



THE
JOYOUS
TROUBLEMAKER
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The Joyous Troublemaker

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CHAPTER I

THE LAST OF THE HOUSE OF CORLISS

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MEN never loitered about their work on Thunder River ranch, the "Queen's Ranch" as it has grown to be known latterly. Booth Stanton, the lean jawed, keen eyed manager of the local Corliss interests, saw to that; it was his business as it was his knack to get out of every man upon his pay rolls all of the efficiency that lay within him. But since last Monday when the message had come to him over the fifty-mile-long telephone wire connecting the ranch headquarters with the railroad town of White Rock, Booth Stanton had outdone himself. Now the activity under his watchful eyes was incessant, would have appeared feverish were it not so invariably prolific of the desired results. From the office in his cabin a hundred paces removed from the big ranch house, employing his desk telephone he kept in intimate touch with everything that went forward, snapping out curt commands in Booth Stanton's crisp way.

Quite like the enchanted palace in the wood the big mountain home that had so long drowsed behind drawn shades and shuttered windows awoke and bestirred itself. Curtains were whisked back, windows and doors flung wide in welcome to streaming sunlight and fresh spring air. The necessary house servants appeared as though they had materialized from the message which had whizzed over telegraph and telephone wires announcing the return of the last of the Corliss blood, and having scarcely glanced about

them, the old ones with curiosity, the new ones with startled eyes, plunged forthwith into an orgy of dusting and cleaning and setting in order. Wagons jolted merrily into White Rock to return creaking and groaning under high heaped piles of trunks and chests and boxes.

Not unlike an old castle the big house whose generous size and cost had won it the countrywide name of the Corliss Folly dominated Thunder River and Thunder River Valley from a position high up on the flank of Thunder Mountain. The approach was by means of a sinuous graded roadway, climbing gradually from the lower lands, a road into which had gone many thousands of the Corliss millions. Upon massive granite foundations rose massive walls, monster timbers with the bark and bits of green-grey moss still clinging to them upon the outer surfaces as it held on in the forests, the whole covering the small tableland save for the gravelled courtyard about which it was builded, a courtyard in which a man might wheel a running six-horse team. Just to the north of the house, set back from a cliff's edge and half hidden in a copse of young pines, was Stanton's cabin.

Getting in touch with the railroad office in White Rock, Stanton learned that the overland limited was on time. By way of thanks for the information he jammed the transmitter back upon its nickelled hook viciously, his eyes resting thoughtfully upon his clock.

"It's nip and tuck if Parker will be there with the car when the train pulls in," he mused. "If he is two seconds late... Well, it's Parker's job, not mine."

His telephone bell jingled. It was Bates, the road boss, saying that he was having trouble with bridge reconstruction across Little Thunder where, according to Bates, the spring washouts had played merry hell.

Booth Stanton cut him short.

"The train gets into White Rock in three quarters of an hour," he said coolly. "Parker's gone in to meet it and he'll burn up the roads on the way back. You know what that means. Bates. Oh, I don't want to hear your tale of woe; think all I've got to do is squat here and listen to a man cuss? Get busy."

In turn he called up the cattle foreman, the horse foreman, the superintendent of the new mine across the ridge some fifteen miles to the eastward, saying alike to each man of them:

"You'll report at the house office at one o'clock. Take a tip from me and come in early."

He went to his door and for a little stood looking out across the green valley stretched below, marking the roaming herds of cattle and horses, noting the men who rode among them or teamed along the winding road or appeared and disappeared as they went about their various duties, duties set them by Booth Stanton in the absence of the last of the Corliss blood who was returning today. Well, it was not unlike some petty kingdom, this Queen's Ranch, and he had ruled it like some petty king since the autmun of last year. His hard eyes brightened to the glorious expanse lying below them, his blood ran pleasantly, tingeing his weathered cheek. He had hired men and fired men, he had helped to make men and break men, he had directed day

after day whatever must be done across many miles of valley and mountain; he, himself, had been in numerous matters a court of last appeal.

