FULL MOON

BY MAXWELL STRUTHERS BURT

A Tale of Romance, Adventure and Sudden Death—of a Lover, a Nymph and a Madman.

AT ABOUT 4 o'clock in the afternoon Stuart left the shimmering openness of the river valley he had been following all day, and, fording a little stream that came in from the northwest, took the road that ran, smooth and damp and shadowy, through the undulating pine forest at the base of the mountains. Every now and then the pines thinned out a trifle, and beyond their tipmost feathery spires he caught glimpses, to right and left of him, of the distant snow peaks, piercing white against a blue, cloudless sky. After the brilliant tawny and gray green of the plain, where, above the sagebrush, the heat danced in iridescent waves, this plunge into the coolness of trees was like submersion in sunset waters.

It was very quiet along the road. The faint ruts showed no signs of recent travel. The forest slept in the golden iridescence of the warm day. Occasionally a squirrel chattered, with the sound of a giant grasshopper, and from time to time a hidden stream broke the silence with its remote murmuring. A faint breeze, hardly a breeze, it was so imperceptible, carried the mingled scent of moss and sunburnt grass and rosin and wild flowers.

Stuart pushed his battered sombrero back from his forehead and ran his fingers through his moist blond hair. He cocked one leg over the fork of his saddle, and, holding loosely in his right hand the slack of the rope with which he was leading his two pack horses, proceeded to roll and light a cigarette. "Twelve miles to Placer," he said to himself—"a trail that turns off through the trees to the left. And I left Placer about an hour and a half ago—Placer City!" He smiled at the grandiose name and his recollection of the lopsided store and battered blacksmith shop which were "the city's" only buildings. "Twelve miles! It must be about six miles farther on, then. You come up over a little rise, and then there's a road to the left, towards the lake."

He drew in a deep breath of cigarette smoke and let it curl out from his mouth and nose with somnolent satisfaction. "Jimmie," he said out loud, leaning over and patting the neck of the gray pony he was riding, "you've had a long, hot day, but this is nice, isn't it? And soon we'll be home for the night with Mr. Prendegast—whatever that may mean. Jimmie, do you like to bunk-up with murderers? Well, perhaps he wasn't one. They never were sure, were they? So don't let's believe gossip if we can help it." He brought his hand down with a gentle slap on the pony's withers. "Come on!" he said. "Let's go!" And without removing his leg from the fork he relaxed to the gentle dog trot.

Behind him two pack animals responded to the rope with amiable obedience.

The road ran straight as an arrow until it was lost in the converging columns of the trees. It seemed like some mammoth exclamation mark, accentuating the mystery of this dumb, self-contained world of trees and thicket. Here and there the cathedral-like solemnity gave way for a brief moment to open spaces gay with purple lupin and crimson Indian paint-brush, where small blue butterflies danced in the lengthening rays of the sun. In one of these a yearling moose, black and sinister as the shadow of rain, stared at Stuart with unfriendly curiosity before trotting reluctantly away into the timber. "Good!" said Stuart. "There's nothing like being cordial, is there?"

He was extremely content; he was growing pleasantly hungry, and this was his favorite hour of the day—approaching dusk. He pulled his horse down to a walk and cocked his leg still higher, and reached into the pocket of his shirt for another cigarette. A wide, shining little stream, running over crystal sand and pebbles, lay before him, and he crossed this and came out on the wet road beyond, and then, as is usually the case, particularly where horses are concerned, at this most peaceful of moments, disaster, swift, and grotesque, overtook him.

"Whoa!" he yelled, and threw his right leg back into the stirrup and straightened up in his saddle and wheeled his horse about, at the same time taking a couple of turns with the lead rope about the horn of his saddle. He objurgated his pack string. "Whoa! You damn fools! Whoa! What in thunder—! Well, buck then, damn you! Buck!"

