYON

The great wall of the Esmeraldas is split at one point by a ragged chasm opening out into the foothills and the grass plains to the north. This was the outlet of Shoestring Creek, a small stream of water which flowed out into the plain and was finally lost in the sands. It ran back into the range almost to the top of the main divide, forming a sort of natural pathway through the rugged mountains, a pathway much followed by the sheep-herders in driving their flocks from winter to summer range.

There was no road, properly speaking. In fact, when one had penetrated a few miles into the cañon passage was rendered arduous and difficult by a series of rocky terraces down which the stream tumbled. At many points the sheep trails winding along the slopes of the cañon walls formed the only practical thoroughfare.

Farther up, the cañon became more level, but no one had ever built a road through it. A good trail ran along it, generally at the level of the stream. Once past the terraced and rough part, there were no difficulties worthy of mention, at least in other seasons than winter.

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It was into this entrance to the Esmeraldas that Solange and her cavaliers rode, pushing on steadily so as to be able to make camp above the obstructions. Sucatash and Dave, finding that the girl was a capable horsewoman and apparently able to bear any reasonable amount of fatigue, had pushed their first day's travel relentlessly, covering the twenty miles between the ranch and the mountains, and aiming to penetrate another ten miles into the hills on the first day.

There had been little conversation. The two boys had the habit of their kind and kept silence for the most part while on the trail. As for Solange, though interested in the strange and wild country, she was engrossed in her own thoughts, aloof from all about her, wondering ceaselessly what her search would

eventually develop.

There had been many times, even after starting on her pilgrimage, when the whole adventure had appealed to her as one that was no better than a weird, senseless obsession, one that she would do well to turn back from and forget. Probably, at first, she had only been kept to the task by a certain spirit of adventure, a youthful and long-repressed urge for romance, fortified by inherited traditions of the sacredness of vengeance. It is even probable that, had it not been for the fortuitous advent of De Launay and the wild impulse which had led her to enlist him in the affair, she would have remained at home and settled down to—what?

It was that memory of what her fate must be at home that had always furnished the final prick to her faltering resolution. Better to wander, lonely and helpless, fighting and struggling to achieve some measure of independence, than remain to what her existence must be in France, whether it was the drab life of a seamstress or shopgirl, the gray existence of a convent, the sluggish grind of a sordid marriage—provided she could find a man to marry—or the feverish degradation of the *demi-monde*.

But now, as she rode under the frowning, yellow-brown, black-patched rocks of the Esmeraldas, or looked backward over the drab plain behind her, she felt an ever-increasing exaltation and tingling sense of expectation. She could not guess what was going to happen. She had no idea of what awaited her among those mountains, but she had a strong and distinct impression that fate was leading her on to a final accounting.

Why De Launay should be inextricably entangled in that settlement she could not imagine but he was always there. Her recollections of him were those of disgust and contempt. To her he was merely a fallen, weak, dissipated man, criminally neglectful of opportunities, criminally indifferent to his obligations. She recalled him as he had stood in the cell of the jail, unkempt, shattered of nerve, and she shivered to think that he had been a man who was once considered great. The fact that she was bound to him, even though the affair was one purely of form, should have affected her as something degrading.

Peculiarly, however, it did not. Most of the time she never considered the marriage at all. When she did it was with a feeling of mingled security and comfort. It was convenient and, somehow, she felt that, in De Launay, she had the one husband who would not have been a nuisance or have endeavored to take advantage of the circumstances. The marriage being a matter of form, a divorce

was inevitable and simple, yet, when she considered that matter of divorce, she felt a queer sort of reluctance and distaste, as though it were best to shove consideration of that point into the future as far as possible.

The gaunt, bare cañon thrilled her. She felt as though she were breaking into some mysterious, Bluebeard region where danger, adventure and intrigue awaited her. The mine, indeed, remained a mere vague possibility, hoped for but hardly expected. But her father's slayer and the vengeance that she had nursed so long became realities. The rocks that blocked the way might hide him and, somewhere in those hills, rode De Launay, who would lead her to that evil beast who had blighted her life.

Again, why De Launay? She did not know, except that she felt that the drunken soldier held the key to the search. Probably he was to be the instrument of vengeance; the slayer of the criminal; the settler of the blood feud. He was hers by marriage, and in marrying her had wedded the vendetta. Besides, he was the type. A légionnaire, probably a criminal, and certainly one who had killed without compunction in his time. The instrument of Providence, in fact!

Ahead of her rode Sucatash, ahead of him the long string of laden pack horses and ahead of them the silent Dave. The two cow-punchers had jogged throughout the day with silent indifference to their surroundings, but after they had entered the foothills and were creeping into the shadow of the cañon they evinced more animation. Every now and then Solange observed that one or the other cast a glance up into the air and ahead of them, toward the interior of the range. She was riding closer to Sucatash who motioned toward the distant crest of the range which showed through the gap of the cañon.

She nodded. She was mountain born and bred and recognized the signs.

"There will be a storm, monsieur."

Sucatash rewarded her with an admiring glance. "Afraid we're headed into it," he said. "Better turn back?"

"It will take more than storms to turn me back," she answered.

Sucatash nodded and turned again to look at the sky turning gray and gradually blackening above the dim line of the ridge. Even as they watched it, the sky seemed to descend upon the crest and to melt it. The outlines became vague, broken up, changed.

"Snowing up there," he said. "By'n by, it'll be snowin' down here. Snow ain't so bad—but——"

“But what?”

“She drifts into this here cañon pretty bad. There ain’t no road and down hereaways where these rocks make the goin’ hard at the best of times, the drifts sure stack up bad.”

“What is it that you mean, Monsieur Sucatash?”

“I mean that we ain’t goin’ to have no trouble gettin’ in, mad’mo’selle, but we may have a fierce time gettin’ out. In two days the drifts will be pilin’ up on the divide and the trail on the other side, and in a coupla days more they’ll be blockin’ the cañon down this a way.”

Solange shrugged her shoulders. “We have food,” she answered. “At any rate, I am going on. I have promised that I would meet Monsieur de Launay in this cañon. I cannot keep him waiting.”

Sucatash accepted her ultimatum without protest. But, after a momentary silence, he turned once more in his saddle.

“Say, mad’mo’selle,” he said, “this here De Launay, now; he’s sure enough your husband?”

“Of course.”

“But he ain’t noways a regular, honest-to-God husband, is he?”

“We are married,” said Solange. “Is that not enough?”

“I reckon so. Still, there’s Dave and me—we would sure admire to know how this feller stands with you.”

Solange looked at him, and he found difficulty, as usual, in concentrating on what she said or on anything but the fathomless eyes. Yet he comprehended that she was speaking, that she was smiling kindly, and yet that speech and smile were both destructive of his immature romance.

“He stands—not at all, monsieur, except as an instrument. But—that way—he and I are bound together forever.”

It was in her eyes that Sucatash read meaning. Somewhere in their depths he found a knowledge denied even to her, perhaps. He heaved a profound sigh and turned to yell at Dave.

“Get a wiggle on, old-timer! You an’ me are just hired hands on this pasear. *Madame de Launay* will be gettin’ hungry before we make camp.”

Dave swung quickly around, catching the slight emphasis on the strange name. Over the backs of the pack horses his and his companion's eyes met. Then he turned back and jogged up the pace a trifle.

By five o'clock in the evening they had passed the worst stages of the journey and were well up into the cañon. But the storm was worse than they had thought. Already occasional snowflakes were drifting down, and the chill was beginning to bite even through the warm fleece that lined mademoiselle's coat. The men decided to make camp.

They pitched Solange's tent in a sheltered spot not far above the stream. They themselves slept in the open under heavy tarps. Sucatash sighed again when, during that evening, Solange showed that she was no helpless creature of civilization but could fully perform her part of any tasks that were to be done. She cooked over a camp fire as though she had been born to it, and the food was better in consequence.

But Sucatash was uneasy. In the morning he consulted Dave and that young man shared his fears.

"It ain't goin' to be bad for several days," he said. "But when she drifts in earnest we all are liable to be stuck in here until spring. I ain't aimin' to get anxious, Dave, but we ain't fixed to buck snow."

"She ain't goin' to turn back, so what can we do?" asked the other.

"This here De Launay will probably be up near the crater. Once we get her up there we ain't responsible. But there ain't no telling how soon the snow'll drift. I'm thinkin' one of us ought to mosey back to the ranch and bring in webs and dogs."

"He'd better get a-going, then," said Dave.

"You'd better stay with the lady and take her on. I hate to leave her alone with a feller like you, but I reckon she'll meet up with her husband by night and he can settle you if necessary. I'll pull my freight out o' here and git the snowshoes and a dog sled and team. We'll maybe need a heap more grub than we've got if we hole up here too long."

"You're shoutin'," agreed Dave.

Mademoiselle, when the plan was broached to her, made no objection. She was constitutionally fearless where men were concerned, and the departure of Sucatash did not in the least alarm her. She also recognized the wisdom of taking

precautions against their being snowed in.

Thus the party broke up in the morning. Sucatash, before departing, took his rifle and a full belt of ammunition and fastened it to the girl's saddle.

"If Dave gets gay," he said, with a grin, "just bust him where he looks biggest with this here 30-30."

After assisting in packing the horses, he mounted and rode down the cañon while Solange and Dave resumed their journey in the opposite direction.

Sucatash, as soon as he had passed out of sight, quartered up the side of the cañon where sheep trails promised somewhat easier going than the irregular floor of the gulch. Thus he was enabled to get an occasional glimpse of them by looking backward whenever favorable ground exposed the valley. But he was soon past all hope of further vision, and when the distraction was removed settled down to make the best speed on his journey.

He gave no heed to anything but the route ahead of him and that was soon a task that engrossed him. It had been snowing some all night, and it was now slithering down in great flakes which made the air a gray mystery and the ground a vague and shadowy puzzle. Sucatash did not care to linger. Without the girl to care for he was one who would take chances, and he rushed his horse rapidly, slogging steadily along the trails, without attention to anything but the ribbon of beaten path immediately ahead of him.

There was every reason to believe that the hills were empty of all humankind except for their own party and De Launay, who was ahead and not behind them. Sucatash was entirely ignorant of the fact that, among the rocky terraces of the cañon, Jim Banker camped, after having followed their trail as long as the light would allow him to do so.

The prospector was up and on the move as soon as Sucatash. He and his burros were trudging along among the rocks, the old man muttering and talking to himself and shaking his head from side to side as one whose brain has been affected by years of solitude and unending search for gold. His eyes were never still, but swept the trail ahead of him or the slopes on either hand, back and forth, back and forth, restlessly and uneasily as though there were something here that he looked for and yet feared to see.

Far ahead of him and high on the slope he finally beheld Sucatash, riding alone and at a rapid trot along a sheep trail, his long, lean figure leaning forward, raised in his stirrups, and his hands on saddle horn. He was evidently riding in

haste, for that gait and attitude on the part of a cow hand means that he is in a hurry and has a long way to go.

The prospector hurriedly unslung a field glass and focused it on Sucatash. When he was sure of the man and of his route he grinned evilly.

“One of ’em right into my hands,” he chuckled.

He then dismounted and ran to one of the burros. From the pack he dragged a roll of wire which he carried there for some purpose or other, probably for the construction of a short length of fence whenever he stopped long enough to make it desirable. He glanced up at the gray sky, noting the swirl of snowflakes which settled down like a cloud. A few moments ago they had almost ceased, enabling him to glimpse the rider at a distance and now they were providentially falling again. Luck was surely with him.

Above him, about fifty yards up the slope of the cañon wall, was a long bench, rather narrow and beaten flat by the passage of countless sheep. Under it the hill sloped sharply, almost precipitously. It was as though made to order for his purpose.

He mounted his horse and spurred it around and quartering up the hill even as Sucatash wound in and out among the swales and depressions of the cañon wall, now coming into dim view and now vanishing behind a bend. Banker had plenty of time.

He reached the bench and hurriedly dismounted, to run to a scrubby cedar growing almost on the edge of the ledge. Round this, at no more than six inches above the ground, he twisted an end of the wire. Then he ran with the other end across the bench and snubbed it around a scrub oak growing on the slope. The branches of the little tree were thick, and the tough, prickly leaves still hung to it in some quantity.

He dropped the wire and went out and led his horse back among the scrub oaks. He then stood up close to the tree, almost invisible against the tangled branches and dead leaves. In one hand he held the coil of wire snubbed about the roots of the scrub oak while the other was clutching the nose of his horse.

Finally out of the smother of snow Sucatash came driving, head bent and hat brim pulled down to avoid the snow. The road was easy enough and he thought of nothing but getting along with all the speed possible. He did not notice that his horse, when emerging onto the bench, broke its stride and threw up its head as though seeking something. Instead he sank his spurs and urged the beast on.

The horse broke into a lope on the level stretch in answer to the spur. They came sweeping down until opposite where the prospector crouched.

Banker released his hold on his horse's nose and tightened the pull on the wire at the same time. His horse neighed.

Shrilly and loud, Sucatash's mount answered. Head thrown high and turned to the side he half checked his stride at the call of his kind. Startled, Sucatash also threw up his head and turned.

Then the wire clutched the forelegs of the horse and, with a crash, he went down. Sucatash went with him, and, catlike, strove to throw himself from the saddle. Unfortunately, he leaped on the outer side where the ledge fell away steeply.

He freed himself from the plunging horse, but his head struck hard against the gnarled trunk of a juniper and, half stunned, his body slid over the edge and dropped.

Chuckling and mouthing, rubbing his hands together, Banker slunk from his ambush. He retrieved his wire and then looked at the horse kicking on the ground.

"No use lettin' him go back to the ranch," he said, slyly. Then he drew his six-shooter and shot the animal.

Leading his own horse he climbed carefully down the slope and worked his way to where the body must have fallen. But it took him some time to find it, as Sucatash had rolled far after striking the slope.

He came upon it at last wedged against a clump of greasewood. There was blood on the head and the sightless eyes stared up to the gray sky. Snowflakes fell steadily and melted against the white cheeks. The body lay awkwardly twisted.