But now he knew within his soul that his monthly wage, ample though it was, was less a thing to grip with jealous fingers than something else that had grown dear to him, vastly less desirable than the sense of power that had been his, undisputed. His lungs filled deeply to the sweet mountain air, the muscles at the bases of his jaw hardened, his eyes running whither the road ran toward Boulder Gap were speculative. Now he was to be no longer absolute but rather majesty's prime minister. For a Corliss was returning to assume responsibility, a Corliss whose hand was eager to grasp the reins of affairs, a Corliss whose imperious and arbitrary disposition Stanton knew and recognized as the dynastic inheritance of a long line of vigorous, forcible men and women.

Clear enough as were the reasons why the expected arrival would irritate the man, it was evident that he experienced no unmixed emotions. There was a quick eagerness in the glance which he turned toward the lower valley, there was a springing quality in his step this morning, a tone in his voice which bespoke pleasurable excitation of a sort. His dark face expressed little of what lay in his mind at any time, but today it was easier to read satisfaction than distaste in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

Critically he noted what had been done in the flower gardens, approved and passed on. With a foot upon the first of the broad granite steps leading to the main entrance he

paused, calling to a man whom he had seen through an open window.

"Bradford, come here," he commanded.

Bradford, tall, thin, immaculate, soft footed, came promptly, just the vague hint of a bow in his greeting.

"Good morning, Mr. Stanton," he said in a toneless voice. "It is good to be back, sir."

Stanton looked at him curiously.

"You are lying, Bradford, and we both know it," he returned shortly. "You'd a deal rather be in New York or even San Francisco.... You have everything ready?"

The majordomo, while his arms hung at his sides, lifted two thin white hands, flexing the wrists so that his palms were for an instant horizontal. Stanton's quick eyes that missed so little caught the gesture. It was the Bradford way of expressing annoyance.

"Almost, sir," spoke the man evenly. "I should have arrived at least another day earlier, that is all. But much can be done in the two or three hours still remaining us. Would you like to step in and see what I have done?"

"Later, perhaps. I wouldn't count upon more than two hours and a half, Bradford."

"Thank you. I'm glad to know."

"What have you done with the newspaper men?"

Again Bradford's palms right-angled his pendant arms.

"In the west wing, sir. I have turned over to them the billiard room and the little rest room. Lunch will be served them there."

"Three of them, aren't there?"

"Four. Another came alone after the others. He's the keenest one of the crowd; what he writes up will be worth reading. There he is having his pipe now."

Stanton looked in the direction indicated by Bradford's eyes. From the west exposure of the rambling edifice a winding gravelled path snaked its way between borders of wild laurels, leading to a little rustic pavilion which took advantage of a level space at the top of a slight fall of cliff. Cement posts with heavy chains run through them guarded the outer edge of the tiny plateau, affording an atmosphere of safety which added cosiness to the natural charm of the place. Here, his back turned to the house, lounged the man whom Bradford termed the keenest one of the reporters.

He was a big young man smoking a big black pipe, slow meditative puffs bespeaking a serene enjoyment of the moment. Soft shirt, riding breeches and boots proclaimed the manner of his coming; the others had driven out in an automobile hired in White Rock. He was bareheaded and the sun picked out the hint of dull copper in his hair.

"Steele, his name is," Bradford said by way of rounding out his information. "William Steele. Don't know which paper, but have an idea it's the San Francisco *Chronicle*. If there's nothing more, Mr. Stanton, I'll hurry things along inside."

Booth Stanton nodded absently, his eyes still upon William Steele's broad, loosely coated back. Bradford turned and went again into the house.

"I'll bet publicity was invented in the first place by a Corliss," muttered Stanton. "And it's good business at that."

But if these news makers had waited a day or two I'd have been just as well pleased."