They did. The impeccable stillness of the road was broken by unexpected furious movement and sound; by the clatter of hoofs on the soft ground; by the straining and creaking of pannier and pack-saddle and lash-rope. Black shadows, careering insanely, cut across the misty yellow and aquamarine nimbus of the trees. In the middle of this Stuart, calm except for two spots of color in his sunburned cheeks, reined his horse slightly from side to side to keep taut the rope between him and his incensed burden carriers. In his hazel eyes were astonishment and anger and a certain amused irritation. Once he spoke without lowering his head. "Don't you buck, too, Jimmie!" he admonished the gray, who, every muscle of his round sleek body alert, was playing the game with equine satisfaction. "Steady! and we've got 'em!"

For a few minutes the breathless little drama continued with unabated vigor, and then the movements of the pack horses grew less violent and the pounding of their hoofs less determined, until, finally, they came to a halt as abrupt as the outbreak of their madness. Stuart sighed and relaxed in his saddle and regarded them with accusing sadness. "You hurt my hand!" he said. They stood with bowed heads, their chests heaving, their flanks, beyond the canvas pack covers, white with sweat.

Stuart addressed the flea-bitten mare next to him on the rope. "Minnie," he said severely, "you're a damned old fool! You're 20 years old, if you're a day, and I never saw you buck before in your life. I suppose every rope on both of you is loose by now." Suddenly he paused and his eyelids narrowed. "What in the world was the matter with you, anyway?" he meditated. "Bears?"

He looked up and down the road. In the sober light of the approaching dusk it lay empty and unrevealing, uncannily quiet, it seemed to Stuart, after the multi-emotioned excitement of the last few minutes. Behind him the stream chuckled absent-mindedly, as if remembering a little joke of its own. The rank, sweet evening smell of alder and moss assailed his nostrils. His gaze slowly traveled over the surrounding bushes and open places until it rested on the damp ground beneath his pony's feet; for a moment it halted there, his eyes opening wide, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "Humph!" he said, and, twisting the lead rope about the horn of his saddle, he dismounted and traced with a finger the huge catlike tracks that in places were half obliterated by the imprint of the stampeding horses. "Mountain lion!" he murmured. "About half an hour ago!"

He raised his head and stared at the dejected Minnie. "I don't blame you an awful lot," he assured her. "You've got a better nose than I have, but you've lived long enough to know that mountain lions won't hurt you, haven't you? They're harmless as kittens. Well——" He got to his feet. "I guess this is where we camp. You've shaken those packs up so that it would take me half an hour to throw them. Mr. Prendegast will have to wait until tomorrow for the pleasure of our company. Let's look for good feed, Jimmie."

He gathered up the reins of the gray pony and led the three horses upstream. For a short distance an alder thicket drove him back into the forest, but a hundred yards or so above this disappeared to give way to the clean sward of a plantation of large scattered firs. Here the stream twisted to the right and a shining little meadow, knee deep in grass, with a hill beyond, came down to the water's edge. Stuart felt the tired horses quicken their walk.

At the brink of the stream he halted and with the dexterity of an old hand unslung his panniers and unsaddled and slipped hobbles on the slim ankles of his horses. Around Minnie's neck he fastened a bell. Minnie was popular, and where she went went the other two. It was the work of only a few minutes as well to spread out a "tarp" bed, arrange the few cooking utensils, and unpack the pannier containing the provisions. There remained only the building of a fire and the fetching of a bucket of water from the stream.

When Stuart had completed these preparations he stood up and stretched his arms and looked towards the west. The sun was down behind the mountains, whose snows were now turning blood red, but warmth still remained in the saffron flecked air. From beyond the little hill Stuart thought there came to him the sound of louder water, indicating a fall, and if this were so there should be a deep pool or two, colored by the twilight, cool and swift, enticing to a man whose shirt still clung to him, damp with the exertions of half an hour back. He started off at a trot, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. In the silence his feet, swishing in the grass, made a sound unnaturally loud.