"Dead!" chuckled Banker. "All of 'em die! Old Jim don't die, though! Old Jim'll find it! He'll find the gold. French Pete hid it; Panamint hid it; this here Frog lady is hidin' it. But old Jim'll find it. Old Jim'll find it after all of 'em's dead. Dead! Dead! Dead!"

He burst out into shrill laughter, and his horse snorted and tried to pull away. He instantly broke off laughing to curse foully, mouthing obscenities and oaths as he jerked cruelly at the spade bit. The trembling horse squatted back and then stood with wildly rolling eyes.

Muttering, Jim stamped heavily down the hill, dragging the horse with him and leaving the still form to the mercies of the snow. The falling flakes were already

filling up the trail that he left. In an hour or two there would be no sign of his presence.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MINE

Through most of the day Dave and Solange pushed on up the cañon and the snow fell steadily, deepening under foot. As yet there were no drifts, for the wind was not blowing and progress was easy enough. After a few hours the snow grew deep enough to ball up under the feet of the horses and to cause some inconvenience from slipping. More than once Solange was in danger of being thrown by the plunge of her horse as his feet slid from under him. This served to retard their progress considerably but was not of much consequence aside from that and the slight element of added danger.

They had no more than fifteen miles to go before reaching the rendezvous, and this they made shortly after noon. Dave, who had become more silent than ever when he found himself alone with the girl, pitched the tent and then went to gather a supply of wood. Unused to strenuous riding, Solange went into her tent and lay down to rest.

They had expected to find De Launay, but there was no sign of him. Dave said that he might be within a short distance and they not know it, and asserted his intention of scouting around to find him after he had got the wood.

Solange was asleep when he came back with a load snaked in with his lariat, and he did not disturb her. Leaving the wood he rode on up the cañon looking for signs of De Launay. But, although he spent the better part of the afternoon in the search, riding in and out of every branch gully, and quartering up the slopes to where the black stands of timber began, he found no trace of the man.

Finally, fearing that Solange would begin to be frightened at his absence, he turned and started back to the camp. He had marked it by a large outcrop that stuck out of the cañon wall, forming a flat oblong bench of rock. This had hung on the slope about a hundred feet above the floor of the valley, and so he made his way along at about that height. It was beginning to get dark, the snow was falling heavily and he found it difficult to see far in front of him.

“High time old Sucatash was fannin’ in fer dogs,” he said to himself. “The winter’s done set in for sure.”

Fearing that he would miss the camp by keeping so high he headed his horse downward and finally reached the bottom of the cañon. Here the snow was deeper but the going was better. He turned downward with some relief, and was just about to spur his horse to greater speed when, through the gray mist of snow, a shadowy figure loomed up before him.

“Hey, De Launay?” he called. The figure did not answer but moved toward him.

He reined in his horse and leaned outward to look more intently. Behind the man, who was mounted, he saw the blurred outlines of pack animals. “De Launay?” he called again.

The figure seemed to grow suddenly nearer and more distinct, descending close upon him.

“It ain’t no Delonny,” chuckled a shrill voice. “It’s me.”

“Huh!” said Dave, with disgust. “Jim Banker, the damned old desert rat!”

“Reckon you ain’t so glad to see me,” wheezed Jim, still chuckling. “Old Jim’s always around, though; always around when there’s gold huntin’ to do. Always around, old Jim is!”

“Well, mosey on and pull your freight,” snarled Dave. “We don’t want you too close around. It’s a free country, but keep to windward and out o’ sight.”

“You don’t like old Jim! Hee, hee! Don’t none of ’em like old Jim! But Jim’s here, a-huntin’—and most of them’s dead that don’t like him. Old Jim don’t die! The other fellers dies!”

“So I hears,” said Dave, with meaning. He said no more, for Banker, without the slightest warning, shot him through the head.

The horses plunged as the body dropped to the ground and Jim wheezed and cackled as he held his own beast down.

“Hee, hee! They all of ’em dies, but old Jim don’t die!”

With a snort Dave’s horse wheeled and galloped away up the cañon. The sound of his going frightened the prospector. He ceased to laugh, and cowered in his saddle, looking fearfully about him into the dim swirl of the snow.

“Who’s that?” he called.

The deadly silence was unbroken. The old man shook his fist in the air and again broke into his frightful cursing.

“I ain’t afraid!” he yelled. “Damn you. I ain’t afraid! You’re all dead. You’re dead, there; French Pete’s dead, Sucatash Wallace’s dead, Panamint’s dead. But old Jim’s alive! Old Jim’ll find it. You bet you he will!”

He bent his head and appeared to listen again. Then:

“What’s that? Who’s singin’?”

He fell to muttering again, quoting doggerel, whined out in an approach to a tune: “Louisiana—Louisiana Lou!”

“Louisiana’s dead!” he chuckled. “If he aint he better not come back. The gal’s a-waitin’ fer him. Louisiana what killed her pappy! Ha, ha! Louisiana killed French Pete!”

He turned his horse and slowly, still muttering, began to haze his burros back down the cañon.

“Old Jim’s smart,” he declaimed. “All same like an Injun, old Jim is! Come a-sneakin’ up past the camp there and the gal never knew I was nigh. Went a-sneakin’ past and seen his tracks goin’ up the cañon. Just creeps along and rides up on him and now he’s dead! All dead but the gal and old Jim! Old Jim don’t die. The gal’ll die, but not old Jim! She’ll tell old Jim what she knows and then old Jim will find the gold.”

Through the muffling snow he pushed on until the faint glow of a fire came to him through the mist of snowflakes. A shadow flitted in front of it, and he stopped to chuckle evilly and mutter. Then he dismounted and walked up to the camp, where Solange busied herself in preparing supper.

“That you, Monsieur David?” she called cheerily, as Jim’s boots crunched the snow.

Jim chuckled. “It’s just me—old Jim, ma’am,” he said, his voice oily and ingratiating. “Old Jim, come to see the gal of his old friend, Pete.”

Solange whirled. But Jim had sidled between her and the tent, where, just inside the flap, rested the rifle that Sucatash had left her.

“What do you wish?” she asked, angrily. Her head was reared, and in the dim light her eyes glowed as they caught reflections from the fire. She showed no fear.

“Just wants to talk to you about old times,” whined Banker. “Old Jim wants to talk to Pete’s gal, ma’am.”

“I heard a shot a while ago,” said Solange sharply. “Where is Monsieur Dave?”

“I don’t know nothin’ about Dave, ma’am. Reckon he’ll be back. Boys like him don’t leave purty gals alone long—less’n he’s got keerless and gone an’ hurt hisself. Boys is keerless that a way and they don’t know the mount’ins like old Jim does. They goes and dies in ’em, ma’am—but old Jim don’t die. He knows the mount’ins, he does! He, he!”

Solange took a step toward him. “What do you wish?” she repeated, sternly. Still, she did not fear him.

“Just to talk, ma’am. Just to talk about French Pete. Just to talk about gold. Old Jim’s been a-huntin’ gold a many years, ma’am. And Pete, he found gold and I reckon he told his gal where the gold was. He writ a paper before he died, they say, and I reckon he writ on that paper where the gold was, didn’t he?”

“No, he did not,” said the girl, shortly and contemptuously.

“So you’d say; so you’d say, of course.” He chuckled again. “There wasn’t no one could read that Basco writin’. But he done writ it. Now, you tell old Jim what that writin’ says, and then you and old Jim will find that gold.”

Solange suddenly laughed, bitterly. “Tell you? Why yes, I’ll tell you. It said _____”

“Yes, ma’am! It said——”

He was slaveringly eager as he stepped toward her.

“It said—to my mother—that she should seek out the man who killed him and take vengeance on him!”

Jim reeled back, cringing and mouthing. “Said—said what? You’re lyin’. It didn’t say it!”

“I have told you what it said. Now, stand aside and let me get into my tent!”

With supreme contempt, she walked up to him as though she would push him aside. It was a fatal mistake, though she nearly succeeded. The gibbering, cracked old fiend shrank, peering fearfully, away from her blazing eyes and the black halo, rimmed with flashing color, of her hair. For a moment it seemed that he would yield in terror and give her passage.

But terror gave place suddenly to crazy rage. With an outburst of bloodcurdling

curses, he flung himself upon her. She thought to avoid him, but he was as quick as a cat and as wiry and strong as a terrier. Before she could leap aside, his claw-like hands were tangled in her coat and he was dragging her to him. She fought.

She struck him, kicked and twisted with all her splendid, lithe strength, but it was in vain. He clung like a leech, dragging her closer in spite of all she could do. She beat at his snarling face and the mouth out of which were whining things she fortunately did not understand. His yellow fangs were bare and saliva dripped from them.

Disgust and horror was overwhelming her. His iron arms were bending her backward. She tried again to tear free, stepped back, stumbled, went down with a crash. He sprang upon her, grunting and whistling, seized her hair and lifted her head, to send it crashing against the ground.

The world went black as she lost consciousness.

The prospector got to his feet, grumbling and cursing. He did not seem to feel the bruises left on his face by her competent hands. He stooped over her, felt her breast and found her heart beating.

“She ain’t goin’ to die. She ain’t goin’ to die yet. She’ll tell old Jim what’s writ on that paper. She’ll tell him where the gold is.”

He left her lying there while he went to get his outfit. The packs were dragged off and flung to the ground, where saddle and rifle followed them. Then he went into the tent.

He pitched the rifle left by Sucatash out into the snow, kicked the girl’s saddle aside, dumped her bedding and her clothes on the floor, tore and fumbled among things that his foul hands should never have touched nor his evil eyes have seen. He made a fearful wreck of the place and, finally, came upon her hand bag, which, womanlike, she had clung to persistently, carrying it in her saddle pockets when she rode.

The small samples of ore he gloated over lovingly, mouthing and gibbering. But finally he abandoned them, reluctantly, and dug out the two notes.

Brandon’s letter he read hastily, chuckling over it as though it contained many a joke. But he was more interested in the other scrawl, whose strange words completely baffled him. He tried in vain to make out its meaning, turning it about, peering at it from all angles, like an evil old buzzard. Then he gave way to a fit of rage, whining curses and making to tear the thing into bits. But his sanity held sufficiently to prevent that.

Finally he folded the paper up and tucked it into a pocket. Then he gathered up the bedding, took it outside and roughly bundled the girl in it. She lay unconscious and dreadfully white, with the snow sifting steadily over her. Her condition had no effect on the old ruffian who callously let her lie, covering her only to prevent her freezing to death before he could extract the information he desired.

He finished her culinary tasks and gluttoned himself on the food, grunting and tearing at it like a wild animal. Then he dragged out his filthy bedding and rolled himself up in it, scorning the shelter of the tent, which stood wanly in the white, misty night.

It was morning when Solange recovered her senses. She awoke to a gray, chill world in which she alternately shivered and burned as fever clutched her. For many minutes she lay, swathed in blankets, dull to sensation, staring up at a leaden sky. The snow had ceased to fall.

Still unable to comprehend where she was or what had happened, she made a tentative attempt to move, only to wince as the pains, borne of her struggle and of lying on the bare ground, seized her. Stiff and sore, weakened, with head throbbing and stabbing, the whole horrible adventure came back to her. She tried to rise, but she was totally helpless and her least movement gave her excruciating pain. Her head covering had been laid aside before she had begun preparation of supper the night before, and her colorless and strangely brilliant hair, all tumbled and loose, lay around her head and over her shoulders in great waves and billows, tinged with blue and red lights against the snow. Her face, delicately flushed with fever, was wildly beautiful, and her eyes were burning with somber, terrible light deep in their depths.

It was this face that Jim Banker looked down upon as he came back from the creek, unkempt, dirty. It was these eyes he met as he stooped over her with his lunatic chuckle.

He winced backward as though she had struck him, and his face contorted with sudden panic. He cowered away from her and covered his own eyes.

“Don’t you look at me like that! I never done nothing!” he whined.

“Canaille!” said Solange. Her voice was a mere whisper but it fairly sang with scorn. Fearless, she stared at him and he could not meet her gaze.

His gusty mood changed and he began to curse her. She heard more foulness from him in the next five minutes than all the delirium of wounded soldiers

during five years of war had produced for her. She saw a soul laid bare before her in all its unutterable vileness. Yet she did not flinch, nor did a single symptom of panic or fear cross her face.

Once, for a second, he ceased his mouthing, abruptly. His head went up and he bent an ear to the wind as though listening to something infinitely far away.

“Singin’!” he muttered, as though in awe. “Hear that! ‘Louisiana! Louisiana Lou!’”

Then he cackled. “Louisiana singin’. I hear him. Louisiana—who killed French Pete. He, he!”

After a while he tired, subsiding into mutterings. He got breakfast, bringing to her some of the mess he cooked. She ate it, though it nauseated her, determining that she would endeavor to keep her strength for future struggles.

While she choked down the food the prospector sat near her, but not looking at her, and talked.

“You an’ me’ll talk pretty, honey. Old Jim ain’t goin’ to hurt you if you’re reasonable. Just tell old Jim what the writin’ says and old Jim’ll be right nice to you. We’ll go an’ find the gold, you and me. You’ll tell old Jim, won’t you?”

His horrible pleading fell on stony ears, and he changed his tune.

“You ain’t a-goin’ tell old Jim? Well, that’s too bad. Old Jim hates to do it, pretty, but old Jim’s got to know. If you won’t tell him, he’ll have to find out anyhow. Know how he’ll do it?”

She remained silent.

“It’s a trick the Injuns done taught old Jim. They uses it to make people holler when they don’t want to. They takes a little sliver of pine, jest a little tiny sliver, ma’am, and they sticks it in under the toe nails where it hurts. Then they lights it. They sticks more of ’em under the finger nails and through the skin here an’ there. Then they lights ’em.

“Most generally it makes the fellers holler—and I reckon it’ll make you tell, ma’am. Old Jim has to know. You better tell old Jim.”

She remained stubbornly and scornfully silent.

The prospector shook his head as though sorrowful over her pertinacity. Then he got up and got a piece of wood, a stick of pitch pine, which he began to whittle carefully into fine slivers. These he collected carefully into a bundle while the

helpless girl watched him.