A hearty peal of young laughter issuing from the billiard room drew his eyes thither. Three men, one of them hardly more than a boy, the others veteran news writers, came out upon the broad veranda. Seeing Stanton they came toward him, a little round ruddy man in the lead.

"You're Booth Stanton, aren't you?" he asked pleasantly. Stanton nodded.

"What's the cause of all the excitement?" he asked. "You fellows land on the job as though a big, new story had broken. Why all the haste?"

The ruddy man put out his hand, laughing.

"I'm Tom Arnold. This is Mr. Enright. This, Mr. Dibley. All we know is that our various rags will run a good big story with pictures, and that we're glad of the vacation. Swell view from here, eh?"

"Steele... that fellow out there... isn't one of your crowd?"

A slightly puzzled look crept into Tom Arnold's eyes.

"No," he admitted. "He's not a local man, either. Funny guy. Asked him what sheet he was with and he told me the funniest story I've heard in a year. We've doped it up, though, that he's the New York *Sun* man. High cost of living and all that sort of thing, you know, has stirred a tremendous interest in all kinds of rural production. If he is the *Sun* man he's out here doing a detail of all western ranching."

"What makes you think he's with the *Sun*?"

"I'm the gumshoe," grinned young Enright. "First, we'd heard they were sending out a man. Second, he had a *Sun* in his pocket and had been reading a report on California mining and timber lands."

"Come in, boys," said Stanton, dropping the subject abruptly. "I'm pretty busy this morning, but we'll round up Bradford and get something to drink. Oh, Steele," he called, "join us over a bottle?"

William Steele turned without removing the pipe-stem from between his strong white teeth which shone cleanly as he answered. Across the brief distance separating him from the four men there came with the look of his eyes a sense of ineffable and unruffled good humour. Be he whatever else time and circumstance might prove him, one had but to look into the merry eyes, note the humorous mouth, mark the vigorous carriage of head and shoulders to write him down a man who drank deep of the sheer joy of life.

"No, thanks." The deep toned voice in harmony with the bigness of his bulk was also in tune with the atmosphere he created, richly good-natured. "I'm drinking my fill of the cocktail of the morning. Mix those old cliffs yonder with the white of the river and the green of the valley, put in a dash of the pine in the air, sprinkle with blue sky and sunshine and... Say, old man, it beats champagne to a frazzle. Thanks just the same."

Stanton shrugged and led the way inside. Steele turned again to the prospect about and below him, smoking slowly.

Having for fifteen minutes entertained the representatives of the press after the generously hospitable manner proverbial of the Corliss home, Stanton excused

himself and left them to their own devices. City men, all of them, with a natural and bursting curiosity about ranch activities, it was their pleasure to spend two or three hours looking through their own eyes into those small portions of the big outfit which they could visit in so brief a time. With gentle saddle horses provided at Stanton's orders and a man to accompany them and answer questions, they rode down the winding road to the valley. Steele watched them go and again gave his attention to the wide panorama offered him.

He was still at his lookout, seated finally in a chair he had dragged forward so that he could rest his heels upon the chain strung through the concrete posts, when far down in the valley a big red automobile raced into view. Steele dropped his heels and sat forward. Through the crystal-clear air he saw how the recently sundried dust puffed up under the speeding wheels and was left behind, rising and spreading slowly, how the heavy car bumped and jolted to the ruts and chuck-holes in the road, how the driver bending over the wheel had his work cut out for him as he took bend after bend at full speed. In the tonneau behind him sat the last of the Corliss blood, a heavy motor veil trailing behind her.

A merry twinkle came into Steele's eyes, his lips shaped themselves to a broadening grin.

"By all accounts," he confided in the pipe whose ashes he at last knocked out, "we have the honour of witnessing the return of the Young Queen!"

The red car sped up the valley, was lost to view behind a clump of poplars, reappeared seeming to have achieved

ever greater momentum, swept about a turn in a manner to make the man who watched lift his brows, rumbled across a high arched bridge, and with motor drumming shot up the first stage of the graded roadway, again losing itself as a shoulder of the mountain intervened.