At the top of the hill was a clump of jack pine, and in this concealing thickness Stuart paused and looked down. His surmise had been correct. A few feet below him the stream, pouring over a miniature waterfall, formed a basin of glistening sand with a deep thicket of willows on the farther side. "Heaven!" said Stuart to himself. "Altogether heaven! Some day I'll come back and camp for a month!" And, with the words still lingering in his mind, he suddenly dropped to his knees and with held breath and beating heart stared at the willows opposite. Faint but unmistakable, there had reached him the creak of branches indicating the approach of some living creature. For that moment both man and the object of his interest faded back into the landscape, and the primeval world of forest and encircling mountains stepped back into its own. The little breeze seemed the only animate thing. Then the willows parted and a slim shape stood for an instant on the sand.

Stuart was utterly unprepared. He had been expecting the lithe shadow of a cougar, but this other apparition was altogether more disconcerting. For all that he knew there was no one within 12 miles of him save Prendegast, and Prendegast, he had been told, lived alone. The figure, slim as a willow wand, was indistinct and glimmering, but about the cropped head, golden and curly, all the light of the dusk seemed to concentrate. Confused memories of the Attic training of his university came back to Stuart. This was some fawn wandered from the hills of Greece to those of Wyoming; a fawn bent upon lyric mystery of his own. From the stream came the splash of water and the sudden joyous gurgling of a girl's voice. Stuart turned and fled on noiseless feet.

He bent over his small fire and soberly cooked bacon. He was overwhelmed with curiosity and extremely lonely, with a loneliness foreign to his self-contained and wandering young life. Dusk had grown perceptible, making faint and shadowy the mountains and all but the nearest trees. From the right came the gentle cropping of his horses and the tinkle of Minnie's bell. Stuart felt himself suffused with an impression infinitely delicate and tender; something white and appealing as spring. He raised his head and saw a dim shape standing at the edge of the clearing, irresolute, it seemed to him, between flight and approach. His mood became more certain and intimate. There was a growing inevitableness about this incident. "Come in!" he called quietly. He realized that there was need of his most reassuring voice, of his most disarming manner. He bent once more over the bacon.

When he looked up the girl was standing by the fire, her hands thrust deep in the pockets of her brown riding breeches, her head, above the white shirt open at the neck thrown back in the attitude of a shy, half-suspicious fawn. Her brown eyes alone were friendly and inquisitive.

"Well?" said Stuart.

She drew back a little. "Well?" she said.

He lit a match and strode over to a pile of sacking in one corner. Lying upon it, watching him with wide eyes, her mouth gagged with a silk handkerchief and her feet and hands tied, was the girl.

"Have you had supper?"

"No."

"Sit down, then."

He poured out a cup of coffee. "Cream? Here's the can. Sugar? Wait a minute—I'll put my mackinaw under you. The ground is damp."

He went on with his preparations, from under lowered eyelids watching her where she sat cross-legged. He was puzzled. This was no native girl; gesture and figure were too dainty; young arms, below sleeves rolled to the elbows, too white and finely textured. Her hair, moreover, had been cropped by a hand appreciative of eastern fashion. Yet, for a stranger to this wilderness, she was remarkably self-assured and calm.

"Where are you camped?" he asked.

She smiled faintly. He wished she would do it again; the lovellest little wrinkles came at the end of her long eyes. "Just a short distance away," she answered, casually.

"You're out for the summer?"

"Yes."

She seemed to find all this quietly amusing. He wondered why.

"What are you?" she asked. "A cowboy?"

"No," said Stuart. "For the time being I am a forest ranger, and, when I have time, I'm a writer. Where do you come from, anyway?"

She pursed her lips. "I've always heard that was bad manners in the west," she said. She sat up straight and caught her knees between her hands. "Since you really want to know," she continued with shy audacity, "I'll tell you all. I am 19 and my first name is Margaret, and I was brought up in Chicago."

