

FRANK BACON

LIGHTNIN'

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Frank Bacon

Lightnin' / After the Play of the Same Name by Winchell Smith and Frank Bacon

CHAPTER I

"Him?" the local postmaster of Calivada would say, in reply to your question about the quaint little old man who had just ambled away from the desk with a bundle of letters stuffed in his pocket. "Why, that's Lightnin' Bill Jones! We call him Lightnin' because he ain't. Nature didn't give no speed to Bill. No, sir, far as I know, Lightnin' 'ain't never done a day's work in his life – but there ain't none of us ever thinks any the less of him for that! Bill's got a way with him, an' he kin tell some mighty good yarns. Lightnin's all right!"

And when you met Bill Jones you agreed with the postmaster. You looked into Lightnin's twinkling, shrewdly humorous eyes and you smiled – smiled with him. You thought of the reply he made to a stranger who protested against his indolence.

"Well," Bill said, with that shrewd glance of his, "I ain't keepin' *you* from makin' a million dollars, am I?"

Old Bill was full of remarks like that, and sometimes those about him were not so sure as to his lack of speed, in spite of his aimless, easy-going habits. You never can tell from the feet alone. Those closest to him were not sure at all; he "had them guessing." There was no doubt that his wife, simple, earnest, hard-working woman that she was, loved him. She mothered him and did not seem to worry much about his shiftless ways. He was her husband, and that was enough for her. What Mrs. Jones thought of her husband's mental acumen would be another question, perhaps, but up to the present she had always consulted Bill's wishes and sought his advice. Their adopted daughter, Millie, a pretty, wholesome, brown-haired girl of nineteen, worshiped Bill. Any one who said a word against "daddy" had Millie to deal with. The third person Bill had guessing was John Marvin, a young man who owned a tract of land and a cabin a few miles down the trail. Marvin had a lot on his mind, and was studying law all alone in the cabin at nights into the bargain, but he liked to have Bill drop in, liked to hear him talk. Bill could tell some pretty tall yarns, but he told them so well you had to swallow them. There was an odd, friendly, understanding bond between the ambitious young fellow and the easy-going, humorous old man. They confided in each other a great deal, and – well, like Mrs. Jones and Millie, Marvin frequently found himself crediting Bill with a semblance of mental speed. But then his mind would picture the ambling, aimless figure of Bill Jones with its shock of disordered gray hair and half-shut eyes, and Marvin would smile to himself and turn his thoughts to something else. But he wondered, nevertheless.

At the present moment, the afternoon of a late summer's day, Bill Jones was doing a little wondering himself, though no one would have suspected it as he ambled lazily up the trail, bound for home. Things were not going well with the Jones family. Mrs. Jones and Millie were worrying, and Bill knew it. Characteristically, he had evaded the issue for several years, content to let each day take care of itself as best it could, but now matters were reaching a crisis and circumstances were forcing Bill to consider it. They had been selling the timber on the land, but that did not help much; and now they were taking summer boarders – when they could get them, for boarders were scarce. Again, this only made more hard work for Millie and Mrs. Jones.

It was of this Bill was thinking as he went along. He had been sent to get the mail and to meet the morning train from San Francisco for the purpose of enticing a few boarders to the Jones establishment if possible. He should have been home hours ago with the mail, and there were some

odd jobs awaiting him, but he had dallied in the little local town. This was his usual habit, for, like a good many lonely souls, Bill was also a social one. People liked to buy Bill drinks and cigars in the tavern and listen to his yarns. But to-day Bill was lingering intentionally; he knew that his wife and Millie expected to take him into consultation this afternoon in regard to the critical state of the family affairs. Naturally Bill dreaded such a proceeding, but there was something more than that to it to-day. His old heart, usually full of happy-go-lucky sunshine, was harboring shadows, for he knew that he ought to help and wanted to. But how? As he had turned slowly homeward, Lightnin' hadn't the faintest idea.

