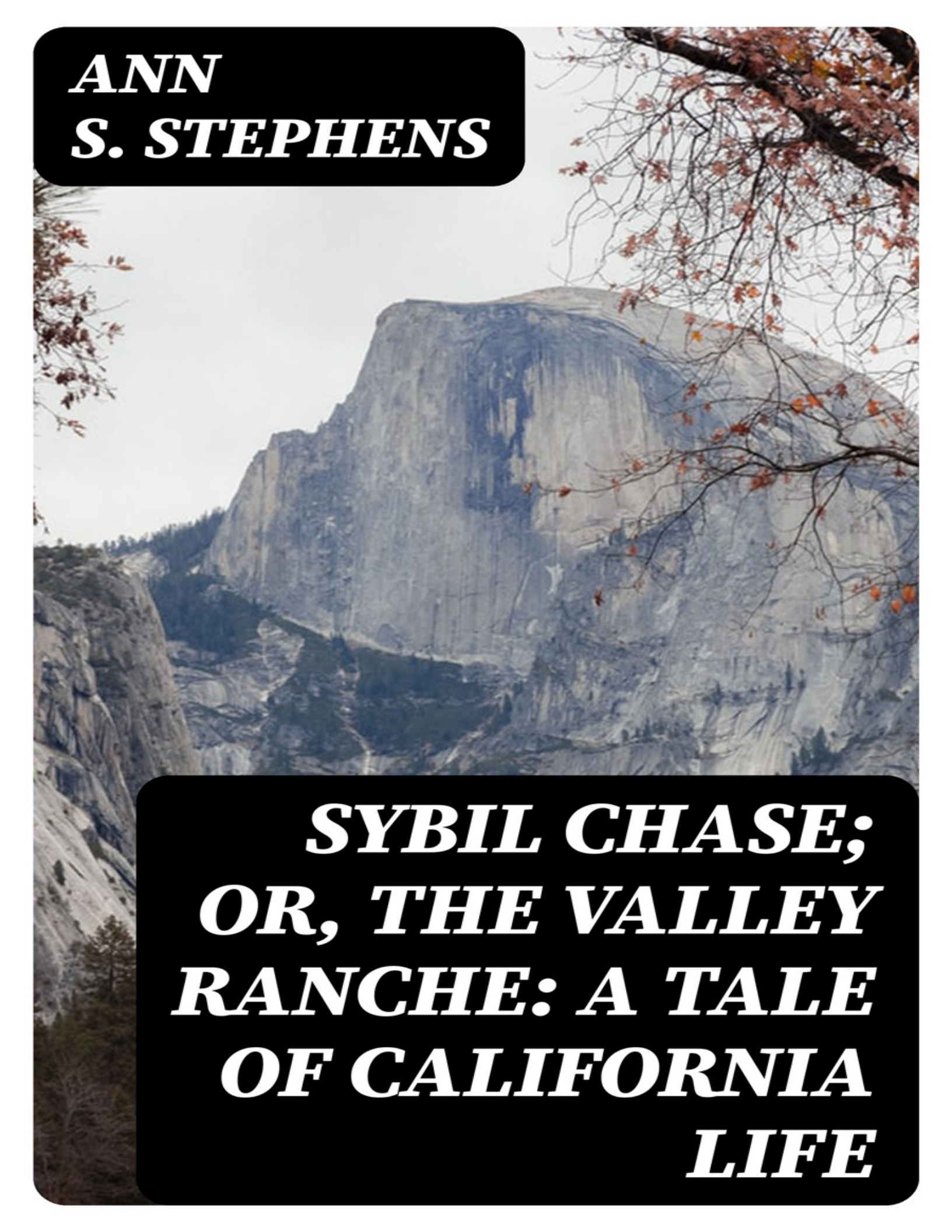