Steele rose to his feet expectantly. Booth Stanton had come out of his cabin and walked swiftly toward the courtyard. Bradford came out of the house and, his whole immaculate being breathing respectful and solicitous servitude, stood at the foot of the granite steps like a queen's musketeer. A bell tinkled somewhere in the house and after it came hurrying footsteps. Two men servants appeared and stood at stiff attention a half dozen paces from Bradford's black coated back. Another bell tinkled and still another.

"The Young Queen!" chuckled Steele.

The red car had appeared, rising to the level of the small tableland, sputtered forward with level road under its spinning wheels, flashed into the open court, accomplished the semicircular half turn and stopped at the steps, avoiding a smash-up by half a dozen inches. Stanton swept off his hat and flung open the tonneau door, his eyes lighting up. Bradford drew a step nearer and stopped, watchful for a sign. The two men servants were like statues ready to be galvanized into action. Steele, watching it all, gave unhidden signs of amused interest.

"Miss Corliss!" cried Booth Stanton warmly, his hand out to the veiled occupant of the car. "It's wonderful to have you back with us."

Steele interestedly awaited her return greetings. His lips twitched as she answered.

"I am always glad to get back."

Her voice was cool, confident and if not actually arrogant at least studiously aloof. She nodded to Stanton, disregarding his hand which, while Stanton flushed, did its duty at the car's door. She seemed to take no note of Bradford or the other servants. A neatly booted foot appeared under her blue travelling suit, she stepped down and ran up the granite blocks to the porch. Here she paused, putting up her hands to her veil.

"Parker was late at the train," she said in the same cool voice. "I can't tolerate that sort of thing you know, Stanton. You will fine him for negligence and if he objects get me another driver in his place."

Steele for the first time saw her face and forgot for the moment to look to Parker or Stanton for the effect of her words. He had heard much of the beauty of this last Corliss, but accepted such reports as he did many others concerning the Queen's Ranch, with a grain of salt. Now, as she was swallowed up by the big double front doors, not only Stanton and Parker and the two men servants stared after her, but William Steele as well. Only Bradford kept his eyes straight ahead until she had gone when, with a gesture to his underlings, he followed her into the house.

"Damn it," snapped Booth Stanton, swinging about upon the chauffeur. "What did you want to be late for? You've started things off in great shape."

"I wasn't late," growled Parker. "Not late enough to count. I got there before the train had finished putting off and

taking on passengers."

"Report at my office in ten minutes," cut in Stanton briefly.

Parker drove off, skirting the house to come to the garage in the rear. Stanton, with a sharp glance directed toward the house that brought him only the vision of Bradford's discreet back, trudged off to his cabin. Steele, his lips pursed for a whistle which never reached even his own ears, remained where he was, his inner eye busy with the pictured memory of the face of Miss Corliss.

He had gone back to his chair, his heels hooked over the chain, when some ten minutes later Bradford came out to him.

"Miss Corliss is having lunch immediately, Mr. Steele," he said from his customarily respectful attitude. "She will be glad of your company."

"The devil you say!" cried Steele.

"And I am to show you to your room, sir... "

"Room?" interrupted Steele, springing to his feet "My dear master of ceremonies, what am I to do with a room?"

"Should you care to prepare for luncheon, sir... "

Steele laughed and clapped Bradford heartily upon the back.

"Just between you and me this is the only suit, including necktie, shirt, socks and boots, I've got in the world. I brushed my teeth after breakfast, combed my hair beforehand, washed my hands not over two or three hours ago. Lead on, kind sir; let us not delay this presentation to royalty."

Closely following the unresponsive Bradford, smiling broadly as he went as though enjoying some rare jest all by himself, he went to meet the mistress of the Corliss millions, the Young Queen of the Queen's Ranch.