Finally he came to her and pulled the blankets from her. He stooped and unlaced her boots, pulling them off. One woolen stocking was jerked roughly from a foot as delicate as a babe's. She tried to kick, feebly and ineffectively. Her feet, half frozen from sleeping in the boots, were like lead.

The prospector laughed and seized her foot. But, as he held it and picked up a sliver, a thought occurred to him. He got up and went to the fire, where he stooped to get a flaming brand.

At this moment, clear and joyous, although distant and faint, came a rollicking measure of song:

“My Louisiana! Louisiana Lou!”

The girl's brain failed to react to it. She gathered nothing from the sound except that there was some one coming. But Banker reared as though shot and whirled about to stare down the cañon. She could not see him and she was unable to turn.

Shaking as though stricken with an ague, the prospector stood. His face had gone chalk white under its dirty stubble of beard. He looked sick and even more unwholesome than usual. From his slack jaws poured a constant whining of words, unintelligible.

Down the cañon, slouching carelessly with the motion of his horse, appeared a man, riding toward them at a jog trot. Behind him jingled two pack horses, the first of which was half buried under the high bundle on his back, the second more lightly laden.

Banker stood, incapable of motion for a moment. Then, as though galvanized into action, he began to gabble his inevitable oaths, while he leaped hurriedly for his rifle. He grabbed it from under the tarpaulin, jerked the lever, flung it to his shoulder and fired.

With the shot, Solange, by a terrific effort, rolled over and raised her head. She caught a glimpse of a familiar figure and shrieked out with new-found strength.

“Mon ami! A moi, mon ami!”

Then she stifled a groan, for, with the shot, the figure sagged suddenly and dropped to the side of his horse, evidently hit. She heard the insane yell of triumph from the prospector and knew that he was dancing up and down and shouting:

“They all dies but old Jim! Old Jim don’t die!”

She buried her face in her hands, wondering, even then, why she felt such a terrible pang, not of hope destroyed, but because the man had died.

It passed like a flash for, on the instant, she heard another yell from Banker, and a yell, this time, of terror. At the same moment she was aware of thundering hoofs bearing down upon them and of a voice that shouted; a voice which was the sweetest music she had ever heard.

Dimly she was aware that Banker had dropped his rifle and scuttled like a scared rabbit into some place of shelter. Her whole attention was concentrated on those rattling, drumming hoofs. She looked up, tried to rise, but fell back with the pain of the effort stabbing her unheeded.

A horse was sliding to a stop, forefeet planted, snow and dirt flying from his hoofs. De Launay was leaping to the ground and the pack horses were galloping clumsily up. Then his arms were around her and she was lifted from the ground.

“What’s the matter, Solange? What’s happened? Where’s the boys? And Banker, what’s he doing shooting at me?”

His questions were pouring out upon her, but she could not answer them. She clung to him and sobbed.

“I thought he had killed you!”

His laugh was music.

“That old natural? He couldn’t kill me. Saw him aim and ducked. Shot right over me. But what’s happened to you?”

He ran a hand over her face and found it hot with fever.

“Why, you’re sick! And your foot’s bare. Here, tell me what has happened?”

She could only sob brokenly, her strength almost gone.

“That terrible old man! He did it. He’s hiding—to shoot you.”

De Launay’s hand had run over her thick mane of hair and he felt her wince. He recognized the great bump on the skull.

“Death of a dog!” he swore in French. “*Mon amie*, is it this old devil who has injured you?”

She nodded and he began to look about him for Banker. But the prospector was not in sight, although his discarded rifle was on the ground. The lever was down

where the prospector had jerked it preparatory to a second shot which he had been afraid to fire. The empty ejected shell lay on the snow near by.

De Launay turned back to Solange. He bent over her and carefully restored her stocking and shoe. Then he fetched water and bathed her head, gently gathering her hair together and binding it up under the bandeau which he found among her scattered belongings. She told him something of what had happened, ascribing the prospector's actions to insanity. But when De Launay asked about Sucatash and Dave she could do no more than tell him that the first had gone to the ranch to get snowshoes and dogs, and the latter had gone out yesterday and had not come back, though she had heard a single shot late in the afternoon.

De Launay listened with a frown. He was in a cold rage at Banker, but there were other things to do than try to find him. He set to work to gather up the wreckage of the tent and outfit. Then he rounded up the horses, leaving the burros and Banker's horse to stay where they were. Hastily he threw on the packs, making no pretense at neat packing.

"I'll have to get you out of this," he said. "With that lunatic bushwacking round there'll never be a moment of safety for you. You're sick and will have to have care. Can you ride?"

Solange tried to rise to her feet but was unable to stand.

"I'll have to carry you. I'll saddle your horse and lead him. The others will follow my animals. I'll get you to safety and then come back and look for Dave."

With infinite care he lifted her to his saddle, holding her while he mounted and gathered her limp form into his left arm. His horse fortunately was gentle, and stood. He was about to reach for the reins of her horse when something made her turn and look up the slope of the hill toward the overhanging, ledgelike rock above the camp.

"*Mon ami!*" she screamed. "*Gardez-vous!*"

What happened she was not able to exactly understand. Only she somehow realized that never had she understood the possibility of rapid motion before. Her own eyes had caught only a momentary glimpse of a head above the edge of the rock and the black muzzle of a six-shooter creeping into line with them.

Yet De Launay's movement was sure and accurate. His eyes seemed to sense direction, his hand made one sweep from holster to an arc across her body and the roar of the heavy weapon shattered her ears before she had fairly realized

that she had cried out. She saw a spurt of dust where the head had appeared.

Then De Launay's spurs went home and the horse leaped into a run. The pack horses, jumping at the sound of the shot, flung up their heels, lurched to one side, circled and fell into a gallop in the rear. Clattering and creaking, the whole cavalcade went thundering up the valley.

De Launay swore. "Missed, by all the devils! But I sure put dust in his eyes!"

He turned around and there, sure enough, was Banker, standing on the rock, pawing at his eyes. The shot had struck the edge of the rock just below his face and spattered fragments all over him.

De Launay laughed grimly as the groping figure shook a futile fist at him. Then Banker sat down and dug at his face industriously.

They had ridden another hundred yards when a yell echoed in the cañon. He turned again and saw Banker leaping and shrieking on the rock, waving hands to the heavens and carrying on like a maniac.

"Gone plumb loco," said De Launay, contemptuously.

But, unknown to De Launay or mademoiselle, the high gods must have laughed in irony as old Jim Banker raved and flung his hands toward their Olympian fastness.

De Launay's shot, which had crushed the edge of the rock to powder, had exposed to the prospector the glittering gold of French Pete's lost Bonanza!

CHAPTER XVIII

TELLTALE BULLETS

De Launay headed up into the hills, making for the spot he and others familiar with the region knew as The Crater. Back about half a mile from the rim of Shoestring Cañon, which, itself, had originally been cut out of lava from extinct volcanoes of the range, rose a vast basalt peak, smooth and precipitous on the side toward the cañon. Its lower slopes had once been terraced down to the flat bench land which rimmed the cañon, but, unnumbered ages ago, the subterranean forces had burst their way through and formed a crater whose sides fell steeply away to the flats on three sides. The fourth was backed by the basalt cliff.

Although long extinct, the volcano had left reminders in the shape of warm springs which had an appreciable effect on the temperature within the basin of the ancient crater. The atmosphere in the place was, even in winter, quite moderate compared with that of the rest of the range. There was, in the center of the crater, a small pond or lake, of which the somewhat lukewarm water was quite potable.

This spot, once a common enough rendezvous for the riders on rodeo, was his objective and toward it he climbed, with mademoiselle's warm body in his arms. Behind him straggled the pack horses.

Solange lay quiet, but under his arm he felt her shiver from time to time. His downward glance at her fell only on her hat and a casual wisp of glistening hair which escaped from it. He felt for and found one of her hands. It clutched his with a hot, dry clasp.

Somewhat alarmed, he raised his hand to her face. That she had fever was no longer to be doubted.

She was talking low to herself, but she spoke in Basque which he did not understand. He spoke to her in French.

“I knew you would come; that I should find you,” she answered at once. “That terrible man! He could not frighten me. It is certain that through you I shall find this Louisiana!”

“Yes,” he answered. “You’ll find Louisiana.”

He wondered what she knew of Louisiana and why she wished to find him, concluding, casually, that she had heard of him as one who might know something of her father’s death. Well, if she sought Louisiana, she had not far to look: merely to raise her head.

“I thought I heard him singing,” said Solange.

“I reckon you did,” he answered. “Are you riding easy?”

“Yes—but I am cold, and then hot again. The man hurt me.”

De Launay swore under his breath and awkwardly began to twist from his Mackinaw, which, when it was free, he wrapped around her. Then, holding her closer, he urged his horse to greater speed.

But, once upon the bench and free to look about him toward the steep slope of the crater’s outer walls, he was dismayed at the unexpected change in the landscape.

On the rocky slopes there had once stood a dense thicket of lodgepole pine, slender and close, through which a trail had been cut. But, years ago, a fire had swept the forest, leaving the gaunt stems and bare spikes to stand like a plantation of cane or bamboo on the crumbling lava. Then a windstorm had rushed across the mountains, leveling the dead trees to the ground, throwing them in wild, heaping chaos of jagged spikes and tangled branches. The tough cones, opened by the fire, had germinated and seedlings had sprung up amidst the riot of logs, growing as thick as grass. They were now about the height of a tall man’s head, forming, with the tangled abatis of spiky trunks, a seemingly impenetrable jungle.

There might be a practicable way through, but to search for it would take more time than the man had to spare. He must get the girl to rest and shelter before her illness gained much further headway, and he knew that a search for a passage might well take days instead of the hours he had at his command. He wished that he had remained in the cañon where he might have pitched camp in spite of the danger from the prospector. But a return meant a further waste of time and he decided to risk an attempt to force his way through the tangle.

Carefully he headed into it. The going was not very hard at first as the trees lay scattered on the edge of the windfall. But, as he wormed into the labyrinth, the heaped up logs gave more and more resistance to progress, and it soon became apparent that he could never win through to the higher slopes which were free of the tangle.

If he had been afoot and unencumbered, the task would have been hard enough but not insuperable. Mounted, with pack horses carrying loads projecting far on the sides, to catch and entangle with spiky branches, the task became impossible. Yet he persisted, with a feeling that his best chance lay in pressing onward.

The lurching horse, scrambling over the timber, jolted and shook his burden and Solange began again to talk in Basque. Behind them the pack horses straggled, leaping and crashing clumsily in the jungle of impeding tree trunks. De Launay came to a stop and looked despairingly about him.

About thirty yards away, among the green saplings and gray down timber, stood a bluish shape, antlered, with long ears standing erect. The black-tailed deer watched him curiously, and without any apparent fear. De Launay knew at once that the animal was unaccustomed to man and had not been hunted. He stared at it, wondering that it did not run.

Now it moved, but not in the stiff leaps of its kind when in flight. He had expected this, but not what happened. There was no particular mystery in the presence of the agile animal among the down logs. But when it started off at a leisurely and smooth trot, winding in and out and upward, he leaped joyously to the only conclusion possible. The deer was following a passable trail through the jungle and a trail which led upward.

He marked the spot where he had seen it and urged his horse toward it. It was difficult going, but he made it and found there, as he had hoped, a beaten game trail, narrow, but fairly clear.

It took time and effort to gather the horses, caught and snared everywhere among the logs, but it was finally done. Then he pushed on. It was not easy going. The trail was narrow for packs, and snags continually caught in ropes and tarpaulins, but De Launay took an ax from his pack and cut away the worst of the obstacles. Finally they won through to the higher slopes where the trees no longer lay on the ground.

But it was growing late and the gray sky threatened more snow. He pressed on up to the rim of the crater and lost no time in the descent on the other side. The willing horses slid down behind him and, before darkness caught them, he had

reached the floor of the little valley, almost free from snow, grass-grown and mildly pleasant in contrast to the biting wind of the outer world.

Jingling and jogging, the train of horses broke into a trot across the meadow and toward the grove of trees that marked the bank of the pond. Here there was an old cabin, formerly used by the riders, but long since abandoned. Deer trotted out of their way and stood at a distance to look curiously. A sleepy bear waddled out of the trees, eyed them superciliously and then trotted clumsily away. The place seemed to be swarming with game. Their utter unconcern showed that this haven had not been entered for years.

Snow lay on the surrounding walls in patches, but there was hardly a trace of it on the valley floor. Steaming springs here and there explained the reason for the unseasonable warmth of the place. The grass grew lush and rich on the rotten lava soil.

“The Vale of Avalon, Morgan *la fée*,” said De Launay with a smile. Solange murmured and twisted restlessly in his arms.

He dismounted before the cabin, which seemed to be in fair condition. It was cumbered somewhat with débris, left by mountain rats which haunted the place, but there were two good rooms, a fairly tight roof, and a bunk built in the wall of the larger chamber. There was a rusty iron stove and the bunk room boasted a rough stone fireplace.

De Launay’s first act was to carry the girl in. His second was to throw off several packs and drag them to the room. He then took the ax and made all haste to gather an armful of dry pitch pine, with which he soon had a roaring fire going in the ancient fireplace. Then, with a pine branch, he swept out the place, cleaned the bunk thoroughly and cleared the litter from the floors. Solange reclined against a pile of bedding and canvas and fairly drank in the heat from the fire.

He found a clump of spruce and hacked branches from it, with which he filled the bunk, making a thick, springy mattress. On this he spread a tarpaulin, and then heaped it with blankets. Solange, flushed and half comatose, he carried to the bed.

The damp leather of her outer garments oppressed him. He knew they must come off. Hard soldier as he was, the girl, lying there with half-closed eyes and flushed face, awed him. Although he had never supposed himself oppressed with scruples, it seemed a sacrilege to touch her. Although she could not realize what he was doing, his hands trembled and his face was flushed as he forced himself

to the task of disrobing her. But, at last, he had the cumbering, slimy outer garments free and her body warmly wrapped in the coverings.

Food came next. She wanted broth and he had no fresh meat. Her rifle rendered that problem simple, however. He had hardly to step from the grove before game presented itself. He shot a young buck, feeling like a criminal in violating the animal's calm confidence. Working feverishly he cleaned the carcass, cut off the saddle and a hind quarter, hung the rest and set to work to make broth in the Dutch oven.