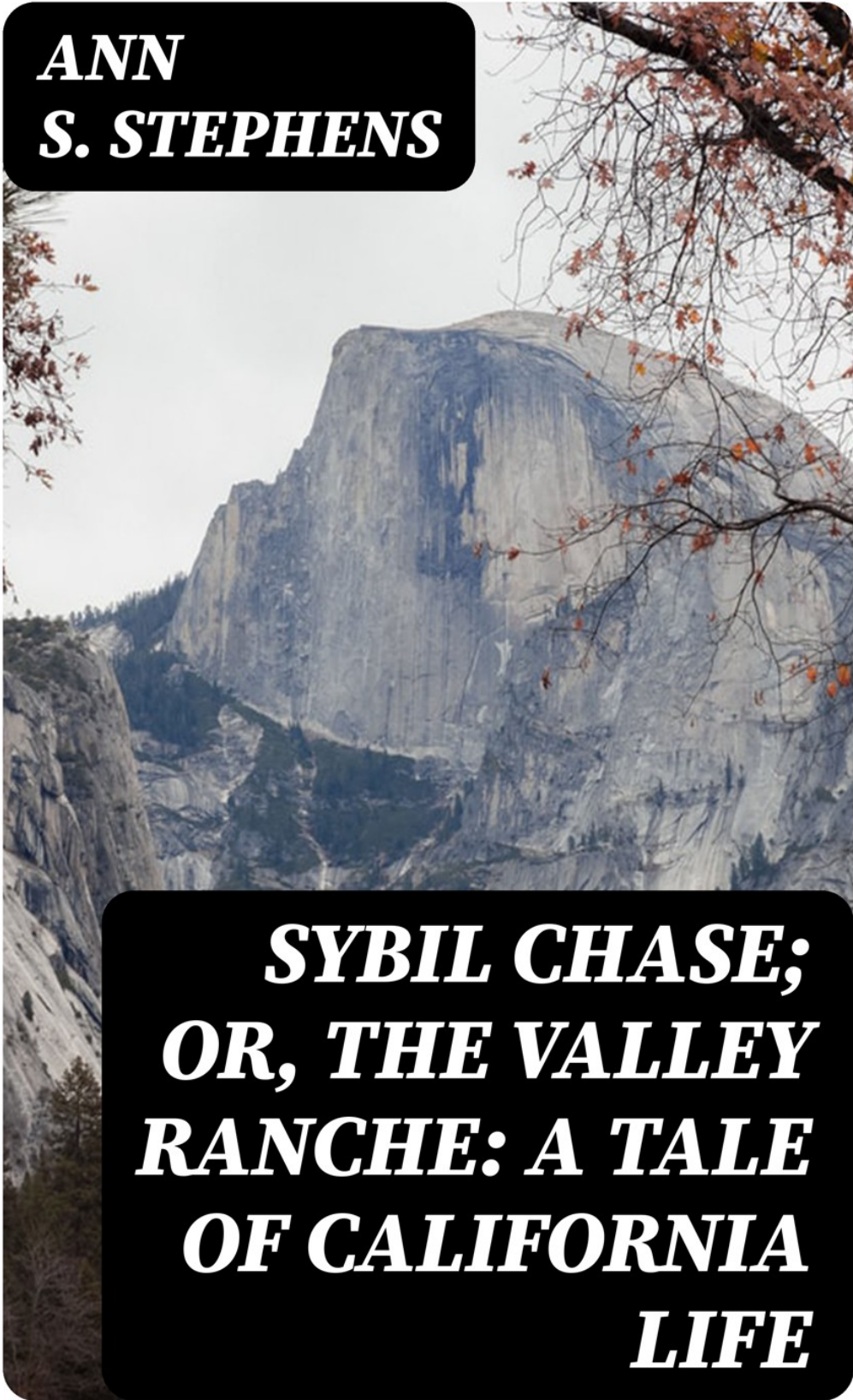