"Thanks!" said Stuart. "That's a lot, isn't it? Here's your bacon and your potatoes and bread. My name is John, and I'm 29."

She took the proffered food demurely. "Thank you, John!" she said.

They ate in silence, the blue dusk deepening about them. When the meal was over Stuart rolled a cigarette. He looked across the fire. "Would you like one, too?" he asked.

"Please!" she held out a hand.

"I take it," said Stuart, "that you were educated at a fashionable school?"

She chuckled. "I was." She lit the cigarette with adroitness. "It seems to me," she continued, thoughtfully, blowing out smoke, "that you yourself talk rather oddly for a forest ranger."

Stuart grinned. "Since you've been so illuminating about your own past," he answered, "I'll confess to you that I am a graduate of Princeton and that my original home was New York."

"And you live out here all the time?"

"Most of the time—for the past eight years. I was in the army a while. Why——?" He waved his hand toward the forest. "Do you think it a foolish thing to do?"

She became suddenly grave, turning her head toward the distant mountains, black silhouettes against a sky fast losing all color. "O no!" she said, with a catch in her voice, "it is lovely beyond all imagining. I think it is the very most worth-while thing to do in the world.

"Thanks!" Stuart looked up with sympathetic eyes. "I didn't make it, but I love it all the same." He watched her for a moment of silence; when he spoke it was with unexpected earnestness. "Would you mind telling me seriously who you are?" he asked.

She turned toward him swiftly, as if her reverie had been unpleasantly disturbed. Then she jumped to her feet, patting her breeches as if they were a skirt. O no!" she said lightly. "O no! You should never carry a meeting like this any further. I must be going."

"Just like this?"

"Just like this!"

How slim and appealing she was, with the dusk all about her and the glow of the fire shining up into her eyes and up her hair! Like a young aspen tree touched by moonlight!

Stuart stammered. "But look here! There's—I saw a mountain lion track back here just a little way. Can't I take you to where you are going?"

She smiled. "Are you still afraid of mountain lions after living in Wyoming eight years? Good night!"

"Good night!" he answered, helplessly.

Something that had never before happened to Stuart happened at that moment; a curious, panic-stricken longing that ran through his veins and contracted his throat and made him feel at one and the same time acutely self-pitying and astonishingly elate; a giddy, agonized joy. With eyes apparently steady, he watched the girl turn and walk slowly into the darkness, but when she was half way across the clearing he called. She waited irresolutely. He hurried over to her and looked down at her. He noticed that the smile on her lips hovered uncertainly and changed to a twisted, apprehensive line, and this made him angry.

"Don't be foolish!" he said hastily, gruffly. "What do you think I am?"

"I don't know," she murmured.

"I do!" He spoke with the precise calmness of fear. "I only wanted to tell you this." His words tumbled over one another. "Somehow, somewhere, I'll find you, and when I do it will be for good—you'll not leave me again. You understand?"

It was with difficulty that he kept his hands from her slender shoulders; in their white clinging shirt there was about them both friendliness and provocation, a mixture of boy and woman. He felt foolishly sorry for those shoulders! For a moment she met his eyes, her own widening, then she sighed and lowered her head, and walked away, her shadow merging into the shadow of the forest. As for Stuart, he went back to the fire.

A great moon came up over the mountains to the east. The world was frosted with silver; grew ethereal. Time hung suspended in an argent disc. Stuart smoked innumerable pipes. Wyoming was small when it came to finding people. He would find this girl tomorrow. His head drooped forward on his knees. How white the moon was! How white girls were! He had made a fool of himself! No, he hadn't! The bell around Minnie's neck tinkled like the swaying of the calyx of a columbine made audible.