CHAPTER II

BILL STEELE AND THE YOUNG QUEEN

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"YOU will forgive me, Mr. Steele," said Miss Corliss graciously, "if I am forced to intermingle business with our luncheon?"

To William Steele, who had noted with some degree of interest the exquisite appointments of the big, high ceilinged rooms through which he had followed Bradford to the tiny luncheon room looking out upon a garden of artificially promoted wild flowers and shrubs, it had seemed that the house was fairly cluttered up with men servants and maid servants. Already it became evident to his long doubting mind that at least some of the tales told about the Queen's Ranch were based upon as solid foundations as the massive house itself. He now turned the battery of a somewhat amused curiosity upon Miss Corliss herself.

"If you will ask what questions you please while we eat," she continued as they sat down, "I'll try to answer them. You see I have been in the East since last fall and the first days at home here are always busy days."

So long had Steele reserved his initial remark to her that Miss Corliss looked up at him with quick question in her glance. She saw that his were very pleasant eyes, well set under good brows, that the mouth was almost, yet not quite, smiling. Had his expression been different she might have thought that this big, loosely clad young fellow in soft

shirt and boots was tongue tied temporarily through embarrassment growing from surroundings unaccustomed.

For his part, William Steele had business with her, a young woman of whom he had heard much, whom until today he had never seen, whom, until this moment, he had not had the opportunity to look upon closely. Before he so much as opened his lips he meant to have his own tentative opinion of his hostess, an opinion which took no stock of hearsay but relied upon what scant evidence was now his at first hand.

She was littler than he had expected, not a tall woman by any means. He was sure that her figure left nothing to be desired. If it had, he was cautiously aware, the soft, dark green gown into which she had changed since her ride, would have taken care of that matter. She knew how to dress; one point immediately and definitely established. That was something. A woman should know how to dress; it is a part of her business.

Her hands... and hands are to be overlooked no more than eyes or mouth... were what he had supposed he would find them. Very soft skinned, very pink-and-white. Like the lily, she toiled not with them nor did she spin. A second point.

Her eyes... he found them her chief charm, and sweepingly and without reserve he had acknowledged her unusual charm when she had lifted her hands to her veil... lay there. Just now, though they regarded him coolly, he saw that they should naturally be very lovely eyes, soft, expressive, a seductive goddess-grey which could haunt a man with their tenderness or coax him to share in their

mirth. He fancied from that moment that there were distinctly two of Miss Corliss, the one God made her, the one she was making herself. Amplifying that impression he hazarded the opinion that God could do a better job here than could Miss Corliss. There was nothing like letting good-enough alone. Her eyes, to conclude with them before his attention travelled elsewhere, she was forcing to appear matter-of-fact, business-like... cool. The thermic adjective on which he had hit at the beginning was the proper one. In it perhaps lay the key to an understanding of that rivalry between the young woman herself and the powers which had made her what she had found herself. That contest was one over the matter of soul-temperature. Steele's opinion... still tentative of course and precarious... was that her destiny at the outset had been one of warmth and sunniness, and that of her own volition she was reconstructing herself into a being who would rather freeze a man than thaw him. He remembered Booth Stanton's obvious discomfiture and chuckled reminiscently.

Miss Corliss was lifting her brows at him. He hastily noted that she was very young though so poised, that her mouth was made to be kissed though she did not suspect the fact, and at last spoke.

"I have discovered," said William Steele pleasantly, "the suspicion of a dimple."

He had wondered if her brows could go still higher. Now he knew that they could. He knew, too, that she could freeze a man quite as he had foreseen that she could. An ordinary man, that is, and fortunately now for his mental balance he was not an ordinary man. Over her head he

caught an amazed stare from Bradford. Had this genial young man drawn a revolver from his pocket and levelled it at his hostess' head it is to be doubted if Bradford would have been more thunderstruck. Miss Corliss herself for the moment was speechless. Steele unfolded his napkin, selected his salad fork and smiled at her equably.

"Mr. Steele," said Miss Corliss icily, "I shall thank you if you will confine your remarks to what business lies between us."

