

alarm was mixed with her anxiety, and it was with difficulty that she refrained from instituting an inquiry.

The day passed without hearing anything of him, and that evening there was a ring at the door bell, and shortly thereafter Robert Hunter was ushered into her presence. He seemed somewhat excited, and almost his first words were:

"Miss Martin, where is Bracebridge?"

"You are wonderfully vehement, Mr. Hunter. My brother's actions are not held under my surveillance, and I certainly know nothing of his whereabouts. He is not at home; that is all I can tell you."

Hunter sprang from his chair and paced up and down the floor once or twice before speaking.

"I have reason to believe," he finally said, in a more composed tone, "that he has fled to the city to avoid the punishment of a crime, the evidence of which I hold in my hands. Poor fool, to think that he could escape, when the most practiced criminals rarely succeed in doing so. The officers of the law and the telegraph will check him the moment I extend my hand. And now, Vida, his fate rests with you."

She met his gaze, that suddenly became fervent, with a haughty stare.

"Pray, sir, do not speak in riddles. Enlighten me as to what Bracebridge has done, and what is expected of me. Then perhaps I may be able to give you an answer; which you evidently expect."

"If you assume that line of action my words will not be many, or very nicely chosen. He has committed forgery. I had a note for a thousand dollars, of which the endorsement was never written by the man whose name it purports to be, and Bracebridge altered this note. Under certain contingencies alone can I interfere with the course of the law. Change the 'no' you once gave me, into a 'yes,' and the note shall be burned in your presence."

Only momentarily did Vida waver. Then came the memory of her brother's warning—the very last words she had heard him utter, and at the same time she caught a glimpse of the fact, that compounding the felony in this way could never save her from a life of shame and self-disgrace—that it would be more apt to bring ultimate relief to do right and dare all. Her answer was no longer delayed.

"No, a thousand times no. Better to break my heart for my brother's faults than sorrow forever over my own disgrace. Do your worst, so that you keep within the limits of the law—but meanwhile, I believe the victim is beyond your reach. And even though he should be adjudged guilty of a crime, I shall believe either that he is innocent, or that he has been made the cat's-paw of yourself—the greater criminal. Be gone! From this hour I know you as you are and cease to recognize you, even as an acquaintance."

He strove to answer her, but she refused to listen to him, and rang the bell for the servant.

"Show this person out and see that he is never again admitted" was her contemptuous order, and then she swept through the door that led to the music parlor, leaving him to make his exit, grinding his teeth with baffled rage.

Well, the threats of Robert Hunter were not altogether idle words. The police were sure enough launched upon his track, the telegraph employed—but all that was apparently useless. Bracebridge Martin had got out into the world, and the world had swallowed him up.

Vida, however disconsolate she may have felt, gave no outward sign. Of the whereabouts of her brother she

knew absolutely nothing, and as yet the papers said nothing of his absence. Once or twice Robert Hunter tried to force himself into her presence, but as often she sternly repelled him. Yet he did at last get the chance for a few words with her, and this time he asked for no favors.

"You slighted my love when it was freely offered; you refused to reason, when reason would have saved one that was dear to you; now you will feel my revenge. I will soon have news of the fugitive; and I will go to the world's end to bring him back myself. Yes, I will bring him back, to his shame and your contempt. A few weeks more and you will see him an inmate of a felon's cell. And then my triumph will but have scarcely begun."

Since her brother had left her, Vida was alone, save for the aunt who had been with the children ever since the death of their parents. This aunt managed the household exceedingly well, but beyond that she was scarcely one to whom Vida could go for comfort or counsel. Practically to this emergency she was all alone. She could not confide to her social friends the story of shame that would have to be revealed before she could ask for advice.

Nevertheless, it seemed that the time was at hand when she must do something, and in default of anything better, she had Robert Hunter shadowed by a private detective—who turned out to be both shrewd and reliable. He asked no questions as to her motives and only required enough of her story to understand what he was expected to do; and very soon he came with a report.

"I think, Miss, that our man has got some information, and is getting ready for a start. If some one is not a deal sharper than I am, he's off for San Francisco next Monday. And the information he has locates your brother somewhere near Poverty Gulch. He is getting the papers ready, and I needn't tell you that he expects to bring him back. You've got three days to take the start of him, and if I can help you any I'll do it."

Vida considered. There was haunting her mind a fear that Bracebridge might fall even lower than Robert Hunter would seek to thrust him. If she had only dreamed that her last words to him were to be those of parting, how differently she would have spoken! and she did not know what to believe. She felt that she must have an interview with him.

There were three days yet, provided she could slip away unnoticed, in which she could get a start on Hunter—and those three days she determined to utilize. That very evening, in company with her aunt and Mr. Howard, the detective agent, she was steaming westward as fast as the Pacific Express could carry her.

Two men were sitting in front of a little cabin, away up the mountain side, above and beyond the mining camp known as Poverty Gulch. It was a lonesome, desolate spot, whither they had drifted not many days before, and the hut was the merest shell, hastily thrown together. But below, a few hundred yards, there was a canyon where, in mining parlance, they had "struck it rich," and from which, while it lasted, they were taking out the shining dust at a rate that satisfied their most ardent desires. This evening they were sitting smoking their pipes by the side of the fire at which they had but lately cooked their supper. They were tired from a hard day's work, and only now and then spoke a word or two for perhaps half an hour. Then the younger and slighter of the two, as he refilled his pipe, loosened his tongue.

"It's strange what luck there is in the world, after all. There's not another man in the next ten thousand that would have taken up with a perfect stranger and a thorough greenhorn like myself. Why, if I hadn't met