Before he came to Prendegast and the ranch on the lake there was dawn, and breakfast, with the smell of bacon and coffee, sweet upon the new air, and some trouble in catching Minnie, who had a feminine distaste for leaving pleasant surroundings, but by 10 o'clock the next morning Stuart had got started, and an hour later—three miles or so from his meadow—he found the trail which his friend Nevill had told him led to Prendegast's. It was more than a trail; it was a twisted road that within a few feet lost itself in the pines. On its brown surface there were so signs of travel except a pony track perhaps a week old. Except for this, it was given over entirely to drowsy silence and alternate pools of sunshine and shadow.

"You'll find nothing there," Nevill had said, "but scenery—and Prendegast. It isn't a ranch, it's a view. Prendegast scorns farming. He lives on what is sent him from the east. His only helper is a Victor talking machine. As a writer you'll be repaid."

Stuart began to think that he would be before the trail, or road, had led him very far along its dim way. The bottom of a small wooden box, nailed to a tree, attracted his attention. He stopped his horse and stood up in his stirrups to read the inscription. Written in pencil, in a straggling hand, were the following words:

"To all you who come this way! Attention! If you love God's creatures, and intend them no harm, welcome! Otherwise, stay out!

Signed:

"RICHARD PRENDEGAST."

Stuart grinned. His sense of drama was quickened.

At the end of possibly a mile the road dipped sharply and came up over a rounded knoll, beyond which was a straggling house of logs. Stuart halted and surveyed the scene with eyes that widened with delight. From the ranch house the ground fell away in a green rolling meadow, studded with great, park-like firs, to the shores of a lake that looked to be at least three miles across. How long it was it was impossible to guess, as to north and south it lost itself behind pine-covered islands. A light breeze was stirring, rippling the grass and wild flowers of the meadow and turning to a broken mirror of innumerable refractions the shining water. On the opposite, distant shore snow mountains, serried and dazzling, raised their peaks.

Stuart was so engrossed with the unspeakable beauty of this panorama that it was not until several seconds later that he became fully aware of the figure in the foreground; a man sitting on the porch of the ranch house, reading a newspaper, his legs encased in riding breeches and puttees, cocked up on the railing before him. Apparently he was totally unaware of Stuart's approach. Stuart rode a few feet further and dismounted, throwing his lead rope to the ground so that the pack horses could reach the luxuriant grass. He walked up to the porch and crossed to the man's side, his spurs and high-heeled boots ringing and clattering on the boards. Over the man's soulder he caught sight of the heading of the paper he was reading—it was a New York Sun, six weeks old. Without turning his head the man spoke.

"Tie your horses up!" he said sharply, but with no particular interest. "I have trouble in keeping this place decent as it is." The accents were those of culture.

The remark was so unexpected, so preposterous, the stolid inattention so uncanny, that Stuart's carefully prepared introduction stumbled on his lips.

"Hurry up!" said the man.

Behind them, another voice, calm and hoarse, spoke. "Yes! Yes!" it said judiciously. "Get to hell out of here!"

Stuart, his face flaming with anger, wheeled. The situation was passing the bounds of acceptance. His irritation dissolved into laughter. From a cage set beneath the eaves of the porch a magpie looked down at him with head on one side and beady eyes alert and inquisitive.

"That's Billy," explained the man in the chair. "I have taught him what I find is a useful phrase."

"Thanks!" said Stuart, curtly. "I'll be off."

The man sprang from his chair. "O don't do that!" he begged in tones of genuine concern. "I haven't talked to a civilized member of my own sex for months. O, don't do that! You misunderstand me. At first I thought from your clothes that you were a cowboy. I have my reasons for—I'm not particularly fond of the native westerner. I'll put your horses up for you in the barn."

He was an exceedingly tall man, topping Stuart's six feet by at least two inches; tall and thin; but his thinness was steel-like and well muscled. From a brown flannel shirt, open down to the second button, arose a powerful sunburned neck. Above this, a sharp auburn beard, streaked with gray, ran up to cheeks weather-beaten and slightly sunken. It was the eyes, however, that particularly arrested Stuart's attention. There was something about them, he decided, that made them the most uncomfortable eyes he had ever seen. Just what this was he could not be sure; possibly a cold, almost cruel indifference, but more likely, he thought, a sly, immense egotism, such as he had seen before in the eyes of elderly, lonely men, but never to such an extent.

