

"What is it that holds me here, you would ask? It is a man's question. A woman's soul is 'A harp of a thousand strings,' and however many of those tender, sensitive cords man's merciless hand may rend asunder, there are ever some left that lie beyond his reach, whose quivering, throbbing melodies his ear can never catch. You ask, if it be neither love nor forgiveness, what can it be that holds me here? I can only answer that I think it must be the saddened, undoing melody of the dead past, vibrating along those harp-strings of my soul, that not even his hand could ever touch. Certain it is, that the touch of his living hand, at this moment, could not send one quickened throb along my veins, nor could the pleadings of his tongue move me to one shadow of forgiveness. Oh, friend, if the day ever dawns when man shall cease to soil his soul with the smirch of vice, it will be when woman has ceased to forgive. You look at me as you might at a sphynx, as though I were full of hidden meanings, which you can not fathom. Ah, well, Mr. Blake, you are a man, and therefore must reach in vain for some of the harp-strings. Come, while we talk the sun sinks, and now we shall be late for tea. Come, Martha and Bayard, it is time to go."

I sat down on my humble threshold and watched the little group out of sight, then shook my head and muttered: "'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

For the first time in all these months, I was glad that I had failed to find Roy Mason. I sincerely hoped, for his sake, that I would never find him—never see nor hear of him again in all the days of my life.

Two days later, I was in town making some final preparations for my departure to the mines. It chanced to be stage day, and that proverbially noisy vehicle came rumbling down the stony street of the town, while I stood beside a counter bargaining for a pair of rubber boots. I heard it, but felt no special interest in its advent, beyond the thought that now I would not go home until the mail had been sorted and distributed, as it would be too bad to miss a letter on the very eve of my departure.

About ten minutes later, as I approached the door of the small, frame building, that did duty as post office, Jack Todd, the stage driver, came out of a saloon adjoining and sprang to his seat, ready to start. Jack was a jolly, whole-souled fellow, ranking, intellectually, somewhat above the average stage driver. I was well acquainted with him, and now, as he cracked his whip, he caught sight of me, and, with a sudden halt, called out—

"Why, hello, Blake! You in town? I've just dropped a passenger that you'll be glad to see, I

reckon; at least he seemed in a deuced hurry to see you; he started off up the trail as soon as his feet touched the ground."

"Who?" I gasped, and held my breath for his reply.

"It's that fellow Morris, that used to be—"

I never heard the completion of the sentence, for as that name fell from his lips, I turned and sprang away in the direction of the trail. Two hours before, as I came down the mountain, I had met Edith Mason going up. The thought that now set my head throbbing, and lent wings to my feet, was—

"Great God! If I should fail to overtake him! If he should come upon her suddenly, the shock would kill her!"

"The shock will kill her," I gasped again and again, as I ran. And oh, how I ran! How I leaped and lunged up that steep and rugged trail! How I strained my eyes to catch sight of him ahead, as I rounded every curve and angle!

"Roy! Roy Mason!" I shouted more than once, as I ran, hoping that the sound might catch his ear and cause him to halt ere it was too late. He had not many minutes' start of me, and surely, I thought, I ought to catch him before reaching the cabin. I remembered, with satisfaction, that pedestrianism was not a boasted accomplishment with him; that he used to climb this self-same trail after a leisurely, languid fashion, often sitting down on wayside rocks to light a cigar and enjoy the scenery. Oh, if he would but sit down for a couple of minutes now! But no; crag after crag I rounded, rock after rock I passed by in my breathless race, and strained my eyes in vain for a sight of his familiar form. When I shouted his name, the canyon walls flung back to me the sound of my own voice, and nothing more.

A two-mile run, even on level ground, is a Quixotic undertaking for a man not in training, and the same distance up the ruggedest of mountain pack trails becomes something formidable. How I ever accomplished the feat, I am at a loss to explain. I only know that I seemed to be goaded on at every step by the thought of the awful responsibility resting upon me. If Roy Mason had returned, he had done so in response to my letters or advertisements, I told myself, and as I had given him no hint of the true state of affairs, I, and not he, was the blunderer; and I alone would be to blame, should anything disastrous ensue.

In fancy—a fancy terribly real and life-like—I saw Edith Mason turning from what she believed to be the grave of her husband, and finding herself standing face to face with the supposed occupant of that grave. Even I, with my masculine strength of nerve, shuddered at the thought of a shock so terrible.