"But, don't you see," cried Steele in vast, untroubled good humour, "that I have touched upon one of the most interesting points in the whole matter! Miss Corliss, last of her name, mistress of many millions, brain of her own big enterprises, heavy stockholder in a vast railroad system, queen of the Queen's Ranch, sole owner of the Little Giant gold mine, and-so-on for half a column, harbours a skeleton in her closet... and it is a dimple! Maybe two of them. That after all, though the public knows her only as a synonym of the power of wealth, she is just a thunderingly pretty girl! Big, soft grey eyes, red lips to tempt and trick and snare a man's soul... "

"Mr. Steele!"

She rose to her feet, her eyes no longer cool but suddenly blazing, the coolness gone out of her cheeks, too, to give place to the hot tide of swift anger.

"This is impertinence! Though you come as a stranger I have been willing to give you a few moments from a busy day supposing that you were as anxious as I to get through the necessary business which brings you here. If you propose merely to be insufferable, to forget that we are not

even acquaintances and will never be more than that, it would be best to end our conversation now."

The words came trippingly, heady with passion.

"Dear me," said Steele, still unruffled. "I had no idea it was a crime to tell a girl she was pretty. We'll brand it *lèse majesté*," and his broadening smile came back with the words. "I'll consider myself properly rebuked and we'll pass on to safer territory. You see, I'm no ladies' man at all. Miss Corliss. Shall we let it go at that and try a fresh beginning?"

She stood looking at him a bit doubtfully, frowning a little, not quite certain how to take him. Finally, the most sensible thing seeming to be to sit down again, she resumed her place.

"I'll be glad, as I told you, to answer any pertinent questions."

"Pertinent is good," laughed Steele. "Well, that's fair at that. No kidding goes, eh? Now we'll begin by getting your name straight. Trixie, isn't it? Trixie Corliss?"

"No," said Miss Corliss emphatically. "It is not. It is Beatrice Corliss."

"How old?" was the next question. Steele's head was a little to one side, he had the air of a man appraising the age of a horse he meant to buy.

"Is that necessary?" asked the girl coldly.

"Essential!" he cried warmly. "What I want is to find the real *you* under the name, Beatrice Corliss; woman of affairs. I'd judge you at twenty-five."

"Twenty-one," said Miss Corliss aloofly. "Next November."

"Um," said Steele thoughtfully, though she was never sure that a grave expression did not mask a grin at her. "It

takes big money interests to put in the fine lines, doesn't it?
Next: How big a proposition have you at hand here?"

"Meaning just what, Mr. Steele?" she asked stiffly.

"The ranch.... By the way, it's called the Queen's Ranch, isn't it?"

"To answer your last question, yes."

"Just of late, I believe? It used to be known as Thunder River Ranch, didn't it?"

"Yes. To both questions."

"And it was to mark your coming that the name changed? Because of your... let me see; how shall I put it pertinently?... of your queenly appearance? Or queenly way of running things? Or both? Just why, Miss Corliss, please?"

The question was put with much grave innocence. Still she had the uneasy impression that he was making fun of her. She had known people to dislike her just as she had known people to fawn and curry favour; it had never entered her experience to have any one, least of all a man, make fun of her. Still she met his eyes steadily and without noticeable hesitation answered.

"I believe I have been called autocratic. It is my own ranch and I do what I please with it."

"I believe you," he agreed pleasantly. "Now the ranch; how many acres?"

"Something over thirty thousand, including mountain and timber lands. My manager, Booth Stanton, can give you such information as this. Even better than I."

"The land alone, then, is valued at close to half a million?"

"I value it at something over that."

"To the tax assessor or the press?"

"To the press," she said steadily, with no flicker of the smile he had fished for.

"Exclusive of the Little Giant mine?"

"Certainly."

"That is on a paying basis?"

"Stanton can give you the figures. It netted me last year something over twenty thousand."