"Very well!" he said, mollified. "Let's be going, then!"

They led the horses out to a barn beyond the house. From a box stall, roughly made, a coal black filly raised her head and whinnied. Prendegast's gray eyes lost their opaqueness and shone with unexpected tenderness. "That's Flossie!" he said. "I broke her this year." He took the satiny neck between his arms and whispered in the filly's ears. Stuart with difficulty began to relate what he heard to what he was seeing. At all events Prendegast, whatever he was and whatever he had done, was displaying an unexpected angle of character. His quick sympathies found themselves ready to enlist on the side of this lonely and, so he was beginning to think, much misunderstood man.

Prendegast let go of the filly's neck. "I'm fond of animals," he said. "Would you like to see my menagerie?"

He guided Stuart to the back of the house, where there was an open space of grass, before, a hundred feet away, one came to the serried pines of the forest. Along the log wall were arranged half a dozen large packing boxes, and near these extemporized shelters, in various attitudes of sleep or a searching for food, was a curious assortment of creatures; a badger, a weasel, a deliberate and charming skunk, two wild geese, and a raven. They sprang to attention at Prendegast's arrival and watched him with eager and understanding eyes. The geese, in single file, fell in behind him with ridiculous waddling, military precision.

"You mean," said Stuart," that they never hurt each other?"

Prendegast spoke with such simplicity of conviction that his words did not sound absurd. "Never!" he said. "If they did they would know what to expect."

He approached the furthest box, the door of which was closed, and, lifting a trap, thrust in his hand. "This is my latest friend," he said. "I found him yesterday with a broken wing. I've set it." A wounded hawk, fierce eyed, the epitome of the wilderness, came out on his wrist. "Gentle, old man!" he warned. "Gentle! Feeling better?" The hawk twisted his neck about as if coquettishly pleased and climbed to Prendegast's shoulder. Prendegast reached up and stroked the brown body.

"In a single day!" breathed Stuart.

Prendegast looked at the sky and spoke as if to himself.

"There is nothing," he said softly. "I cannot bend to my will." His gaze returned to Stuart. "You have yet to see the prize of my collection," he added. Into his eyes had crept a look of sly, immense egotism—this time Stuart was not in doubt.

They went by the back door into the house. Stuart's morning had been one of surprises, but he was still unsatiated enough to mark with what comfort and spare charm the long hall was furnished, and the two rooms opening off it, and to listen, as well, with astonishment to Prendegast's sudden burst of conversation. Prendegast had forgotten, it seems, his animals and his power over them, and had completely laid aside suspicion concerning his visitor. He became, out of nothing, talkative and charming. It was almost as if he wished to conjure Stuart as he had his hawk and his badger and the magpie. "Here are some sketches," he said opening a drawer. "I paint," he announced ingenuously. Stuart was finding it difficult to keep in touch with reality. He wondered if it wasn't better to forget reality and to accept wholeheartedly the curious world in which apparently his host lived—madman, creature of the woods, or, perhaps, only lost, inarticulate artist.

For the half hour that followed, and all during the excellent lunch of eggs and milk and hot bread, which Prendegast prepared with adroitness, the talk was of painting and music; of prima donna and exhibition; a conversation in which Stuart felt himself to be at a disadvantage. "Of course," said Prendegast, "I never get a chance nowadays to hear anything in person, but, barring that, the phonograph is an immense comfort." He closed his eyes. "Music," he added, grandiloquently, "is the food of splendid thought. The world drops away——"

He opened his eyes and spoke in the manner of tired royalty. "I always sleep on hot days," he said. "Make yourself at home. I am asking you," he continued, "to spend the night. If I like you I will ask you to stay longer. But I never ask a stranger to stay more than one night to begin with." He arose from the table. Stuart felt himself dismissed. He was not sorry; he wanted time to correlate the fantastic experiences of the last few hours; moreover, in his mind was a vague determination to set out in search of the girl of the night before. He had already lost many hours. He realized with some chagrin that since he had come to Prendegast's he had thought very little about her.