Then suddenly, when about a mile from the house, Bill paused in the middle of the trail, chuckled, and then sat down on a fallen tree. He pushed back his battered old hat, drew a bag of tobacco and a Manila paper from his pocket, and rolled himself a cigarette. All signs and manifestations indicated that Bill Jones was overwhelmed by an idea. He sat puffing the cigarette and grinning to himself for a few minutes; then he arose slowly and ambled on; but now the amble was not so aimless. It had a suggestion of the walk of a man with a purpose, and there was a gleam of satisfaction and humorous self-importance in his half-shut eyes.

Nearing the house, he observed his wife sitting on the broad veranda, rocking to and fro, obviously on the watch for him. From force of habit, Bill tried to make a detour with the intent of entering unseen through the back door; but, knowing his ways, Mrs. Jones was too quick for him. She called to him, and, with the air of one who had no intention whatever of entering by the back door, he came up on the porch and dropped into a chair beside her.

"Well, mother," he said, amiably, "you look all tuckered out. Glad to see you restin'."

"Where you been all day?" she asked, ignoring his remark. Her tone was none too tender, but there was a gentle gleam in her motherly, tired eyes as they sought her husband's, sheepishly hiding behind half-closed lids.

"Just takin' a look at town," Bill drawled. "Just takin' a look." He settled himself comfortably in his chair and rolled a cigarette.

"Don't you know there's some new boarders come?"

"Sure," said Bill, easily. "I sent 'em, didn't I? Told 'em you was the best cook in two states, mother. Guess I ought to know."

Millie, an apron over her neat and simple house dress, came out and drew a chair between her foster-parents. She glanced quickly from one to the other, and then her gentle brown eyes came to rest lovingly on old Bill. He returned her smile.

"What a long time you were, daddy!" she said. "I bet you stayed away just because you knew mother and I wanted to talk to you to-day – own up, daddy!"

Bill grinned delightedly, despite his knowledge of the rather grave situation the girl's smiling comment covered. "Well, Millie," he answered, "I'm here now, ain't I? Guess we can have a little talk before them boarders begin to yell for their supper. I kinder wish as you didn't have to cook for 'em, mother – an' Millie waitin' on 'em. 'Tain't fair."

Mrs. Jones's lips twitched; the weight of a hard day was on her.

"It ain't no use puttin' it off, Bill," she said, wearily. "We got to do somethin'. Mr. Townsend was here this afternoon."

"What o' that?" asked Bill.

"Well, he's pretty shrewd, you know, an' he's thinkin' about us, Bill. He seen how much of the timber's gone. He knows we sold another strip o' land last month for next to nothin' – "

"What's that to him?" Bill queried, rolling another cigarette and apparently completely absorbed in the operation.

"He – he's just worried about us, an' it's nice of him, Bill, him knowin' us all these years. He – he thinks as we might move into – into one o' them little cabins down the trail an' – "

"Lem Townsend's all right," Bill cut in, lazily, "but we ain't goin' to move, mother. An' it ain't nobody's business, neither – not even Lem Townsend's. I hope you told him that."

"Why, Bill!" Mrs. Jones exclaimed, sharply. "I told him no such thing! An' I ain't so sure but what I ain't goin' to take his advice!"

Bill looked at her, a hidden smile in his eyes. "It's your property, mother," he said, quietly.

Tears sprang into the woman's eyes and she made an impulsive gesture.

"You mustn't think that way, Bill!" she cried. "I know you deeded the whole place over to me when we were married – and it was all you had! I wasn't thinkin' o' that – 'ceptin' as I always think. You must say *our* place, Bill. It's yours an' mine an' Millie's. We'll stick together. But we got to do *somethin'*."

Bill glanced slyly at the girl, whose brown head was bowed thoughtfully. "What you think, Millie?" he asked.

"I don't know what to say," she replied, slowly. "I could go back to San Francisco and work as I did last year. But maybe we could pull through this winter – if only we could get boarders. I don't mind the work, and – and I'd rather stay home here."

Bill's eyes suddenly twinkled. "What's the matter?" he chuckled. "John Marvin come back from the city to stay at his cabin?"

Millie blushed. "Daddy!" she pouted.

Mrs. Jones did not seem any too pleased at her husband's remark. "John Marvin 'ain't got nothin' to do with it!" she exclaimed. "I don't see what he comes foolin' around here for, anyway – Millie 'ain't got *him* on her mind!"