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***SYBIL CHASE;
OR, THE VALLEY
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Sybil Chase; or, The Valley Ranche: A Tale of California Life

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CHAPTER I.

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THE BRIDLE-PATH.

A small valley cutting through a range of mountains in California—a green oasis that looked strange and picturesque in the midst of that savage scenery. The cliffs rose in a solid wall on one side to the height of many hundred feet. Dwarfed fir-trees and dead cedars were scattered along the summit, stretching up their gaunt limbs and adding to the lonely grandeur of the scene. Great masses of broken rocks, which, in some conflict of the elements, had been wrenched from their bed, projected from the rifted precipices and lay in great moss-covered boulders in the lap of the valley. On the southeastern side a break in the heart of the cliffs was covered with thrifty verdure, and, over the rocks that obstructed it, a mountain torrent rushed thundering into the valley, dividing that cradle of verdure in the middle, and abruptly disappearing through another gorge, breaking to the open country somewhat lower down, where it plunged over a second precipice with the sound of distant artillery.

Just above the spot where this mountain stream cut the valley in twain, a collection of huts, tents and rickety frame houses composed one of those new villages that are so often found in a frontier country, and half a mile above stood a small ranche, with its long, low-roofed dwelling half buried in heavy vines that clambered up the rude cedar pillars of the veranda, and crept in leafy masses along the roof. Beyond this, great oaks sheltered the dwelling, and the precipice that loomed behind it was broken with rifts of

verdure, which saved this portion of the valley from the savage aspect of the mountains lower down.

The sunset was streaming over this picturesque spot; great masses of gorgeous clouds, piled up in the west, were casting their glory down the valley, turning the waters to gold, and, flashing against the metallic sides of the mountains, changed them into rifts and ledges of solid gems.

Standing upon the rustic veranda, and looking down over the beautiful valley dotted with tents and picturesque cabins, the waters singing pleasantly, the evening wind fluttering the greenness of the trees, that mountain pass appeared so tranquil and quiet, a stranger could hardly have believed the repose only an occasional thing. In truth, it is the heavenly aspect of the valley that I have given you, and that was truly beautiful.

Only a few miles off, still higher up among the rugged mountains, the "gold diggings" commenced, and from this point, every Saturday night of that beautiful summer, came down crowds of wild, reckless men with their bowie-knives, revolvers, and the gold-dust which soon changed hands either at the liquor-bar, set up in some log-cabin, or the gambling-table, established in an opposite shanty.

Before the gold excitement, that pretty ranche had been the abode of a quiet family, whose cattle were fed on the luxuriant herbage of the valley; but the reckless adventurers that crowded there soon drove the household into less turbulent quarters, and the dwelling changed its occupants many times. Thus its quiet walls soon became accustomed to scenes of strife and dissipation, which destroyed its respectable, home-like appearance entirely; and the place that had originally been a pleasing feature in the valley shared the general aspect of the neighborhood. Still, nature will assert her rights; and, amid the wild riot of the valley,

vines grew luxuriantly as ever, flowers blossomed in the turf, and the water fall sounded loud and clear above the shouts of savage men, however turbulently they might be raised.

By one of the upper windows of this dwelling stood a woman, leaning idly against the rude sill and looking down the sweep of the valley.

Hers was no attitude of expectation; there was no eagerness in the great eyes that wandered slowly from one object to another, nor did the glance betray any enjoyment of the beautiful scene. The woman was evidently lost in deep and melancholy thought; each moment the lines about her mouth deepened, and the cold sadness of the eyes settled into a hard, bitter expression which gave something almost repulsive to the whole face.

She looked very unlike the sort of woman one would have expected to find in that solitary place. She was tall and slender, and her form would have appeared almost fragile had it not been for a certain flexibility and force visible in every line even in that attitude of repose.

She was young still; but from her face it would have been impossible to guess at her real age. At one moment it looked fairly girlish; the next the shadow of some heavy thought swept across it and appeared to accomplish the work of years upon the features.

It was evident that her fate had been very different from that which met most of the women who followed husbands and fortune into the Eldorado of the New World. The hand which lay upon the window-frame was delicate and white; the colorless pallor of the cheek bore no evidence of hardship or exposure.