The light had long since failed, but the fire gave a ruddy light. Solange supped the broth out of a tin cup, raised on his arm, and immediately after fell back and went to sleep. Feeling her cheek, he found that it was damp with moisture and cool.

He bound up her head with a dampened bandage and left her to sleep. Then he began the postponed toil of arranging the camp.

After her things had been brought in and placed in her room, he at last came to his own packs. He ate his supper and then spread his bedding on the ground just outside the door of the cabin. As he unrolled the tarpaulin, he noted a jagged rent in it which he at first thought had been caused by a snag in passing through the down timber.

But when the bed had been spread out he found that the blankets were also pierced. Searching, he found a hard object, which on being examined, turned out to be a bullet, smashed and mushroomed.

De Launay smiled grimly as he turned this over in his hand. He readily surmised that it was the ball that Banker had fired at him and which, missing him as he ducked, had struck the pack on the horse behind him. Something about it, however, roused a queer impression in him. It was, apparently, an ordinary thirty-caliber bullet, yet he sensed some subtle difference in size and weight, some vague resemblance to another bullet he had felt and weighed in his hand.

Taking his camp lantern he went into the cabin and sat down before a rude table of slabs in the room where the stove was. He took from his pocket the darkened, jagged bullet that Solange had given him and compared it with the ball he had taken from his pack. The first was split and mushroomed much more than the other, but the butts of both were intact. They seemed to be of the same size when held together.

Yet they were both of ordinary caliber. Probably nine out of ten men who carried

rifles used those of thirty-three caliber. Bullets differed only in jacketing and the shape of the nose. A Winchester was round, with little of the softer metal projecting from the jacket, while a U. M. C. was flatter and more of the lead showed. But the bases were the same.

Still, De Launay was vaguely dissatisfied. It seemed to him that there was something in these two misshapen bullets that should be investigated. He took one of Solange's cartridges from his pocket and looked at it. Then, with strong teeth, he jerked the ball from the shell and compared the bullet with those he held in his hand. To all seeming they were much the same.

Still, the feeling of dissatisfaction persisted. In some subtle way the two mushroomed bullets were the same and yet were different to the unused one. De Launay tried to force Solange's bullet back into the shell, finding that it went in after some force was applied. Then, withdrawing it, he took the other two and tried to do the same with them.

The difference became apparent at once. The two used bullets were larger than the 30-30; almost imperceptibly so, but enough greater in diameter to make it clear that they did not fit the shell.

De Launay weighed the bullets in his hand and his face was grim. After a while he put the two in his pocket, threw the one he had pulled from the shell into the stove and rose to look at Solange. He held the lantern above her and stood for a moment, the light on her hair glinting back with flashes of red and blue and orange. He stooped and raised a lock of it on his hand, marveling at its fine texture and its spun-glass appearance. His hand touched her face, finding it damp and cool.

The iron lines of his face relaxed and softened. He stooped and brushed her forehead with his lips. Solange murmured in her sleep and he caught his own nickname, "Louisiana."

He saw that the fire was banked and then went out and turned in to his blankets, regardless of the drizzle of snow that was falling and melting in the warm atmosphere.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FINDING OF SUCATASH

De Launay came into the cabin the next morning with an armload of wood to find Solange sitting up in bed with the blankets clutched about her, staring at the unfamiliar surroundings. He smiled at her, and was delighted to be met with an answering, though somewhat puzzled smile.

“You are better?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “And you—brought me here?”

He nodded and knelt to rebuild the fire. When it was crackling again he straightened up.

“I was afraid you were going to be ill. You had a bad shock.”

Solange shuddered. “It is true. That evil old man! He hurt my head. But I am all right again.”

“You had better lie quiet for a day or two, just the same. You have had a bad blow. If you feel well enough, though, there is something I must do. Will you be all right if I leave you for a few hours?”

Her face darkened a little but she nodded. “If you must. You have been very kind, monsieur. You brought me here?”

Her eyes fell on her leather coat flung over the end of the bunk and she flushed, looking sideways at the man. He seemed impassive, unconscious, and her puzzled gaze wandered over his face and form. She noted striking differences in the tanned, lean face and the lithe body. The skin was clear and the eyes no longer red and swollen. He stood upright and moved with a swift, deft certainty far from his former slouch.

“You are changed,” she commented.

“Some,” he answered. “Fresh air and exercise have benefited me.”

“That is true. Yet there seems to be another difference. You look purposeful, if I may say it.”

“I?” he seemed to protest. “What purpose is there for me?”

“You must tell me that.”

He went out into the other room and returned with broth for her. But she was hungry and the broth did not satisfy her. He brought in meat and bread, and she made a fairly hearty breakfast. It pleased De Launay to see her enjoying the food frankly, bringing her nearer to the earth which he, himself, inhabited.

“The only purpose I have,” he said, while she ate, “is that of finding what has become of your escort. There’s another matter, too, on which I am curious. Do you think you can get along all right if I leave food for you here and go down to the camp? I will be back before evening.”

“You will be careful of that crazy old man?”

He laughed. “If I am not mistaken he thinks I am a ghost and is frightened out of seven years’ growth,” he said, easily. His voice changed subtly, became swiftly grim. “He may well be,” he added, half to himself.

Breakfast over and the camp cleared up, De Launay took from his packs a second automatic, hanging the holster, a left-hand one, to the bunk. He showed Solange how to operate the mechanism and found that she readily grasped the principle of it, though the squat, flat weapon was incongruous in her small hand. The rifle also he left within her reach.

Shortly he was mounted on his way out of the crater. He made good time through the down timber and, in about an hour and a half, was headed into the cañon. He searched carefully for traces of Dave but found none. The snow was over a foot deep and had drifted much deeper in many spots. Especially on the talus slopes at the bottom of the cañon had it gathered to a depth of several feet.

Finally he came to the site of the camp where he had rescued Solange from the mad prospector. Here he was surprised to find no trace of the man although the burros were scraping forlornly in the snow on the slopes trying to uncover forage. Camp equipment was scattered around, and a piece of tarpaulin covered a bundle of stuff. This was tucked away by a rock, but De Launay ran on it after some search.

He devoted his efforts to finding the shell from Banker’s rifle which he had seen on the snow when he left the place. It was finally uncovered and he put it in his

pocket. Then he left the place and headed down the cañon, searching for signs of the cow-puncher.

He found none, since Dave had not been in this direction. But De Launay pushed on until almost noon. He rode high on the slopes where the snow was shallower and where he could get an unrestricted view of the cañon.

He was about to give it up, however, and turn back when his horse stopped and pricked his ears forward, raising its head. De Launay followed this indication and saw what he took to be a clump of sagebrush on the snow about half a mile away. He watched it and thought it moved.

Intent observation confirmed this impression and it was made a certainty when he saw the black patch waver upward, stagger forward and then fall again.

With an exclamation, De Launay spurred his horse recklessly down the slope toward the figure on the snow. He galloped up to it and flung himself to the ground beside it. The figure raised itself on arms from which the sleeves hung in tatters and turned a pale and ghastly face toward him.

It was Sucatash.

Battered and bruised, with an arm almost helpless and a leg as bad, the cow-puncher was dragging himself indomitably along while his failing strength held out. But he was almost at the end of his resources. Hunger and weakness, wounds and bruises, had done their work and he could have gone little farther.

De Launay raised his head and chafed his blue and frozen hands. The cow-puncher tried to grin.

“Glad to see you, old-timer,” he croaked. “You’re just about in time.”

“What happened to you, man?”

“Don’t know. Heard a horse nicker and then mine stumbled and pinned me. Got a bad fall and when I come to I was lying down the hill against some greasewood. Leg a’most busted and an arm as bad. Horse nowhere around. Got anything to drink? Snow ain’t much for thirst.”

De Launay had food and water and gave it to him. After eating ravenously for a moment he was stronger.

“Funny thing, that horse nickerin’. It was snowin’ and I didn’t see him. But, after I come to I tried to climb up where I was throwed. It was some job but I made it. There was my horse, half covered with snow. Some one had shot him.”

“Shot him? And then left you to lie there?”

“Just about that. There wasn’t no tracks. Snow had filled ’em. But I reckon that horse wasn’t just shot by accident.”

“It was not. And Dave’s gone.”

“Dave? What’s that?”

“He’s gone. Left the camp day before yesterday and never came back. I wasn’t there.”

“And madame? She all right?”

“She is—now. I found her yesterday morning with Banker, the prospector. He was trying to torture her into telling him where that mine is located. Hurt her pretty bad.”

Sucatah lay silent for a moment. Then:

“Jumpin’ snakes!” he said. “That fellow has got a lot comin’ to him, ain’t he?”

“He has,” said De Launay, shortly. “More than you know.”

Again the cow-puncher was silent for a space.

“Reckon he beefed Dave?” he said at last.

“Shouldn’t be surprised,” said De Launay. “I searched for him but couldn’t find him. He wouldn’t get lost or hurt. But Jim Banker’s done enough, in any case.”

“He sure has,” said Sucatah.

De Launay helped the cow-puncher up in front of him and turned back to the crater. He rode past Banker’s camp without stopping, but keeping along the slope to avoid the deeper snow he came upon a stake set in a pile of small rocks. This was evidently newly placed. He showed it to Sucatah.

“The fellow’s staked ground here. What could he have found?”

“Maybe the old lunatic thinks he’s run onto French Pete’s strike,” grinned Sucatah. “This don’t look very likely to me.”

“Gone to Maryville to register it, I suppose. That accounts for his leaving the burros and part of his stuff. He’d travel light.”

“He better come back heavy though. If he aims to winter in here he’ll need bookoo rations. It’d take some mine to make me do it.”

Sucataash was in bad shape, and De Launay was not particularly interested in old Jim's vagaries at the present time, so he made all speed back to the crater. Sucataash, who knew of the windfall, would not believe that the soldier had found an entrance into the place until he had actually treaded the game trail.

He looked backward from the heights above the tangle after they had come through it.

"Some stronghold," he commented. "It'd take an army to dig you outa here."

They found Solange as De Launay had left her. She was overjoyed to see Sucataash and at the same time distressed to observe his condition. She heard with indignation his account of his mishap and, like De Launay, suspected Banker of being responsible for it. Indeed, unless they assumed that some mysterious presence was abroad at this unseasonable time in the mountains, there was no one else to suspect.

She would have risen and assumed the duties of nursing the cow-puncher, but De Launay forbade it. She was still very weak and her head was painful. The soldier therefore took upon himself the task of caring for both of them.

He made a bed for Sucataash in the kitchen of the cabin and went about the work of getting them both on their feet with quiet efficiency. This bade fair to be a task of some days' duration though both were strong and healthy and yielded readily to rest and treatment.

It was night again before he had them comfortably settled and sleeping. Once more, with camp lantern lit, he sat before the slab table and examined his bullets and the shell he had picked up at Banker's camp.

He found that both bullets fitted it tightly. Then he turned the rim to the light and looked at it.

Stamped in the brass were the cabalistic figures:

U. M. C. SAV. .303.

For some time he sat there, his mouth set in straight, hard lines, his memory playing backward over nineteen years. He recalled the men he had known on the range, a scattered company, every one of whom could be numbered, every one of whom had possessions, weapons, accouterment, known to nearly all the others. In that primitive community of few individuals the tools of their trades were as a part of them. Men were marked by their saddles, their chaparajos, their weapons. A pair of silver-mounted spurs owned by one was remarked by all the others.

Louisiana had known the weapons of the range riders even as they knew his. The six-shooter with which he had often performed his feats would have been as readily recognized as he, himself. When a new rifle appeared in the West its advent was a matter of note.

In Maryville, then a small cow town and outfitting place for the men of the range, there had been one store in which weapons could be bought. In that store, the proprietor had stocked just one rifle of the new make. The Savage, shooting an odd caliber cartridge, had been distrusted because of that fact, the men of the country fearing that they would have difficulty in procuring shells of such an unusual caliber. Unable to sell it, he had finally parted with it for a mere fraction of its value to one who would chance its inconvenience. The man who possessed it had been known far and wide and, at that time, he was the sole owner of such a rifle in all that region.

Yet, with this infallible clew to the identity of French Pete's murderer at hand, it had been assumed that the bullet was 30-30.

De Launay envisioned that worn and battered rifle butt projecting from the scabbard slung to the burro in Sulphur Falls. Nineteen years, and the man still carried and used the weapon which was to prove his guilt.

Once more he got up and went in to look at the sleeping girl. Should he tell her that the murderer of her father was discovered? What good would it do? He doubted that, if confronted with the knowledge, she could find the fortitude to exact the vengeance which she had vowed. And if, faced with the facts, she drew back, what reproach would she always visit upon herself for her weakness? Torn between a barbaric code and her own gentle instincts, she would be unhappy whatever eventuated.

But he was free from gentleness—at least toward every one but her. He had killed. He was callous. Five years in the *Légion des Etrangers* and fourteen more of war and preparation for war had rendered him proof against squeamishness. The man was a loathly thing who had slain in cold blood, cowardly, evil, and unclean. Possibly he had murdered within the past few days, and, at any rate he had attempted murder and torture.

Why tell her about it? He had no ties; no aims; nothing to regret leaving. He had nothing but wealth which was useless to him, but which would lift her above all unhappiness after he was gone. And he could kill the desert rat as he would snuff out a candle.

Yet—the thought of it gave him a qualm. The man was so contemptible; so

unutterably low and vile and cowardly. To kill him would be like crushing vermin. He would not fight; he would cower and cringe and shriek. There might be a battle when they took De Launay for the “murder,” of course, but even his passing, desperate as he might make it, would not entirely wipe out the disgrace of such a butchery. He was a soldier; a commander with a glorious record, and it went against the grain to go out of life in an obscure brawl brought on by the slaughter of this rat.

Still, he had dedicated himself to the service of this girl, half in jest, perhaps, but it was the only service left to him to perform. He had lived his life; had his little day of glory. It was time to go. She was his wife and to her he would make his last gesture and depart, serving her.