"I should say not!" Millie echoed, though it occurred to Bill that the softness of her brown eyes belied the petulant toss of her head. "Perhaps, after all, it would be best for me to go back to Mr. Thomas's office!"

Bill turned his half-shut eyes on her quickly, but Millie did not note the expression of genuine concern in them. He sat lost in thought. The last winter had been the most difficult of all for them. Millie, feeling that it was time for her being some help, had studied typewriting and stenography and had obtained a position in the office of Raymond Thomas, a San Francisco lawyer. Presumably on a vacation, Thomas had chanced to spend a week at the Jones place the previous summer. Millie had told him of her design to help the family, and Thomas had suggested that she take the position open in his office.

But that had been a dreary and lonely winter for Bill and his wife. Millie's pretty face and youthful ways had been missed sorely; the girl had come to be all in all to the old couple, and they could not bear to see her go away again for another long winter.

Then, too, Bill had his own reasons for feeling grave and down in the mouth when Millie suggested her returning to work in the office of Raymond Thomas. Bill Jones was not one to analyze, or to voice or explain his thoughts – even to himself – unless he took a notion to, or considered that the right moment had arrived; it was all too much trouble, anyway. Certain thoughts were running through his mind now, however; running a little at random, to be sure, but they were there. His young friend, John Marvin, had worked in Thomas's office for a time – was working there when Millie entered the office. Indeed, that was how Marvin had met Millie and found, to his delight, that they were neighbors up in Nevada – that she was the pretty daughter his friend Bill Jones was always mentioning.

But Bill was thinking now especially of the fact that Marvin had left Raymond Thomas's office suddenly, and had told Bill precisely why he had left.

"Don't *you* think it would be best for me to go back, daddy?" Millie questioned, interrupting his random musings. "Maybe mother could manage here, with one or two boarders and the money I shall send her. And there will be your army pension. Mr. Thomas is coming to pay us a visit tomorrow, you know, and I'll ask him at once for my old position. I know it will be all right, for he's

always been perfectly splendid! He told me the position would always be open to me. You have no idea how kind and considerate he is, daddy! Then maybe next summer – "

"Next summer we're all goin' to be rich!" said her odd foster-father, unexpectedly. "Yes, sir, meanin' you an' mother, Millie girl, next summer we're goin' to be awful rich. Leastways, you an' mother is. Bein' rich wouldn't mean nothin' to me – I'm above it!"

"Why, daddy!" Millie exclaimed, staring at him. "How – What do you mean, daddy?"

Slumped away down in his chair, Bill's eyes were now all but closed tight and he was grinning.

"Nothin' particular," he answered, softly. "'Cept that maybe Bill Jones ain't called Lightnin' for nothin'."

"Bill," said his wife, "this ain't no time for to be smart! If you have anything to say, I wish to goodness you'd say it!"

Bill half opened his eyes and glanced at her. "Millie ain't goin' back to that tailor-made lawyer's office," he said.

"Daddy, please!" said Millie, flushing.

"You mustn't make fun of Mr. Thomas when – "

"All right, Millie," he stopped her, resting his thin hand on her brown hair for an instant. "I wouldn't say nothin' as would hurt you. But you won't have to go back, my dear – not unless you really want to leave us. I got an idea, mother – that's why I was late gettin' home. Ideas take time, 'specially when they're good ones! I got a good one what'll fix this whole business!"

Bill stuck his thumbs in his faded old shirt comically. Even slumped down in his chair as he was, the suggestion of a harmless swagger was in his manner – the easy swagger of one who, hitherto unconsidered, has astonished the skeptics by giving birth to an idea and solving a problem. There was something about Bill that suppressed the gentle but none the less amused smile that was dimpling Millie's cheeks.

"Out with it, daddy!" she demanded, restraining a desire to pull his ear.

"If Lem Townsend is so anxious to help us," he stated, "he can arrange all the details for you, mother. I 'ain't got time for details – that's what I told Grant once, when we was havin' supper before Petersburg. Got enough to do with the idea. Lem can put the ads. in them Reno papers, an' hire the maids for you, an' things like that." Then Bill suddenly stopped, hugely enjoying the mystification of his two listeners.