She was plainly dressed, but her garments were made in a picturesque fashion, and the few ornaments she wore were

heavy and rich. Her long, golden hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead and gathered in shining bands at the back of her head, and made the chief beauty of her person. Only those who have seen the tress of Lucretia Borgia's hair, preserved still in a foreign gallery, can form any idea of the peculiar color which I desire to describe. I was wrong to call it golden; it was too pale for that. In the shadow it had the colorless tint one seldom sees, except in the locks of very young children; but when she moved, so that the sun struck its loose ripples, it flashed out so brightly that it crowned her forehead like a halo.

The sunset deepened, but still the lady remained leaning out of the window and giving herself up to that gloomy meditation, which sometimes seemed to deepen into absolute pain.

Suddenly a new object at the upper end of the valley attracted her attention, and she gazed with more eagerness than she had before manifested.

Leading by the place where the mountain torrent had cleft its way through the rocks, there ran a bridle-path, worn by the miners' feet, from the gold diggings down the valley. It was toward that spot the lady's eyes were directed, as a small cavalcade wound slowly down the rocky path and took the grassy plain which led toward the ranche.

An expression of displeasure disturbed the stillness of the woman's face. She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked eagerly toward the advancing group; but at that distance it was impossible to distinguish more than that it consisted of three men mounted on mules, followed by several persons on foot.

She moved quickly from the window and passed into another room; in a moment she returned, carrying a

spyglass which she directed toward the procession. After the first glance she drew a heavy breath and muttered:

"It is not they! I shall have an hour more to myself, at all events."

She still continued to watch the slowly approaching group, and saw that one of the equestrians was supported in his saddle by two of the guides, while another led the mule by the bridle. The rider had evidently met with some accident on the road.

Slowly the party moved on; they were in recognizable distance from the house; by the aid of her glass, the lady could distinguish the lineaments of each face.

Suddenly she grasped the glass hard in both hands and looked steadily at the injured man. A great change passed over her; she trembled violently and her face grew ashen. Her fingers shook so that she was obliged to support the glass against the window-sill. At length her hands fell to her side and a cry broke from her lips like the angry moan of some wounded animal.

"Oh! I must be mad!" she exclaimed. "This can not be—I fancied it! This is one of my wild dreams!"

With a powerful effort she controlled herself sufficiently to raise the glass once more. Nearer and nearer the group advanced; her eyes were fastened upon it with a look of unutterable fear and agony.

"Laurence!" she exclaimed again; "Laurence in this place! Oh! I shall go mad! They are coming to the house—they mean to spend the night here!" The words broke unconsciously from her lips; all the while her strained gaze was fastened upon the group. "He has been hurt—he has fainted!"

She dropped the glass and started to her full height, striking her forehead violently with her clenched hand, as if searching for some plan or device, which, in her agitation and terror, she could not find.

"Fool!" she muttered, bitterly. "Is this your strength? Does it desert you now?"

She walked hurriedly up and down the room, flinging her arms about, so overcome that any thing like connected thought was impossible.

"He must not see me—I would rather be hurled over the precipice! He must not stay here. Oh! mercy—mercy! if Philip should come home!"

She cast one more feverish glance through the window and hurried out of the room, nerved to action by the near approach of pain and danger. But directly she came back again, looking wild and frightened, like a bird coming back to the branch where it has been wounded. She took up the glass again, steadied it firmly. She was evidently doubtful still if she had seen aright.

CHAPTER II.

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A FACE FROM THE PAST.

The party of strangers were slowly winding their way across the plain, and had arrived within a short distance of the house. The woman gazed on them through her glass till the man supported on his mule became quite visible to the naked eye; she then dropped her hand heavily, and drew a deep breath.

"How white he is! There has been violence. He has fainted. See how his head falls on the guide's shoulder," she murmured, sweeping a hand across her eyes as if some dimness had come over them.

The lady was quite alone in her dwelling. The Indian women who acted as the household servants had gone to the hills in search of berries, and thus she was compelled to descend and open the door, when a summons was made by the party whose approach had given her so much anxiety. At another time, knowing, as she did, the lawless nature of the population around, she would have allowed the besiegers to knock unanswered, and go away at their leisure; but now she descended the stairs, trembling violently as she went. She had thrown a black silk scarf over her head, thus giving her dress a Spanish effect, and, unclosing the door, stood framed in the opening—and a more remarkable picture was never presented in the wilderness of any country. It was not that the woman was so beautiful, in fact, but the color of her hair and the wild anxiety in her eyes gave that to her person which no artist could ever have caught. The guide, who had come in advance of his party, stepped back in amazement as she presented herself, for it was seldom that the people

of the region had obtained a glimpse of her person, and her presence took him by surprise.