Then, as he looked at her, her eyes opened and flashed upon him. In their depths something gleamed, a new light more baffling than any he had seen there before. There was fire and softness, warmth and sweetness in it. He dropped on his knees beside the bunk.

“What is it, *mon ami*?” Solange was smiling at him, a smile that drew him like a magnet.

“Nothing,” he said, and rose to his feet. Her hand had strayed lightly over his hair in that instant of forgetfulness. “I looked to see that you were comfortable.”

“You are changed,” she said, uncertainly. “It is better so.”

He smiled at her. “Yes. I am changed again. I am the légionnaire. Nameless, hopeless, careless! You must sleep, *mon enfant*! Good night!”

He brushed the hand she held out to him with his lips and turned to the door. As he went out she heard him singing softly:

*“Soldats de la Légion,
De la Légion Etrangère,
N’ayant pas de Nation,
La France est votre Mère.”*

He did not see that the light in her marvelous eyes had grown very tender. Nor did she dream that he had made a mat of his glory for her to walk upon.

CHAPTER XX

LOUISIANA!

On the following morning, De Launay, finding his patients doing well, once more left the camp after seeing that everything was in order and food for the invalids prepared and set to their hands. Among Solange's effects he had found a pair of prism binoculars, which he slung over his shoulder. Then he made his way on foot to the lower end of the valley, up the encircling cliffs and out on the ridge which surrounded the crater.

Here he hunted until he came upon a narrow, out-jutting ledge which overlooked the country below and the main backbone of the range to the southward and eastward. From here he could see over the bench at the base of the cliff, with its maze of tangled, down timber, and on to the edge of Shoestring Cañon, though he could not see down into that gulch. Above Shoestring, however, he could see the rough trail which wound out of the cañon on the opposite side and up toward the crest of the range, where it was lost among the timber-clad gorges and peaks of the divide. Over this trail came such folk as crossed the range from the direction of Maryville. All who came from the Idaho side would head in by way of Shoestring and come up the cañon.

That day, although he swept the hills assiduously with his glasses, he saw nothing. The dark smears and timber, startlingly black against the snow, remained silent, brooding and inviolate, as though the presence of man had never stirred their depths.

He did not remain long. Fearing that he would be needed at the cabin, he returned before noon. Solange was progressing bravely, though she was still weak. Sucatash, however, was in worse shape and evidently would not be fit to move for several days.

The next day he did not go to his post, but on the third morning, finding Sucatash improving, he again took up his vigil. On that day banked clouds hovered over the high peaks and nearly hid them from view. A chill and biting

wind almost drove him from his post.

Seeing nothing, he was about to return, but, just as a heavy flurry of snow descended upon him, he turned to give one last look toward the divide and found it lost in mist which hung down into the timber. Under this fleecy blanket, the cañon and the lower part of the trail stood forth clearly.

Just as De Launay was about to lower his glasses, a man rode out of the timber, driving before him a half dozen pack horses. The soldier watched him as he dropped below the rim of the cañon and, although distant, thought he detected signs of haste in his going.

This man had been gone hardly more than ten minutes when a second horseman rode down the trail. There might have been doubt in the case of the first rider, but it was certain that the second was in a hurry. He urged his horse recklessly, apparently in pursuit of the first man, whom he followed below the cañon's rim.

De Launay was earlier than usual at his post the next day. Yet he was not too early to meet the evidence of activity which was even more alert than his. But before he could settle himself he saw the trail across the cañon alive with moving men and beasts. In ones, twos, and threes they came. Some rode singly and without outfit, while others urged on pack animals. But one and all were in a hurry.

He counted more than twoscore travelers who dropped into Shoestring within an hour and a half. Then there was a pause in the rush. For an hour no more came.

After that flowed in another caravan. His glasses showed these were better equipped than the first comers though he was too far away to get any accurate idea of what they carried. Still a dim suspicion was filling his mind, and as each of the newcomers rushed down the trail and over the cañon rim his suspicion took more vivid form until it became conviction and knowledge.

“By heavens! It's a mining rush!”

His mind worked swiftly. He jumped at the evidence he had seen where Banker had staked a claim. The prospector had ridden to Maryville to record the claims. He had been followed, and in an incredibly short time here were veritable hordes rushing into Shoestring Cañon. If this was the vanguard what would be the main body? It must have been a strike of fabulous proportions that had caused this excitement. And that strike must be——

“French Pete's Bonanza!” he almost yelled.

The thing was astounding and it was true. In naming a rendezvous he, himself, had directed these men to the very spot—because there was no other spot. The obvious, as usual, had been passed by for years while the seekers had sought in the out-of-the-way places. But where would Pete find a mine when he was returning to the ranch with his flock? Surely not in the out-of-the-way places, for he would not be leading his sheep by such ways. He would be coming through the range by the shortest and most direct route, the very route that was the most frequented—and that was the trail over the range and down Shoestring Cañon.

De Launay wanted to shout with laughter as he thought of the search of years ending in this fashion: the discovery of the Bonanza, under the very nose of the dead man's daughter, by the very man who had murdered him!

But his impulse was stifled as his keen mind cast back over the past days. He recalled the rescue of Solange and the ambush from the top of the great, flat outcrop. Vague descriptions of Pete's location, heard in casual talks with Solange, came to him. The old sheep-herder had been able to describe his find as having been made where he had eaten his noonday meal "on a rock." That rock—the Lunch Rock, as it had been called, had even given the mine a name in future legend, as the Peg Leg had been named.

But there had been no rock that could answer the description near the camp. At least there had been only one, and that one had been the flat outcrop on which Banker had lain at length and from which he had attempted to shoot De Launay.

Then swiftly he recalled Solange's cry of warning and his own swift reaction. He had fired at the eyes and forehead appearing above the edge of the rock and he had hit the edge of the rock itself. He had laughed to see the mad prospector clawing at his eyes, filled with the powdered rock, and had laughed again to see his later antics as he stood upright, while De Launay rode away, waving his arms in the air and yelling.

He saw now what had caused those frantic gestures and shouts. It had been he, De Launay, who had uncovered to the prospector's gaze the gold which should have been mademoiselle's.

No wonder he had no desire to laugh as he turned back into the valley. He was weighted down with the task that was his. He had to tell Solange that the quest on which she had come was futile. That her mine was found—but by another, and through his own act. He visualized those wonderful eyes which had, of late, looked upon him with such soft fire, dulling under the chilling shock of disappointment, mutely reproaching him for her misfortune and failure.

The wild Vale of Avalon, which had seemed such a lovely haven for Morgan *la fée*, had lost its charm. He plodded downward and across the rank grass, going slowly and reluctantly to the cabin. Entering it, he went first to Sucatash, asking him how he felt.

The cow-puncher raised himself with rapidly returning strength, noting the serious expression on De Launay's face.

"I'm getting right hearty," he answered. "I'll drag myself out and sit up to-night, I reckon. But you don't look any too salubrious yourself, old-timer. Aimin' to answer sick call?"

"No," said De Launay. "Thinking about mademoiselle. You remember those stakes we saw?"

"Banker's claim? Sure."

"Well, he's struck something. There is a small army pouring into Shoestring from Maryville. It's a regular, old-time gold rush."

"Damn!" said Sucatash, decisively.

He pondered the news a moment.

"In these days," he finally said, "with gold mines bein' shut down because it don't pay to work 'em, there wouldn't be no rush unless he'd sure struck something remarkable."

"You've guessed it!" said De Launay.

"It's French Pete's mine?"

"I don't see any other explanation."

Again Sucatash was silent for a time. Then:

"That little girl is sure out o' luck!" he said. There was a deep note of sympathy in the casual comment. And the cow-puncher looked at De Launay in a manner which the soldier readily interpreted.

"No mine, no means of support, no friends within five thousand miles; nothing—but a husband she doesn't want! Is that what you're thinking?"

"Not meaning any offense, it was something like that," said Sucatash, candidly.

"She'll get rid of the incumbrance, without trouble," said De Launay, shortly.

"Well, she ain't quite shy of friends, neither. I ain't got no gold mines—never

took no stock in them. But I've got a bunch of cows and the old man's got a right nice ranch. If it wasn't for one thing, I'd just rack in and try my luck with her."

"What's the one thing?"

"You," said Sucatash, briefly.

"I've already told you that I don't count. Her marriage was merely a formality and she'll be free within a short time."

Sucatash grinned. "I hate to contradict you, old-timer. In fact, I sure wish you was right. But, even if she don't know it herself, I know. It sure beats the deuce how much those eyes of hers can say even when they don't know they're sayin' it."

De Launay nodded. He was thinking of the lights in them when she had turned them on him of late.

"They told *me* something, not very long ago—and I'm gamblin' there won't be any divorce, pardner."

"There probably won't," De Launay replied, shortly. "It won't be necessary."

He got up and went into the other room where Solange reclined on the bunk. He found her sitting up, dressed once more in leather breeches and flannel shirtwaist, and looking almost restored to full strength. Her cheeks were flushed again, but this time with the color of health. The firelight played on her hair, glowing in it prismatically. Her eyes, as she turned them on him, caught the lights and drew them into their depths. They were once more fathomless and hypnotic.

But De Launay did not face them. He sat down on a rude stool beside the fire and looked into the flame. His face was set and indifferent.

"Monsieur," said Solange, "you are changed again, it seems. It is not pleasant to have you imitate the chameleon, in this manner. What has happened?"

"Your mine has been found," said De Launay, shortly.

Solange started, half comprehending. Then, as his meaning caught hold, she cried out, hesitating, puzzled, not knowing whether his manner meant good news or bad.

"But—if it has been found, that is good news? Why do you look so grim, monsieur? Is it that you are grieved because it has been found?"

De Launay had half expected an outburst of joyous questions which would have

made his task harder. In turn, he was puzzled. The girl did not seem either greatly excited or overjoyed. In fact, she appeared to be doubtful. Probably she could not realize the truth all at once.

“It has been found,” he went on, harshly, “by Banker, the prospector from whom I rescued you.”

Solange remained still, staring at him. He sat with elbows on his knees, his face outlined in profile by the fire. Clean and fine lined it was, strong with a thoroughbred strength, a face that a woman would trust and a man respect. As she looked at it, noting the somber suppression of emotion, she read the man’s reluctance and disappointment for her. She guessed that he buried his feelings under that mask and she wondered wistfully how deep those feelings were.

“Then,” she said, at last, “it is not likely that this Monsieur Banker would acknowledge my claim to the mine?”

“The mine is his under the law. I am afraid that you have no claim to it. Your father never located it nor worked it. As for Banker——”

He paused until she spoke.

“Well? And what of this Banker?”

“He will not hold it long. But he has heirs, no doubt, who would not acknowledge your claim. Still, I will do my best. Sucatash will back us up when we jump the claim.”

“Jump the claim? What is that?”

He explained briefly the etiquette of this form of sport.

“But,” objected Solange, “this man will resist, most certainly. That would mean violence.”

A faint smile curled the man’s mouth under the mustache. “I am supposed to be a violent man,” he reminded her. “I’ll do the killing, and you and Sucatash will merely have to hold the claim. The sympathy of the miners will be with you, and there should be little difficulty unless it turns out that some one has a grubstake interest.”

He had to explain again the intricacies of this phase of mining. Solange listened intently, sitting now on the edge of the bunk. When he was done, she slid to her feet and took position beside him, laying her hand on his shoulder. Behind her, by the side of the bunk, was a short log, set on end as a little table, on which

rested the holstered automatic which De Launay had left with her.

“It appears then,” she said, when he had finished, “that, in any event I have no right to this mine. In order to seize it, you would have to fight and perhaps kill some one. But, monsieur, I am not one who would wish you to be a common bravo—a desperado—for me. This mine, it is nothing. We shall think no more of it.”

Again De Launay was mildly surprised. He had supposed that the loss of the mine would affect her poignantly and yet she was dismissing it more lightly than he could have done had she not been concerned. And in her expression of consideration for him there was a sweetness that stirred him greatly. He lifted his hand to hers where it rested on his shoulder, and she did not withdraw from his touch.

“And yet,” he said, “there is no reason that you should concern yourself lest I act like a desperado. There are those who would say that I merely lived up to my character. The General de Launay you have heard of, I think?”

“I have heard of him as a brave and able man,” answered Solange.

“And as a driver of flesh and blood beyond endurance, a butcher of men. It was so of the colonel, the *commandant*, the *capitaine*. And, of the *légionnaire*, you have heard what has always been heard. We of the *Légion* are not lap dogs, mademoiselle.”

“I do not care,” said Solange.

“And before the *Légion*, what? There was the cow-puncher, the range bully, the gunman; the swashbuckling flourisher of six-shooters; the notorious Louisiana.”

He heard her breath drawn inward in a sharp hiss. Then, with startling suddenness, her hand was jerked from under his but not before he had sensed an instant chilling of the warm flesh. Wondering, he turned to see her stepping backward in slow, measured steps while her eyes, fixed immovably upon him, blazed with a fell light, mingled of grief, horror and rage. Her features were frozen and pale, like a death mask. The light of the fire struck her hair and seemed to turn it into a wheel of angry flame.

There was much of the roused fury in her and as much of a lost and despairing soul.

“Louisiana!” she gasped. “You! You are Louisiana?”

CHAPTER XXI

GOLD SEEKERS

Puzzled, but watchful and alert, De Launay saw her retreating, sensing the terrible change that had come over her.

“Yes, I am Louisiana,” he said. “What is the matter?”

In answer she laughed, while one hand went to the breast of her shirtwaist and the other reached behind her, groping for something as she paced backward. Like a cameo in chalk her features were set and the writhing flames in her hair called up an image of Medusa. There was no change in expression, but through her parted lips broke a low laugh, terrible in its utter lack of feeling.

“And I have for my husband—Louisiana! *Quelle farce!*”

The hand at her breast was withdrawn and in it fluttered the yellow paper that Wilding had brought from Maryville to Wallace’s ranch. She flung it toward him, and as he stooped to pick it up, her groping hand fell on the pistol resting on the upturned log at the side of the bunk. She drew it around in front of her, dropped the holster at her side and snapped the safety down. Her thumb rested on the hammer and she stood still, tensely waiting.