His wife sat up. "Bill Jones," she said, "you been drinking again down to town, that's what I think!"

"Go on, daddy!" Millie encouraged, putting her hand on his arm. "I feel that you've thought of something! Tell us!"

Ignoring his wife's accusation, Bill gave Millie a grateful glance and resumed, in his slow drawl:

"I got an idea – sure enough, mother an' Millie! It didn't hit me until I was half-way home to-day, but I got it lookin' at the mornin' train what goes on through to Reno. I've looked at a pile o' trains in my time, but I never got no idea from 'em before. Look here, don't the state line run plumb through the middle o' this house, so's half of it is in California an' the other half in Nevada? Well, what's the matter with makin' this house a hotel temporary for busted hearts what takes six months to cure? Lots o' them rich folks from the East who goes on down to Reno to git divorced would like to live on the lake, but they can't because they got to live in Nevada for six months. They can live on one side o' this house an' be in Nevada. An' at the same time they gits all the good o' livin' in California! They'd be tickled to death an' they'd be comin' in shoals all year, winter an' summer. An' what they pays ain't nothin' to them – the Reno hotels is so rich off them they don't want to take in no one what 'ain't a busted heart! You better start right away gettin' ready, mother!"

Mrs. Jones and Millie gasped. Bill, however, having spoken at considerable length for him, merely reached for his eternal bag of tobacco and paper and idly rolled himself a cigarette.

Millie clapped her hands. "Why, mother!" she cried, "daddy's right – it is an idea! And so simple!"

"All big things is simple," Bill remarked, with the air of one who ought to know.

Mrs. Jones stared from her husband to Millie. "Oh, Bill," she said, finally, "I really think we can do it! And now I'll tell you somethin'. I – I was goin' to suggest this very thing some time ago, but – but I thought you wouldn't approve of it on account o' Millie. Lem Townsend put the notion in my head when he was talkin' about our sellin' the timber."

Bill looked up. "Lem thought of it, eh? Didn't think Lem had that much sense. Anyways, I bet I thought of it first – I must 'a' been thinkin' of it for a long time without knowin' it. Why shouldn't I approve – on account o' Millie, mother?"

"I – I don't know," said his wife, uncertainly. "I hear some of them divorcers is – is –"

"Shucks, mother," Bill stopped her. "They're human beings, ain't they? An' them as ain't we needn't take. But they're all right. I seen a lot o' them on the trains. Right smart lookers, most o' them! They can't help it if their hearts gets busted, can they? Human beings is human beings. Besides, we gotter look at it from a business point o' view – as Lincoln said to me about the Civil War. I was a business man once an' –"

Millie laughed, and Bill, remembering that he was in the bosom of his family and that there were certain things he couldn't "get away with" there, subsided.

Evidently Mrs. Jones had been thinking hard during the past few minutes, and now she spoke. "We'll do it, Millie!" she said. "Some o' them Reno hotels got started overnight, just like this, an' we can do the same. It'll be kinder queer at first, turning our home into a hotel, but maybe we can soon make enough to – to make it a home again. Shall we try it, Millie?"

"Of course!" Millie exclaimed. "I think it will be great fun! You're awful clever, daddy, to think of it!"

Bill, who had rolled and lighted another cigarette, arose and stuck his hands carelessly in the pockets of his worn, baggy old trousers. "'Tain't nothin'," he remarked, swaying on his heels and toes. "Nothin' at all! I think o' lots o' things like that, but I don't tell 'em – too busy! Well, mother, as Lem Townsend's comin' over to-night, you better have him fix them details. I got to go an' think some more about the idea!"

He moved away with elaborate unconcern and started to amble down the veranda steps. His wife suddenly remembered several odd jobs he should be attending to, but she did not stop him. Her mind was full of plans – and one is naturally timid about asking a Man with a Big Idea to perform menial tasks.