"Whew!" commented Steele. "I wish I had a mine like that."

Here being no question she offered no remark. Bradford, ever watchful, gave a signal with one of his expressive thin hands and a servitor in livery appeared with the next course. For a moment conversation died as Steele ate and pondered. Then,

"You manage all of your own affairs?"

"Yes. I have, of course, capable men under me to take my orders and give expert attention to the various branches of my work. I don't pretend to know anything about mining operations, for instance."

"The queen acknowledges the limitations of humanity," he chuckled. "Well, let's get on. Next question: You have lands along the upper waters of Thunder River?"

"Yes,"

"Near the place that is called Hell's Goblet?"

"Yes."

"At what figure do you hold those lands? They're mostly rock and big timber, aren't they?"

"They are not for sale."

"The world's for sale!" he laughed carelessly. "If the price happens to be big enough. Would you take, say twenty dollars an acre for a section in there? That's big money, you know, for wild, rough land so far from anywhere."

"No. I wouldn't accept twenty dollars. Nor yet fifty. I'm not selling, Mr. Steele."

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Because," she flared out, "I don't want to. And I fail to see the drift of your questions."

"That should be plain enough." Under this second signal of her hot displeasure he was as cheerful as though she were smiling upon him, "You told me to ask what questions I pleased and you would answer them. I have naturally taken advantage of a pleasant situation. From the point of the lands about Hell's Goblet I was going to another pertinent one."

"Let us have it," she said sharply.

"Are you engaged?" asked Steele. "Or even in love?"

Never until now had she met a man like this one. Plainly, for one of those rare occasions in her life, she was uncertain of just what to do or say. Finally, speaking with a marked lack of expression she replied:

"I fail to see why the public should be interested in knowing about so intimate and purely personal a matter."

"Hang the public! I'm not the public. I'm just Bill Steele, and I want to know."

"Then, Mr. Bill Steele, may I answer that it is none of your business?"

"Sure thing. No harm done at all. Next... "

"Next," she interrupted before he could go on, "you will please confine your desire for information to such matters as your paper has instructed you to get."

Steele's laughter startled her, booming out suddenly. A look of sheer wonder came into her eyes; she began to think the man mad.

"Paper!" He choked over the word. "Why bless your soul, my dear girl, I'm no more a newspaper man than you are. 'Fess up, now; can't you remember having heard of Bill Steele? Knew your father for years Bill Steele, mining engineer, gentleman of adverse fortune, lord of an empty pocket and a full heart? Come now; think."

A dead silence fell in the little luncheon room after the merry burst of Steele's laughter. Beatrice Corliss looked at him with a sort of horrified expression of incredulity in her eyes. Her gasp and Bradford's, twin signals of consternation, had been lost in her guest's echoing enjoyment of the situation.

"Bradford told me," she said, her voice at last a trifle uncertain, "that you were representing the *New York Sun*."

"Bradford slipped up," cried Steele in hearty appreciation of the look he surprised just then in Bradford's eyes. "He simply guessed and guessed wrong."

Miss Corliss turned in her chair, her eyes upon Bradford. The major domo's face went a painful scarlet. For once in his life his two hands met in front of him, clasped and lifted in an attitude of prayer.

For the second time in so few moments the girl rose to her feet.

"You have done a very ungentlemanly thing... "

"Betrayed your trust, eh? Played spy and sailed under false colours?" laughed Steele. "Come now, Beatrice Corliss, be a good sport. I have only had my little joke and no harm done."

"Bradford," said Beatrice Corliss with crisp distinctness, "you may serve the remainder of my lunch in the breakfast room. And," the words reminding Steele of little separate bits of tinkling ice, "you may report to me in my office at one o'clock."

Her head lifted very high, with no further glance toward the table from which she turned, she left the room.

"Such a little Queen!" observed Steele dramatically.

Beatrice Corliss' cheeks as she went through the door which Bradford flung open for her were as red as Bradford's own.