De Launay read the notice of reward swiftly and looked up. His face was stern, but otherwise expressionless.

“Well?” he demanded, his eyes barely resting on the pistol before they swept to meet her own blazing gaze. There was no depth to her eyes now. Instead they seemed to be fire surrounded by black rims.

“You have read—murderer!”

“I have read it.” De Launay’s voice was like his face, and in both appeared a trace of contempt.

“What have you to say before I kill you?”

“That you would have shot before now had you been able to do it,” answered De Launay, and now the note of contempt was deeper. He turned his back to her and leaned forward over the fire, one outstretched hand upon the stone slab that formed the rude mantel.

The girl stood there immobile. The hand that held the pistol was not raised nor lowered. The thumb did not draw back the hammer. But over her face came, gradually, a change; a desperate sorrow, an abandonment of hope. Even the light in her hair that had made it a flaming wheel seemed in some mysterious way to die down. The terrible fire in her eyes went out as though drowned in rising tears.

A sob burst from her lips and her breast heaved. De Launay gazed down upon the fire, and his face was bitter as though he tasted death.

Solange slowly reached behind her again and dropped the heavy weapon upon the log. Then, in a choked voice she struggled to call out:

“Monsieur Wallace! Will you come?”

In the next room there was a stirring of hasty movements. Sucatash raised a cheery and incongruous voice.

“Just a minute, mad’mo’selle! I’m comin’ a-runnin’.”

He stamped into his boots and flung the door open, disheveled, shirt open at the neck. Astonished, he took in the strange attitudes of the others.

“What’s the answer?” he asked. “What was it you wanted, ma’am?”

Solange turned to him, her grief-ridden face stony in its hopelessness.

“Monsieur, you are my friend?”

“For mayhem, manslaughter or murder,” he answered at once. “What’s wanted?”

“Then—will you take this pistol, and kill that man for me?”

Sucatash’s eyes narrowed and his mottled hair seemed to bristle. He turned on De Launay.

“What’s he done?” he asked, with cold fury.

De Launay did not move. Solange answered dully.

“He is the man who—married me—when he was the man who had murdered my father!”

But Sucatash made no move toward the pistol. He merely gaped at her and at De Launay. His expression had changed from anger to stupidity and dazed incomprehension.

“What’s that? He murdered your father?”

“He is Louisiana!”

“He? Louisiana! I allowed he was an old-timer. Well, all I can say is—heaven’s delights!”

Solange put out her hand to the edge of the bunk as though she could not support herself longer unaided. Her eyes were half closed now.

“Will you kill him, monsieur? If you do, you may have—of me—anything—that you ask!”

The words were faltered out in utter weariness. For one instant De Launay’s eyes flickered toward her, but Sucatash had already sprung to her side and was easing her to a seat on the edge of the bunk. Her head drooped forward.

“Ma’am,” said Sucatash, earnestly, “you got me wrong. I can’t kill him—not for that.”

“Not for that?” she repeated, wonderingly.

“Never in the world! I thought he’d insulted you, and if he had I’d a taken a fall out of him if he was twenty Louisianas. But this here notion you got that he beefed your father—that’s all wrong! You can’t go to downin’ a man on no such notions as that!”

“Why not?” asked Solange, in a stifled voice.

“Because he never done it—that’s whatever. You’d never get over it, mad’mo’selle, if you done that and then found you was wrong! And you are wrong.”

Slowly, Solange dragged herself upright. She was listless, the lightness had gone out of her step. Without a word, she reached out and lifted her leather coat from the nail on which it hung. Then she dragged her leaden feet to the door. Sucatash silently followed her.

In the other room she spoke once.

“Will you saddle my horse for me, monsieur?”

“There ain’t no place for you to go, ma’am.”

“Nevertheless, I shall go. If you please——”

“Then I’ll go with you.”

She followed him to the door, putting on her coat. Outside, she sat down on a log and remained stonily oblivious as Sucatash hastily caught up several horses and dragged saddles and *alforjas* into position. The westerling sun was getting low along the rim of the crater and he worked fast with the knowledge that night would soon be upon them. Inside the cabin he heard De Launay moving about. A moment later as he entered to gather Solange’s equipment, he saw the soldier seated at the rough table busy with paper and fountain pen.

As Sucatash went past him, carrying an armload of blankets and a tarpaulin, De Launay held out a yellow paper.

“She will want this,” he said, and then bent over his writing.

Again, when Sucatash came in for more stuff, De Launay stopped him. He held out the pen, indicating the sheet of paper spread upon the table.

“This needs two witnesses, I think, but one will have to serve. She is my wife, after all—but it will make it more certain. Will you sign it?”

Sucatash glanced hastily at the document, reading the opening words: “I, Louis Bienville de Launay, colonel and late general of division of the army of France, being of sound and disposing mind, do make, declare, and publish this my Last Will and Testament——”

His eye caught only one other phrase: “I give, bequeath, and devise to my dearly beloved wife, Solange——”

With an oath, Sucatash savagely dashed his signature where De Launay indicated, and then rushed out of the room. The soldier took another piece of paper and resumed his writing. When he had finished he folded the two sheets into an envelope and sealed it. Outside, Sucatash was heaving the lashings taut on the last packs.

De Launay came to the door and stood watching the final preparations. Solange still sat desolately on the log.

Finally Sucatash came to her and assisted her to rise. He led her to her horse and held the stirrup for her as she swung to the saddle. He was about to mount himself when De Launay caught his eye. Instead, he stepped to the soldier’s side.

“Take this,” said De Launay, holding out the envelope. “Give it to her to-

morrow. And—she needn't worry about the mine—or Banker.”

“She’s not even thinkin’ about them!” growled Sucatash.

He turned and strode to his horse. In another moment they were riding rapidly toward the rim of the crater.

De Launay watched them for some time and then went into the cabin. He came out a moment later carrying saddle and bridle. On his thighs were now hanging holsters on both sides, and both were strapped down at the bottoms.

He caught and saddled his horse, taking his time to the operation. Then, searching the darkening surface of the crater wall, he found no trace of the two who had ridden away. But he busied himself in getting food and eating it. It was fully an hour after they had gone before he mounted and rode after them.

By this time Solange and Sucatash had reached the rim and were well on their way through the down timber. More by luck than any knowledge of the way, they managed to strike the game trail, and wound through the impeding snags, the cow-puncher taking the lead and the girl following listlessly in his wake. Before dark had come upon them they had gained the level bench and were riding toward the gulch which led into the cañon.

After a while Sucatash spoke. “Where you aimin’ to camp, ma’am?”

“I am going down to these miners,” she said flatly.

“But, mad’mo’selle, that camp ain’t no place for you. There ain’t no women there, most likely, and the men are sure to be a tough bunch. I wouldn’t like to let you go there.”

“I am going,” she answered. To his further remonstrances she interposed a stony silence.

He gave it up after a while. As though that were a signal, she became more loquacious.

“In a mining camp, one would suppose that the men, as you have said, are violent and fierce?”

“They’re sure likely to be some wolfish, ma’am,” he agreed. In hope that she would be deterred by exaggeration, he dwelt on the subject. “The gunmen and hoss thieves and tinhorn gamblers all come in on the rush. There’s a lot of them hobos and wobblies—reds and anarchists and such—floatin’ round the country, and they’re sure to be in on it, too. I reckon any of them would cut a throat or

down a man for two bits in lead money. Then there's the kind of women that follows a rush—the kind you wouldn't want to be seen with even—and the men might allow you was the same kind if you come rackin' in among 'em."

Solange listened thoughtfully and even smiled bleakly.

"These men would kill, you say, for money?"

"For money, marbles or chalk," said Sucatash. He was about to embellish this when she nodded with satisfaction.

"That is good," she said. "And, if not for money, for a woman—one of that kind of woman—they would shoot a man?"

Sucatash blanched. "What are you drivin' at, ma'am?"

"They will kill for me, for money—or if that is not enough—for a woman; such a woman as I am. Will they not, Monsieur Sucatash?"

"Kill who?"

He knew the answer, though, before she spoke: "Louisiana!"

Shocked, he ventured a feeble remonstrance.

"He's your husband, ma'am!"

But this drove her to a wild outburst in startling contrast to her former quiescence.

"My husband! Yes, my husband who has defiled me as no other on earth could have soiled and degraded me! My husband! Oh, he shall be killed if I must sell myself body and soul to the man who shoots him down!"

Then she whirled on him.

"Monsieur Sucatash! You have said to me that you liked me. Maybe indeed, you have loved me a little! Well, if you will kill that man for me—you may have me!"

Sucatash groaned, staring at her as though fascinated. She threw back her head, turning to him, her face upraised. The sweetly curved lips were half parted, showing little white teeth. On the satin cheeks a spot of pink showed. The lids were drooping over the deep eyes, veiling them, hiding all but a hint of the mystery and beauty behind them.

"Am I not worth a man's life?" she murmured.

“You’re worth a dozen murders and any number of other crimes,” said Sucatash gruffly. He turned his head away. “But you got me wrong. If he was what you think, I’d smoke him up in a minute and you’d not owe me a thing. But, ma’am, I know better’n you do how you really feel. You think you want him killed—but you don’t.”

Solange abruptly straightened round and rode ahead without another word. Morosely, Sucatash followed.

They came into the cañon at last and turned downward toward the spot where camp had been pitched that day, which seemed so long ago, and yet was not yet a week in the past. Snow was falling, clouding the air with a baffling mist, but they could see, dotted everywhere along the sides of the cañon, the flickering fires where the miners had camped on their claims. Around them came the muffled voices of men, free with profanity. Here and there the shadow of a tent loomed up, or a more solid bulk spoke of roughly built shacks of logs and canvas. Faint laughter and, once or twice, the sound of loud quarreling was heard. It all seemed weirdly unreal and remote as though they rode through an alien, fourth dimensional world with which they had no connection. The snow crunched softly under the feet of the horses.

But as they progressed, the houses or shacks grew thicker until it appeared that they were traversing the rough semblance of a street. Mud sloshed under the hoofs of the horses instead of snow, and a black ribbon of it stretched ahead of them. Mistily on the sides loomed dimly lighted canvas walls or dark hulks of logs. The sound of voices was more frequent and insistent down here, though most of it seemed to come from some place ahead.

In the hope that she would push on through the camp Sucatash followed the girl. They came at last to a long, dim bulk, glowing with light from a height of about six feet and black below that level. From this place surged a raucous din of voices, cursing, singing and quarreling. A squeaky fiddle and a mandolin uttered dimly heard notes which were tossed about in the greater turmoil. Stamping feet made a continuous sound, curiously muffled.

“What is this?” said Solange, drawing rein before the place.

“Ma’am, you better come along,” replied Sucatash. “I reckon the bootleggers and gamblers have run in a load of poison and started a honkatonk. If that’s it, this here dive is sure no place for peaceable folks like us at this time o’ night.”

“But it is here that these desperate men who will kill may be found, is it not?” Solange asked.

“You can sure find ’em as bad as you want ’em, in there. But you can’t go in there, ma’am! My God! That place is *hell!*”

“Then it is the place for me,” said Solange. She swung down from her horse and walked calmly to the dimly outlined canvas door, swung it back and stepped inside.

CHAPTER XXII

VENGEANCE!

The place, seen from within, was a smoky inferno, lighted precariously by oil lanterns hung from the poles that supported a canvas roof and sides. Rows of grommets and snap hasps indicated that pack tarpaulins had been largely used in the construction. To a height of about five feet the walls were of hastily hewn slabs, logs in the rough, pieces of packing cases, joined or laid haphazard, with chinks and gaps through which the wind blew, making rivulets of chill in a stifling atmosphere of smoke, reeking alcohol, sweat and oil fumes. The building was a rough rectangle about twenty feet by fifty. At one end boards laid across barrels formed a semblance of a counter, behind which two burly men in red undershirts dispensed liquor.

Pieces of packing cases nailed to lengths of logs made crazy tables scattered here and there. Shorter logs upended formed the chairs. There was no floor. Sand had been thrown on the ground after the snow had been shoveled off, but the scuffling feet had beaten and trampled it into the sodden surface and had hashed it into mud.

Ankle-deep in the reeking slush stood thirty or forty men, clad mostly in laced boots, corduroys or overalls, canvas or Mackinaw jackets; woolen-shirted, slouch-hatted. Rough of face and figure, they stood before the bar or lounged at the few tables, talking in groups, or shouting and carousing joyously. There was a faro layout on one of the tables where a man in a black felt hat, smoking a cigar, dealt from the box, while a wrinkle-faced man with a mouth like a slit cut in parchment sat beside him on a high log, as lookout. Half a dozen men played silently.

Perhaps half of those present milled promiscuously among the groups, hail-fellow-well-met, drunk, blasphemous, and loud. These shouted, sang and cursed with vivid impartiality. The other half, keener-eyed, stern of face, capable, drew together in small groups of two or three or four, talking more quietly and

ignoring all others except as they kept a general alert watch on what was going on. These were the old-timers, experienced men, who trusted no strangers and had no mind to allow indiscreet familiarities from the more reckless and ignorant.

When the door opened to admit Solange, straight and slim in her plain leather tunic and breeches, stained dark with melted snow, the drunken musicians perched on upended logs were the first to see her. They stopped their playing and stared, and slowly a grin came upon one of them.

“Oh, mamma! Look who’s here!” he shouted.

Half a hundred pairs of eyes swung toward the door and silence fell upon the place. Stepping heedlessly into the ankle-deep muck, Solange walked forward. Her flat-brimmed hat was pulled low over her face and the silk bandanna hid her hair. Behind her Sucatash walked uncertainly, glaring from side to side at the gaping men.

The groups that kept to themselves cast appraising eyes on the cow-puncher and then turned them away. They pointedly returned to their own affairs as though to say that, however strange, the advent of this girl accompanied by the lean rider, was none of their business. Again spoke experience and the wariness born of it.

But the tenderfeet, the drunken roisterers, were of different clay. A chorus of shouts addressed to “Sister” bade her step up and have a drink. A wit, in a falsetto scream, asked if he might have the next dance. Jokes, or what passed in that crew for them, flew thickly, growing more ribald and suggestive as the girl stood, indifferent, and looked about her.