The party were now within a few minutes' ride of the ranche, and a weary, travel-soiled band it was. The mules were stained far above their fetlocks with yellow mud, through which they had floundered all day long; and the travelers, in their slouched hats, rude, blue flannel shirts, and heavy boots, engulfing the nether garments to the knees, were liberally bespattered with the same compound. The mules were huddled close together, for one of the riders was supporting the wounded man on his saddle; the other had dismounted when the guide left him, and was leading the sick man's mule, while his own tired beast followed submissively in the wake of the party.

Before the guide had recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to address the lady, who seemed perfectly unconscious of his presence, the party halted in front of the veranda.

The two gentlemen sprung forward to assist their companion, who lay helpless in his saddle, his head falling upon the shoulder of the man that supported him. With the assistance of the guides he was removed from the mule and carried up the steps of the veranda. They laid him upon a bench under the windows, then the two companions of the insensible man turned toward the lady.

She had not stirred; her eyes were fastened upon the motionless figure over which the guides were bending with rough solicitude; the strained, eager look in her face seemed to demand an explanation which her lips had no power to frame.

The two gentlemen moved toward her, struck, even in that moment of anxiety, by her appearance, and saluted her

with the courtesy which proved their station and high-breeding.

"We owe you a thousand apologies, madam," said the foremost, "for this abrupt proceeding; but our friend here had a hurt."

She started at his words, instinctively drew the folds of the mantle more closely about her face, and said, quickly:

"No apology is necessary; in this region strangers consider themselves at home in every house."

"I thought you'd say so, ma'am," said one of the guides, approaching and looking curiously at her. "I s'pose Mr. Yates ain't to hum."

"No; I believe he is at the mines," she answered; then added quickly, pointing to the injured man: "Has he fainted?"

"You see he got a fall," answered the guide, before either of the gentlemen could speak, "a-coming over that rough pass on the mountain; but I think he's only stunted like."

"I am afraid his arm is broken," said the elder gentleman.

The lady hurried toward the injured man; her face was turned away, so that none of the party could see how ghastly it became. She bent over the still form, dextrously cut open the sleeve of his coat with a pair of scissors which she drew from her pocket, and took the injured limb between her trembling hands.

"It is only a sprain," she said; "the agony and the shock have been too much for him."

"He bore it very well at first," said the gentleman who had followed her; "but fainted quite suddenly, just as we got down into the valley."

The lady made him no answer; she directed the guides where to find water and spirits. Going into the house herself,

she brought out a large napkin, which she saturated with water, and bound upon the wounded arm.

While she was bending over him, the man gave signs of returning consciousness. She started back, and shrouded her face completely in the mantle.

"Laurence," called one of his friends, stooping over him, "are you better?"

There was a faint murmur; the injured man raised his head, but it sunk back, and he was insensible again.

"Is there no physician near?" demanded the gentleman. "I am very anxious. He is not strong, like the rest of us."

"You will find one at Wilson's ranche," replied the lady.

"How far is that?"

"Good seven miles," answered the guide.

"It will take so long to get him here," exclaimed the first speaker.

"Your best way will be to go there," observed the lady, coldly.

The whole party turned toward her in astonishment; hospitality is the chief virtue of wild countries, and it was an unparalleled thing in the experience of those old guides, to hear a woman so coolly turning a stranger, sick or injured, from her door.

"My dear madam," pleaded the gentleman, "he can not ride; it will be dangerous—death, perhaps."

"He will come to himself, shortly," she answered. "I assure you I have proposed the best mode. I do not mean it unkindly. Heaven knows how sorry I am."

The eldest guide absolutely whistled, and the men stared at each other, while she busied herself over Laurence,