He accepted his host's peculiar invitation dryly. "Thank you!" he said, and walked through the hall to the porch, inhaling, with the content of a well-fed man, his cigarette. The green meadow slept in the heat of the early afternoon and the lake had become still beneath the overpowering sun of 2 o'clock. The magpie drowsed in his cage. Suddenly he awakened and twisted nervously on his perch. "Yes! Yes!" he shrieked angrily. "Get to hell out of here!" He ruffled his wings. A long shadow fell athwart the porch. Stuart looked up; his hand stole to his waist, and then he remembered that he had left his revolver and cartridge belt in the hall inside. A faint cold breeze seemed to stir the hair at the back of his head. "Don't worry!" said an amused voice behind him. "It's only Jane!" Prendegast was leaning against the door jamb, watching him. A mountain lion leapt noiselessly onto the porch and, passing Stuart with superb indifference, came to Prendegast's outstretched hand "This is the prize of my menagerie," said Prendegast. "I raised her from a kitten. It is easy to tame all things if you have the trick." He was staring at the lake, in his eyes the look of immense, almost splendid, complacency.

Perhaps, of all the amazing episodes of that amazing time, the least surprising to Stuart was the discovery that the girl was Prendegast's daughter. Once or twice during the last 15 hours the possibility of this had occurred to him, for he had heard Prendegast's story—at least the countryside version of it—and he knew that there had been two children, a son and a daughter, and that the latter had been taken east by wealthy relatives to be educated. But he had dismissed the supposition as absurd. What would a girl be doing with this, to speak in the most careful terms, uncertain father?

Prendegast slept in some unknown recess of the ranch house, and at his feet, so Stuart imagined, slept Jane. Stuart was left entirely to himself and the spacious fir-scented afternoon. The magpie slept in his cage. Stuart went back to the barn and saddled Jimmie, and rode at a walk down the winding wagon track to the main road. It seemed to him that Wyoming, a country given to unexpectedness and fantastic drama, was outdoing itself; as if he was some medieval adventurer wandered into a forest of enchanted moods.

The mountain lion was the last bizarre touch to a bizarre day. The road stretched before Stuart, shadowy, mistily swimming in light filtered through branches, like a lane beneath green-gold water; his eyes brooded upon its farthest vistas; coming towards him he saw the girl. She was dressed in the brown riding breeches of the day before, and on her head was a small hat of orange felt. Stuart pulled up his horse, dismounted and walked forward, his sombrero in his hand. About this second meeting was the same inevitableness as there had been about the first. The girl did not see him until he was almost at her side. From her bowed head he imagined that she was deep in thought.

"Good afternoon," he said, casually.

She started and looked, the blood suddenly mounting to her cheeks.

"O!" she said. "So it's you, is it?"

"I told you it would be," he answered, calmly, despite the beating of his heart.

"Where are you staying?"

"With a Mr. Prendegast."

Her brown eyes became troubled. "My father?" she asked. She hastened to cover up her revealing anxiety. "How strange!"

Stuart shook his head; he allowed his surprise at her statement to remain unspoken; after all it was what he had half expected. "No, it isn't," he said; "it isn't strange at all—it was bound to happen."

She clenched her hands at her sides with unexpected fierceness; then she looked up and laughed with a brave effort at lightness. "Don't!" she begged. "Please! We must be very sensible. You will stay here a day or so, and then you will go away, and then it will be all right. Meanwhile we'll enjoy ourselves. We can sit down, and you will tell me all about yourself, and I'll tell you all about me. There isn't much to tell."