Then Sucatash strode between her and the group near the bar from which most of the noise emanated. He hitched his belt a bit and faced them truculently.

“You-all had better shut up,” he announced in a flat voice. His words brought here and there a derisive echo, but for the most part the mirth died away. The loudest jibbers turned ostentatiously back to the bar and called for more liquor. The few hardy ones who would have carried on their ridicule felt that sympathy had fled from them, and muttered into silence. Yet half of the crew carried weapons hung in plain sight, and others no doubt were armed, although the tools were not visible, while Sucatash apparently had no weapon.

Behind the fervid comradeship and affection, the men were strangers each to the other. None knew whom he could trust; none dared to strike lest the others turn upon him.

At one of the rude tables not far from the entrance, sat three men. They had a bottle of pale and poisonous liquor before them from which they took frequent and deep drinks. They talked loudly, advertising their presence above the quieter groups. One or two men stood at the table, examining a heap of dirty particles of crushed rock spread upon the boards. They would look at it, finger it and then pass on, generally without other comment than a muttered word or two. But the three seated men, one of whom was the gray, weasel-faced Jim Banker, boasted loudly, and profanely calling attention to the “color” and the exceeding richness of the ore. Important, swaggering, and braggart, they assumed the airs of an aristocracy, as of men set apart and elevated by success.

Outside, in the lull occasioned by Solange’s dramatic entrance, noises of the camp could be heard through the flimsy walls. Far down the cañon faint shouts could be heard. Some one was calling to animals of some sort, apparently. A faint voice, muffled by snow, raised a yell.

“H’yar comes the fust dog sled in from the No’th,” he cried. “That’s the sour doughs for yuh! He’s comin’ *right!*”

They could hear the faint snarls and barks of dogs yelping far down the cañon.

Then the noise swelled up again and drowned the alien sounds.

Dimly through the murk Solange saw the evil face of the desert rat, now flushed with drink and greed, and, with a sudden resolution, she turned and walked toward him. He saw her coming and stared, his face growing sallow and his yellow teeth showing. He gave the impression of a cornered rat at the moment.

Then his eyes fell on Sucatash, who followed her, and he half rose from his seat, fumbling for a gun. Sucatash paid no heed to him, not noticing his wild stare nor the slight slaver of saliva that sprang to his lips. His companions were busy showing the ore to curious spectators and were too drunk to heed him.

Slowly Banker subsided into his seat as he saw that neither Solange nor Sucatash apparently had hostile intentions. He tried to twist his seamed features into an ingratiating grin, but the effort was a failure, producing only a grimace.

“W’y, here’s ole French Pete’s gal!” he exclaimed, cordially, though there was a quaver in his voice. “Da’tter of my old friend what diskivered this here mine an’ then lost it. Killed, he was, by a gunman, twenty years gone. Gents, say howdy to the lady!”

His two companions gaped and stared upward at the strange figure. The standing men, awkwardly and with a muttered word or two, backed away from the table,

alert and watchful. Women meant danger in such a community. Under the deep shadow of her hat brim, Solange's eyes smoldered, dim and mysterious.

"You are Monsieur Banker!" she asserted, tonelessly. "You need not be frightened. I have not come to ask you for an accounting—yet. It is for another purpose that I am here."

"Shore! Anything I kin do fer old Pete's gal—all yuh got to do is ask me, honey! Old Jim Banker; that's me! White an' tender an' faithful to a friend, is Jim Banker, ma'am. Set down, now, and have a nip!"

He rose and waved awkwardly to his log. One of the others, with a grin that was almost a leer, also rose and reached for another log at a neighboring table from which a man had risen. All about that end of the shack, the seated or standing men, mostly of the silent and aloof groups, drifted casually aside, leaving the table free.

Solange sat down and Sucatash put out a hand to restrain her.

"Mad'mo'selle!" he remonstrated. "This ain't no place fer yuh! Yuh don't want to hang around here with this old natural! He's plum poisonous, I'm tellin' yuh!"

Solange made an impatient gesture. "Some one quiet him!" she exclaimed. "Am I not my own mistress, then!"

"Yuh better be keerful what yuh call me, young feller," said Banker, belligerently. "Yuh can't rack into this here camp and get insultin' that a way."

"Aw, shut up!" retorted Sucatash, flaming. "Think yuh can bluff me when I'm a-facin' yuh? Yuh damn', cowardly horned toad!"

He half drew back his fist to strike as Banker rose, fumbling at his gun. But one of the other men suddenly struck out, with a fist like a ham, landing beneath the cow-puncher's ear. He went down without a groan, completely knocked out.

The man got up, seized him by the legs, dragged him to the door and threw him into the road outside. Then he came back, laughing loudly, and swaggering as though his feat had been one to be proud of. Solange had shuddered and shrunk for a moment, but almost at once she shook herself as though casting off her repulsion and after that was stonily composed.

On his way to the table the man who had struck Sucatash down, called loudly for another bottle of liquor, and one of the red-shirted men behind the bar left his place to bring it to them.

The burly bruiser sat down beside Solange with every appearance of self-satisfaction. He leered at her as though expecting her to flame at his prowess. But she gave no heed to him.

“Yuh might lift up that hat and let us git a look at yuh,” he said, reaching out as though to tilt the brim. She jerked sharply away from him.

“In good time, monsieur,” she said. “Have patience.”

Then she turned to Banker, who had been eying her with furtive, speculative eyes, cautious and suspicious.

“Monsieur Banker,” she said, “it is true that you have known this man who killed my father—this Louisiana?”

“Me! Shore, I knowed him. A murderin’ gunman he was, ma’am. A bad hombre!”

“And did you recognize him that time he came—when you played that little—joke—upon me?”

Banker turned sallow once more, as though the recollection frightened him.

“I shore did,” he assented fervently. “He plumb give me a start. Thought he was a ghost, that a way, you——”

He leaned forward, grinning, his latent lunacy showing for a moment in his red eyes. Confidentially, he unburdened himself to his companions.

“This lady—you’ll see—she’s a kind o’ witch like. This here feller racks in, me thinkin’ him dead these many years, an’ I misses him clean when I tries to down him. I shore thinks he’s a ha’nt, called up by the lady. Haw, haw!”

His laughter was evil, chuckling and cunning. It was followed by cackling boasts:

“But they all dies—all but old Jim. Louisiana, he dies too, even if I misses him that a way with old Betsy that ain’t missed nary a one fer nigh twenty year.”

Under her hat brim Solange’s eyes gleamed with a fierce light as the bloodthirsty old lunatic sputtered and mouthed. But the other two grinned derisively at each other and leered at the girl.

“Talks like that all the time, miss,” said one. “Them old-timers likes to git off the Deadwood Dick stuff. Me, I’m nothin’ but a p’fessional pug and all the gun fightin’ I ever seen was in little old Chi. But I ain’t a damn’ bit afraid to say I could lick a half dozen of these here hicks that used to have a reputation in these

parts. Fairy tales; that's wot they are!"

He swigged his drink and sucked in his breath with vast self-satisfaction. The other man, of a leaner, quieter, but just as villainous a type, grinned at him.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "I ain't never seen no one could juggle a six-gun like they say these birds could do, but I reckon there's some truth in it. Leastways, there are some that can shoot pretty good."

He, too, leaned back, with an air of self-satisfaction. Banker chuckled again.

"You're both good ones," he said. "This gent can shoot some, ma'am. He comes from Arkansas. But I ain't a-worryin' none about that. Old Jim's luck's still holdin' good. I found this here mine, now, although you wouldn't tell me where it was. Didn't I?"

"I suppose so," said Solange indifferently. "I do not care about the mine, monsieur. It is yours. But there is something that I wish and—I have money _____"

The instant light of greed that answered this announcement convinced her that she had struck the right note. If the mine had been as rich as Golconda these men would have coveted additional money.

"You got money, ma'am?" Banker spoke whiningly.

"Money to pay for your service. You are brave men; men who would help a woman, I feel sure. You, Monsieur Banker, knew my father and would help his daughter—if she paid you."

The irony escaped him.

"I sure would," he answered, eagerly. "What's it you want, ma'am, and what you goin' to pay fer it?"

She spoke quite calmly, almost casually.

"I want you to kill a man," she answered.

The three of them stared at her and then the big bruiser laughed.

"Who d'you want scragged?" he said, derisively.

Solange looked steadily at Banker. "Louisiana!" she answered, clearly. But old Jim turned pale and showed his rat's teeth.

The others merely chuckled and nudged each other.

Solange sensed that two considered her request merely a wild joke while the other was afraid. She slowly drew from her bag the yellow poster that De Launay had sent back to her by Sucatash.

“You would be within the law,” she pleaded, spreading it out before them. As they bent over it, reading it slowly: “See. He is a fugitive with a price on his head. Any one may slay him and collect a reward. It is a good deed to shoot him down.”

“Five hundred dollars looks good,” said the lean man from Arkansas, “but it ain’t hardly enough to set me gunnin’ for a feller I don’t know. Is this a pretty bad actor?”

“Bad?” screamed Banker, suddenly. “Bad! I’ve seen him keep a chip in the air fer two or three seconds shootin’ under it with a six-shooter! I’ve seen him roll a bottle along the ground as if you was a-kickin’ it, shootin’ between it and the ground and never chippin’ the glass. Bad! You ask Snake Murphy if he’s bad. Snake was drunk an’ starts a fuss with him an’ his hand was still on his gun butt an’ the gun in the holster when Louisiana shoots him in the wrist an’ never looks at him while he’s a-doin’ it! Bad! I’ll say he’s bad!”

He was shivering and almost sick in his sudden fright at the idea of facing Louisiana. The others, however, were skeptical and contemptuous.

“Same old Buffalo Bill and Alkali Ike stuff!” said the pugilist sneeringly. “I ain’t afraid of this guy!”

“Well—neither am I,” said the man from Arkansas, complacently. “He ain’t the only one that can shoot, I reckon.”

Banker fairly fawned upon them. “Yes,” he cried. “You-all are good fellers and you ain’t afraid. You’ll down Louisiana if he comes. But he won’t come, I reckon.”

“He *is* coming,” said Solange. “Not many hours ago I heard him say that he was going to ‘jump your claim,’ which he said did not belong to you. And he intimated that there would be a fight and that he would welcome it.”

The three men were startled, looking at one another keenly. Banker licked his lips and was unmistakably frightened more than ever. But in his red eyes the flame of lunacy was slowly mounting.

“If I had old Betsy here——” he muttered.

“He ain’t goin’ to jump this mine,” said the man from Arkansas, grimly. “Me and

Slugger, here, has an interest in that mine. We works it on shares with Jim. If this shootin' sport comes round, we'll know what to do with him."

"Slugger," however, was more practical. "We'll take care of him," he agreed, slapping his side where a pistol hung. "But if there's money in gettin' him, I want to know how much. What'll you pay, ma'am?"

"A—a thousand dollars is all I have," said Solange. "You shall have that, messieurs."

But, somehow, her voice had faltered as though she, now, were frightened at what she had done and regretted it. Some insistent doubt, hitherto buried under her despair and rage, was struggling to the surface. As she watched these sinister scoundrels muttering together and concerting the downfall of the man who was her husband—and perhaps something more, to her—she felt a panic growing in her, an impulse to spring up and rush out, back on the trail to warn De Launay. But she suppressed it, cruelly scourging herself to remembrance of her dead father and her vow of vengeance. She tried to whip the flagging sense of outrage at the trick that the brutal Louisiana had played upon her in allowing her to marry him.

"If he lights around here," she heard Banker cackling, "we'll down him, we will! I'll add a thousand more to what the lady gives. We'll keep a lookout, boys, an' when he shows up, he dies!"

Then his shrill, evil cry arose again and men turned from their pursuits to look at him. The foam stood on his lips, writhen into a snarl over yellow fangs and his red eyes flamed with insanity.

"He'll die! They all dies! Only old Jim don't die. French Pete dies; Panamint dies; that there young Dave dies! But old Jim don't die!"

Solange turned pale as he half rose, leaning on the table with one hand while the other rested on the butt of his six-shooter. A great terror surged over her as she saw what she had let loose on her lover.

Her lover! For the first time she realized that he was her lover and that, despite crime and insult and deadly injury, he could be nothing else. She staggered to her feet, shoving back the brim of her hat, her wonderful eyes showing for the first time as she turned them on these grim wolves who faced her.

"My God!" said the bruiser, in a sudden burst of awe as he was caught by the fathomless depths. The man from Arkansas could not see them so clearly, but he sensed something disturbing and unusual. Banker faced her and tried to tear his

own eyes from her.

Then, as they stood and sat in tableau, the flimsy door to the shack flew open and Louisiana stood on the threshold, holsters sagging on each hip and tied down around his thighs.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO THE VALE OF AVALON

Slowly the sense of something terrible and menacing was borne in on those who grouped themselves at the table. First there came a diminishing of the sounds that filled the place. They died away like a fading wind. Then the chill sweep of air from the door surged across the room, like a great fear congealing the blood. In the sloppy mess underfoot could be heard the sucking, splashing sound of feet moving, as men all about drew back instinctively and rapidly to be out of the way.

Solange felt what had happened rather than saw it. The fearful convulsion of fright, followed by maniac rage that leaped to Banker's face told her as though he had shouted the news. His companions and allies were merely stupefied and startled.

With an impulse to cry out a warning or to rush to him and throw her body between De Launay and these enemies, she suddenly whirled about to face him. She saw him standing in the doorway, the night black behind him except where the light fell on untrodden snow. Dim and shadowy in the open air of the roadway were groups of figures. The yelping and snarling of dogs floated into the place and she could see their wolfish figures between the legs of men and horses.

De Launay stood upright, hands outstretched at the level of his shoulders and resting against the sides of the doorway. He was open to and scornful of attack. His clean features were set sternly and his eyes looked levelly into the reeking interior, straight at Solange and the three men grouped behind her.

"Monsieur de Launay!" she cried. His eyes flickered over her and focused again on the men.

"Louisiana—at your service," he answered, quietly.

In some wild desire to urge him back she choked out words.

“Why—why did you come?”