CHAPTER II

After supper the following evening Bill slipped from the house and ambled through the woods to the lake border, where a young moon, cradled above the western ridge, sent its shafts of silver light across the darkened waters. It was evident that Bill Jones wanted to be alone. He settled down on the trunk of a fallen tree and absently rolled himself a cigarette. When it was satisfactorily lighted he glanced down the shore. It was deserted, but a little way back, on the woodland path, he observed two people strolling in the dim shadows of the pines and cedars. He knew that the girl in the white dress was Millie, and he guessed that the man with her was John Marvin. Bill was not especially romantic, but there was no doubt that the sight of those two together pleased him. He knew that the pair had not seen much of each other of late, and he wondered why. He himself had not seen John Marvin for nearly two weeks. Though he did not indulge in romance personally, he understood much, and he sighed deeply as he watched the dim figure of the girl strolling along the path. His mind wandered off through a vista of past years to the time when Millie had first come to the Tahoe region and to the Jones family, a bit of a girl of three. Sinking into a reverie, Bill failed to note that the pair had finally parted, Marvin striding off up the trail in the direction of his cabin. A pull at his ear brought him back to earth.

"Why, daddy! What are you doing out here all alone?"

Millie sat down beside him, putting an arm around his neck.

"Hello!" said Bill, reaching for his bag of tobacco and papers. "Where's John?" he asked, a humorous gleam in his eyes, as he met hers.

Millie seemed to hesitate before answering: "He's gone back to his place. I told him Mr. Thomas was here and he wouldn't even come in to see him! He says he does not like it. I don't think it is any of his business," she added, giving Bill a hug.

"Why ain't it?" Bill asked.

Again Millie hesitated, then said, "Mr. Thomas is just as nice as he can be daddy, and – "

"His yaller gloves is nice. So's his cane. Must take him an awful long time to dress."

Millie took her arm away and looked at him. She caught the lift of his eyebrows and the peculiar expression of his half-open mouth and half-shut eyes, an expression which always decorated Bill's face when he gave vent to sentiments which Millie had come to regard as "Daddy's intuitions." Bill always used trivial words at such moments, but that did not minimize the effect.

"But, daddy, it seems so hard to make you understand how good Mr. Thomas has been to me! Mother understands. He took such pains with me. I was a perfect greenhorn and didn't know the first thing about office work. No matter what mistakes I made, he was just as patient as he could be. And he says he loves this beautiful country up here! He liked to hear me tell about our wonderful waterfall."

Bill puffed his cigarette, an odd gleam in his eyes, perhaps of amusement, perhaps of wisdom. Millie glanced back toward the house; then her eyes swept the shore and finally came to rest on something barely visible far up on the mountain – John Marvin's cabin. She sighed and continued to gaze in the same direction. Bill stole a look at her.

"Liked to hear about our waterfall, eh?" he remarked. "I thought so."

Millie started. "Thought what, daddy?" she asked, her brown eyes trying to read his face.

"Nothin'. Nothin'," he replied, with a note of finality that she had long learned to know as indicating the futility of further questioning.

"Well," she said, rising, "I think you'd better come up to the house, daddy. I suppose you left Mr. Thomas all alone there on the veranda, didn't you? You might have stayed and entertained him until I got back."

"Guess he entertains himself pretty well," said Bill. "Besides, mother's with him."

"But you ought to be there, too, daddy; you're the head of the house, you know!"

He gave her an amused glance as she cuddled his arm in hers and walked him off. "All right, Millie, but I kinder keep fergettin' that part of it."

Coming up the veranda steps, they found Mrs. Jones sitting there with a handsome, perfectly groomed young man of possibly twenty-seven. Raymond Thomas looked actually too good to be true in that backwoods region. He arose quickly, placed a chair for Millie, and then drew one beside his own, urging Bill to occupy it.

"Please sit right here, Mr. Jones!" he insisted, with an easy, flattering smile. "Where did you disappear to after supper? I've been looking all over for you. I want to hear some more of those famous stories of yours! Tell me how to get him started, Miss Buckley," he added, with mock appeal and turning his dazzling smile on Millie.

"Oh, daddy just starts himself!" she answered, laughing.

Bill dropped into the chair and crossed his legs. Gingerly he took the cigar Thomas offered him.

"I want to hear about some of your experiences in the Civil War," Thomas urged. "Why, I have heard that you were in most of the big battles!"