There wasn't. She remembered nothing of her earliest years, and the rest had been the ordinary school days of the only child of well-to-do parents, until she discovered that she wasn't their child at all, but had a father, lost in some remote spot, whom she had set out to find. Stuart realized that here was a trembling, hidden realism; a young, twisted, probably agonizing moral attitude, cruel as most young morality is. Her father needed her, but, then, her foster parents had loved her. He did not know what to say. He felt helpless in the face of a fixed idea.

"And you intend to stay here forever?" he asked.

"Of course! What else could I do? He is all alone. I have thought about it so much."

"Let's be getting up to the house," he said grimly.

They walked for a while in silence before he spoke. "I hardly thought I would find you here," he said. "There was no sign of you about the house."

"I spend most of my time in the woods," she answered. "They are new to me, but I am learning to know them."

Prendegast was sitting on the step of the porch, smoking a pipe, Jane curled up beside him. His attitude was one of abstraction. He chose to remain unconscious of Stuart's and the girl's approach until they paused at his feet. Then he looked up and spoke in the disinterested voice he had used when he had first met Stuart. "You know each other already," he said.

Stuart had an inspiration. "Oh, no," he retorted, hastily. "I came upon your daughter in the road."

The clear but tortured idealism that had displayed itself in their recent talk seemed to seize the girl. "We met last night," she interjected, breathlessly.

Prendegast regarded Stuart with a speculative eye. "It's time," he said to the girl, with a certain harshness in his voice, "for you to be getting supper. Sit down, Mr. Stuart."

He stared at the lake for a long while before he spoke. "You know my history?" he asked abruptly.

Stuart felt himself growing cold, but he nodded with all the calmness he could assume. "Yes," he hesitated. "Nevill——"

"Damn Nevill!" said Prendegast. "He knows nothing about it; neither does anyone else. My daughter is a pretty girl, Mr. Stuart; I think perhaps you should hear." He stared again at the lake. "To put it frankly," he concluded, in the same disinterested voice, "my father claimed he was not married to my mother, so Margaret——"

"You mean—" exclaimed Stuart.

"Exactly! Of course he was, but I cannot prove it, so in the eyes of the world it doesn't help me much, does it? Let me continue—it will only take a few minutes of your time. My father, then, abandoned my mother. He was a man of excellent family—probably your grandfather knew him. He came from New York, too—my mother was a seamstress. My father, however, was a gentleman"—there was scorn in the carefully modulated voice—"and he pensioned my mother off handsomely. She was foolish enough to use the money in educating me. Education and a lack of paternity make an uncomfortable combination. I discovered that rather early in my career. Had I been a drinking man I probably would have been by now comfortably dead; as it was, I came west. I worked as a cowpuncher for a while and then as a miner, but I wanted the loneliest country I could find, and so I am here. I have been here 22 years. Each stick and stone of this place is mine, and I have made it what it is. Curiously enough, after I had been here a year I met a girl of my own class who seemed willing to share my solitude, although she knew all about my history. I was still young enough to dream that my luck had turned—I was still young enough to wish, as time went on, for more money. For her sake, you understand—I had enough for myself. I wrote back to a man I had known in college, asking him to join with me in cattle ranching. He accepted and came out here. The climax of the story I think you know—do you?" He paused abruptly and stared at Stuart with narrowed eyes.

Stuart nodded his head hesitatingly.

"At that time," resumed Prendegast, "a snowshoe patrol came past here once a week on skis to Placer all during the winter—usually a sergeant from the cavalry post above here. It was his custom to stop in at my place for the night. On that particular night its was very cold—five feet or so of snow; it was in January—and it was late. He came to my door about 11 o'clock and could not get in, although the cabin, so he said, was a blaze of light and someone was playing the piano. He was a wise soldier and broke in. I was playing the piano—softly—he said wildly—and in the next room was my wife, dying. She had shot herself, but how could I prove it? I did

(Concluded on Page 7.)