He did not answer her direct but raised his voice a little, though still without emotion.

“Jim Banker,” he said, “I came for you. There are others out here who have also come for you—but I am holding them back. I want you myself.”

Out of Banker’s foaming lips came a snarling cry.

“Wh-what fer?”

Again the answer was not direct, and this time it was Solange he spoke to, though he did not alter the direction of his gaze.

“Mademoiselle, you are directly in line with these—men. You had better move aside.”

But Solange felt the pressure of a gun muzzle at her back and the snarl was in her ear.

“You don’t move none! Stand where you be, or I’ll take you fust and git him next!”

Nevertheless she would have moved, had not De Launay caught the knowledge of her peril. He spoke again, still calm but with a new, steely note in his voice.

“Stand fast, mademoiselle, then, if they must have you for a shield. But don’t move. Shut your eyes!”

Hardly knowing why, she obeyed, oblivious of the peril to herself but in an agony lest her presence and position increase his danger. De Launay dominated her, and she stood as rigid as a statue, awaiting the cataclysm.

But he was speaking again.

“The wolves dug up the body of Dave MacKay, Banker, and the men outside found it. What you did to Wallace the other day he has recovered sufficiently to tell us. What you tried to do to this young woman I have also told them. Shall I tell her, and the others, who killed French Pete nineteen years ago?”

Again came the whining, shrill snarl from behind Solange.

“You did, you——”

“So you have said before, Jim. But I have the bullet that killed Pete d’Albret. I also have the bullet you shot at me when I came up to save mademoiselle from you a week ago. Those two are of the same caliber, Banker. It’s a caliber that’s

common enough nowadays but wasn't very common in nineteen hundred. Who shot a Savage .303, nineteen years ago, and who shoots that same rifle to-day?"

There was a slow mutter of astonishment rising from the men crowded about the walls and in front of the crude bar. It was a murmur that contained the elements of a threat.

"I give you first shot, Jim," came the half-mocking voice of De Launay beating, half heard, on Solange's ears, where the astounding reversal of her notions was causing her brain almost to reel. Then she heard the whistling scream of Banker, quite lunatic by now, as he lost all sense of fear in his rising madness.

"By heaven, but you don't git me, Louisiana! Nobody gits old Jim. They all die—all but old Jim!"

The shattering concussion of a shot fired within an inch or two of her ear almost stunned her. She felt the powder burning her cheek. Almost against her will her eyes flew open to see the figure in the door jerk and sag a little. Triumphant and horrible came Banker's scream.

"They all die—all but old Jim!"

She was conscious of hasty movements beside her. The two other men, awaking from their stupor and sensing their opportunity as De Launay was hit, were drawing their guns.

"Stand still!" thundered De Launay and she stiffened automatically. His hands had dropped from the doorway and now they seemed to snap upward with incredible speed and in them were two squat and heavy automatics, their grizzly muzzles sweeping like the snap of a whip to a line directly at herself, as it seemed.

Two shots again rocked her with their concussion. They seemed merely echoes of the flaming roars from the big automatics as each of them spoke. A man standing against the wall some feet away from De Launay ducked sharply, with a cry. The shot fired by the Slugger had gone wide, narrowly missing him. A chip flew from the door lintel near De Launay's head. The man from Arkansas was shooting closer.

Solange was conscious that some one beside her had grunted heavily and that some one else was choking distressingly. She could not look around but she heard a heavy slump to her left. To her right something fell more suddenly and sharply, splashing soggily in the muck. Then, once more the powder burned her cheek and the eardrum was numbed under an explosion.

“I got you, Louisiana!” came Banker’s yell. She saw De Launay stagger again and felt that she was about to faint.

“Stand still!” he shouted again. She knew she was sheltering his murderer and that, from behind her, the finishing shot was already being aimed over her shoulder. Yet, although she felt that she must risk her life in order to get out of line and give him a chance, his voice still dominated her and she stiffened.

One of the big pistols swept into line and belched fire and noise at her. She heard the brittle snapping of bone at her ear and something struck her sharply on the collar bone, a snapping blow, as though some hard and heavy object had struck and glanced upward and away. Then the second pistol crashed at her.

Again she heard the sound of something smashing behind her. There was no other sound except the noise of something slipping. That something then slid, splashing, to the floor.

De Launay’s pistols were lowered and he was taking a step into the room. Solange noted that he staggered again, that the deerskin waistcoat was stained, and she tried to find strength to run to him.

She saw, as she moved, the huddled figures at her side where the dead men lay, and she knew that there was another behind her. She heard the slopping of feet in the mud as men closed in from all about her. She heard awe-struck voices commenting on what had happened.

“Plumb center—and only a chunk of his haid showin’ above the gal! If you ask me, that’s shore some shootin’!”

“An each o’ the other two with a shot—jest a left an’ a right!”

“Gets the gun with one barrel an’ the man with the other. Did you-all see it?”

Her feet were refusing to carry her, leaden and weighty as they seemed. Her knees were trembling and her head swimming. Yet she retained consciousness, for, in front of her, De Launay was crumpling forward, and sinking to the muddy shambles in which he stood.

Friendly hands were holding her up and she swept the cobwebs from her brain with her hands, determined that she would conquer her weakness. Somehow she staggered to De Launay’s side and, heedless of the mud, sank to her knees.

“*Mon ami! Mon ami!*” she moaned over him, her hands folding over his lean cheeks, still brown in spite of the pallor that was sweeping them.

A man dropped to his knees beside De Launay and opposite her. She did not heed his swift gesture in ripping back the buckskin vest. Nor did she feel the hand on her shoulder where Sucatash stood behind her. The crowding bystanders were nonexistent to her consciousness as she raised De Launay's head.

Then his eyes fluttered open and met hers; were held by them as though they were drawn down to the depths of her and lost in them. Over his mouth, under the small, military mustache crept a smile.

"Morgan *la fée*!" he whispered.

Solange choked back a sob. She leaned nearer and opened her eyes wider. De Launay's gaze remained lost in the depths of hers. But he saw at last to the bottom of them; saw there unutterable sorrow and love.

"Don't worry, fair lady!" he gasped. "It's been something—to live for—once more! And the mine—you'll not need that—after all!"

His eyes slowly closed but he was not unconscious, for he spoke again.

"It's nothing much. That rat couldn't kill—Louisiana!"

The man who was examining De Launay made an impatient gesture and Sucatash drew her gently away. She rose slowly, bending dumbly over the physician, as he seemed to be.

"Reckon he's right," said this man, grimly, as he bared De Launay's chest. "Huh! These holes aren't a circumstance to what this hombre's had in him before this. Reckon he's had a habit of mixing with cougars or something like that! Here's a knife wound—old."

"A bayonet did that," said Solange.

"Soldier, eh! Well, he's used to bullet holes and it's a good thing. Hand me something to bandage him with, some one. He's lost a heap of blood but there ain't anything he won't get over—that is, if you can get him out of this hole."

The man seemed competent enough, although, abandoning his practice to join the gold rush, he had brought few of the tools of his trade with him. He gathered handkerchiefs and Solange ripped open her flannel shirtwaist and tore the lingerie beneath it to furnish him additional cloth. She had collected herself and, although still shaky, was cool and efficient, her nurse's experience rendering the doctor invaluable aid. Together they soon stanching the bleeding and directed De Launay's removal to a near-by tent where he was laid upon ample bedding.

Then the doctor turned to Solange and Sucatash, who hovered around her like a satellite.

“I’ve done what I can,” he said. “But he’ll not stand much chance if he’s left up here. You’d better risk it and get him down to the Falls if it can be done.”

“But how can we take him?” cried Solange. “Surely it would kill him to ride a horse.”

“No, he can’t,” agreed the doctor. “But there is the dog team that came in to-night. You ought to get him to Wallace’s with that and he can probably stand it.”

Solange turned at once and ran out to seek the driver of the dog team. The dogs lay about in the road but the man was not visible. She hastily burst into the saloon again in the hope of finding him there.

The signs of conflict had been removed and men were once more lined up before the rude bar, discussing the fight in low voices.

They fell silent when Solange entered and most of them took off their hats, although they had all been puzzled to explain her connection with the event and her actions before it had come off.

She paid no attention to them but swept the crowd looking for the newcomer. He saved her the trouble of identifying him by coming forward.

“Ma’am,” he said, with great embarrassment, “I’m Snake Murphy and I was grubstakin’ that ornery coyote that Louisiana just beefed. I come in to-night with that dog team and I reckon that, accordin’ to law, this here claim of Jim’s belongs to me now that he’s dead. But I wants to say that I ain’t robbin’ no women after they come all the way across the ocean to find this here mine and—well—if half of it’ll satisfy you, it’s yours!”

Solange seized him by the arm.

“You are the man with the dogs?” she cried.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Then—you keep the mine—all of it, I do not want it. But you will let us have the dogs that we may take Monsieur de Launay to the hospital? We must have the dogs. The mine—that is yours if you agree!”

Snake Murphy broke into a grin. “Why, ma’am, shore you’re welcome to the dogs. This here Louisiana shot me up once—but damned if I stands fer no one shootin’ him from behind a woman that a way. Come on, and we’ll fix the sled!”

A few minutes later Solange had resumed her watch beside De Launay while, outside, Sucatash and Murphy were busy unloading the sled and getting it ready for the wounded man.

De Launay slept, apparently. Solange sat patiently as the long hours passed. At intervals he muttered in his sleep and she listened. Fragments of his life formed the subject of the words, incoherent and disconnected. She caught references to the terrible years of existence as a légionnaire and later snatches of as terrible scenes of warfare.

Once he spoke more clearly and his words referred to her.

“Morgan *la fée*!—promised to be something interesting—more than that—worth living, perhaps, after all.”

She dropped her hand over his and he clutched it, holding fast. After that he was quiet, sleeping as easily as could be expected.

In the morning the doctor examined him again and said that the trip might be taken. De Launay awoke, somewhat dazed and uncertain but contented, evidently, at finding Solange at his side. He had fever but was doing very well.

Solange gave him broth, and as he sipped it he looked now and then at her. Something seemed to be on his mind. Finally he unburdened himself.

“I was planning to save you the divorce,” he said. “But I probably will get well. It is too bad!”

“Why too bad?” asked Solange, with eyes on broth and spoon.

“After this even a Nevada divorce will mean notoriety for you. And you’ve lost the mine.”

“I have not lost it,” said Solange. “Monsieur Murphy gave me half of it—but I traded it away.”

“Traded it?”

“For a team of dogs to take you out. As for a divorce, Monsieur de Launay, there is a difficulty in the way.”

“A difficulty! What’s that? All you have to do is establish a residence. I’m still an American citizen—at least I never took steps to be naturalized in France. Perhaps that’s why they demoted me. Anyhow, such a marriage of form wouldn’t hold a minute if you want to have it annulled.”

Solange blushed a little.

“But you forget. I cannot blame you for I hardly recalled it myself until recently. I am a Catholic—and divorce is not allowed.”

“But—even a Catholic could get an annulment—under the circumstances, if she wished it.”

“But——” said Solange, and stopped.

“But what?”

“Be quiet, please! If you twist that way you will spill the broth. If I wished—yes, perhaps.”

“Solange!”

“But I—do not wish!”

De Launay lay still a moment, then:

“Solange!”

“Monsieur?”

“*Why* don’t you wish it?”

She stole a glance at him and then turned away. His face was damp and the fever was glittering in his eyes but behind the fever was a great hunger.

“Husbands,” said Solange, “are not plentiful, monsieur.”

He sank back on the bed, sighing a little as though exhausted. Instantly Solange bent over him, frightened.

“Is that all?” she heard him mutter.

Slowly she stooped until her glimmering hair swept around his face and her lips met his.

“*Méchant!*” she breathed, softly. “That is not all. There is also—this!”

Her lips clung to his.

Finally she straightened up and arranged her hair, smiling down at him, her cheeks flushed delicately and her eyes wonderfully soft.

“Morgan *la fée!*” said De Launay. “My witch—my fairy lady!”

Solange kissed him lightly on the forehead and rose.

“We must be getting ready to go,” she said. “It will be a hard trip, I am afraid. But we shall get you down to the town and there is enough money left to keep

you in the hospital until you are well again. And I shall find work until everything is all right again.”

De Launay stared at her. “Hasn’t Sucatash given you that note?”

“But what note?”

He laughed out loud.

“Call him in.”

When the cow-puncher came in he held the note in his hand and held it out to Solange.

“I done forgot this till this minute, ma’am. The boss told me to give it to you to-day—but I reckon it ain’t needed yet.”

“Open it,” said De Launay.

Solange complied and took out the two inclosures. The first she read was the will and her eyes filled at this proof of De Launay’s care for her, although she had no idea that his estate was of value. Then she unfolded the second paper. This she read with growing amazement.

“But,” she cried, and stopped. She looked at him, troubled. “I did not know!” she said, uncertainly.

His hand groped for hers and as she took it, timidly, he drew her closer.

“Why,” he said, “it makes no difference, does it, dear?”

She nodded. “It makes a difference,” she replied. “I am not one that——”

“You are one that traded a mine worth millions that I might have dogs to take me out,” he interrupted. “Now I will buy those dogs from you and for them I will pay the value of a dozen gold mines. If you will kiss me again I will endow you with every oil well on my father’s ancestral acres!”

Solange broke into a laugh and her eyes grew deep and mysterious again as she stooped to him while the embarrassed Sucatash sidled out under the tent flap.

“You will make yourself poor,” she said.

“I couldn’t,” he answered, “so long as Morgan *la fée* is with me in Avalon.”

Sucatash called from outside, plaintively:

“I got the dogs fed and ready, mad’mo’selle—I mean, madame! Reckon we better carry the gen’ral out, now!”

Solange threw back the flap to let him enter again.

“We are ready—for Avalon,” she said.

“Wallace’s ranch, you mean, don’t you?” asked Sucatash.

“Yes—and Avalon also.”

Then, as the stalwart Sucatash gathered the wounded man and lifted him, she took De Launay’s hand and walked out beside him.

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

Obvious spelling and punctuation errors repaired and noted by the use of a dotted underline in the text. Scrolling the mouse over such text will display the change that was made.

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