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING HELL'S GOBLET AND TWO PROMISES

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ESSENTIALLY an outdoors-man, William Steele's mental attitude toward the class of people whom he grouped and branded as the "soft-handed sort" was pleasantly tinged with amused toleration. Which was natural and, since he himself was no less human than another, to be forgiven him. It was not that he looked down upon these other fellow beings sneeringly or even with conscious condescension; rather was he prone to ridicule them mirthfully and without venom, realizing that they had their privilege as he had his of living life as it pleased them. In his many bouts with fortune there had been too frequent and undisguised defeats for him to nourish any overweening sense of his own superiority. He was just plain man, was Bill Steele, which means that a great deal of the boy lived on in him, joyously and perhaps impudently.

The blood of the outdoors-man, be he man of the plains, mountaineer or one who takes his chances with the sea, is likely to be ruffled by the calm gaze of authority. Too long has he recognized but the one majesty of the natural world, too long has he battled with hard hands at that, to accept any other. Dictatorial mandates irritate, anger or... as in Steele's case... amuse him. Kingly attitudes assumed by his own brother mortals are little enough to his liking. "Here below there is no sovereign but Earth," sums up his

unformulated doctrine of existence, "and against her I wage unceasing and rebellious warfare." So Steele, without asking himself the clear-cut reason, was prepared to laugh at the serene graciousness of Beatrice Corliss, a girl.

A chance situation had tempted him and it was not his jovial way to refuse such invitations. Had he been a different sort of man in this particular he would not have remained, as he put it, "lord of an empty pocket and a full heart." Without premeditation he promptly acted the part of William Steele as the blood of his ancestors and his own life had made him. That his lot had been to incur the blazing anger of Miss Corliss brought him no visible regrets.

"It's good for her soul," was his cheerful way of thinking. "She'd be a corking fine girl if she wasn't so damned queenish."

He finished his meal alone and with hearty appreciation, conscious now and then of a horrified stare from the passing Bradford, filled his pipe and strolled outside. That he did not go by the billiard room for the hat he had left there bespoke his decision not to accept just yet his unwilling hostess' emphatic desire for his departure. He went back to his chair, rested his heels as before upon the chain strung between the concrete posts and with contented eyes gave his attention to the valley lands spread out below him.

Meantime Beatrice Corliss, having given Bradford his opportunity for an explanation which failed somewhat to placate her, sought to shut out of her mind all thought of William Steele and his "boorish rudeness." In the first grip of her anger, before she had had time for the nicer selection of a word, she termed him to herself as just "fresh." It had not

been her lot before to meet a man like him, a man who in his first talk with her should manifest toward her a degree of unpleasant familiarity so marked and so "insufferable." The adventure left no memories she cared to treasure. And yet, through its very novelty, the episode maintained a stubborn place in her thought. Seeking to plan in her former cool, untroubled, clear way for her interviews with her foremen, she found herself asking of a kind fate the joy of someday having in her two hands the opportunity of meting out to Mr. William Steele the punishment he so plainly merited.

She heard Steele go out and a few minutes later, having pushed her dessert aside, she went through the house to the front veranda. Here, set out in the cheer of the sun, was her chair whence, upon occasion, she could look across certain miles of her possessions and dream the dreams which pleased her. Today, however, she did not even seat herself; out yonder, his broad back turned upon her like a further rudeness, was Steele. She whirled and returned to the living room, resurgent annoyance reddening her cheeks.

"Bradford," she instructed her head servant coolly, "Mr. Steele is waiting outside. You will take him his hat and anything else he may have left here. You will tell him that he is free to go as soon as he chooses. If he fails to understand you may add that if he makes it necessary I shall have him put off the ranch."

Bradford bowed and departed, a look of eagerness in his eye, a new elasticity in his walk. Beatrice, without paying Mr. Steele the compliment of watching while he received his hat and her ultimatum, went to her office. Here, in an atmosphere of austere dignity created by massive furniture,