Bill glanced at his smiling questioner with an odd look. With great deliberation he bit off the end of the cigar. "I was in all them battles but two," he said, finally, holding up the cigar and subjecting it to a minute inspection.

"Yes?" Thomas encouraged. "Allow me to light the cigar, Mr. Jones!"

Bill gave him a quizzical glance at this unusual attention, a glance that apparently was quite lost on Thomas.

"Sure. All but two," said Bill, taking a long pull at the cigar. "I was in Washington on private business when them two was goin' on. I was greatly disappointed."

"I can imagine so!" exclaimed Thomas.

"You can imagine a lot o' things, can't you?" said Bill, unexpectedly. "I often imagine I never saw some people. It makes you feel better. But about them battles. Ye know Grant 'd never won the battle of Lookout Mountain if it hadn't been for me – "

"Indeed!" cried Thomas, in a tone of pleasant surprise.

"Nope. I was the only man he would let look out."

Thomas laughed effusively and gently tapped Bill on the back. "Capital!" he exclaimed. "You must tell me some more later on. And you've got to come to town with me some time, Mr. Jones. But" – and for a moment he turned his brilliant smile on Millie and Mrs. Jones – "I've been thinking ever since supper of that great idea of yours about turning this place into a hotel for the broken-hearted. Really, I've given much serious thought to it, as I was telling your wife just before you and Miss Buckley joined us. I am so interested in you all that I hate to act like a damper, but I have very grave doubts about it being a paying proposition. And then I fear none of you have taken into consideration the vast amount of work, preparation, and alteration the scheme will entail. Now, as you are doing this to – er – well, to improve the financial yield of the establishment – you have flattered me by deeming me worthy of your confidence, Mrs. Jones, so perhaps I need not hesitate over words – it seems to me that we might find some other and easier way of accomplishing the desired object – "

"Hello, Lem! Come an' set down," called Bill, calmly interrupting the above flow of words and addressing a tall, rather impressive and distinguished-looking man of about forty who had come up the veranda steps.

"How's it goin' Lem?" Bill asked. He turned his eyes on Thomas. "Lem's runnin' fer superior judge o' Washoe County at the fall election."

Mrs. Jones and Millie greeted Townsend cordially and the girl placed a chair for him while he turned to shake hands with Thomas, who had recovered his slightly shattered poise and risen gracefully. Townsend shook hands genially, but there was a lurking frown in Raymond Thomas's eyes – more than a suggestion that he was annoyed at the interruption, and, for reasons of his own, resented the presence of another person on the veranda. His dazzling smile was at work, however.

"It is a pleasure to meet the future legal light of Washoe County!" he said.

"That's right – better make yourself solid with him now," said Bill, throwing away the remains of the cigar and bringing out his tobacco and papers. There was something in his voice that somehow did not bring a laugh.

"Why, daddy!" cried Millie. "I don't think that's funny at all!"

Bill merely glanced at her and went on rolling his cigarette. Thomas had given Bill a keen, puzzled look; but no one could ever tell from Lightnin's expression whether or not any special meaning lay back of his words.

Mrs. Jones created a diversion. Eagerly she imparted Bill's great idea to Townsend and their intention of carrying it out at once. Millie joined in and asked him if he would help. He declared himself at their immediate disposal.

"I'm very glad you are going to do it, mother!" he said. "In my judgment, it is an excellent solution of your problem. You will recall that I suggested this – "

"But I beat you to it, Lem!" Bill cut in quickly. "Forethought and execution is the whole carnage!"

Raymond Thomas had been listening closely. If there was disapproval and annoyance at the turn things were taking, it did not show in his face.

"But are you sure this venture will pay these good friends of ours, Mr. Townsend?" he asked, in a tone of grave doubt. "Those divorce people – they are mostly women, you know – are generally on short rations, though they have been used to having a lot of money to spend. I'm afraid they'll demand comforts and luxuries that will run expenses into big figures, and they won't want to pay enough to make a reasonable margin of profit."

"I am certain it will pay splendidly!" replied Townsend. "Look at the Reno hotels! Oh yes, I strongly advise our friends to tackle it!"

Thomas frowned slightly. "Perhaps you are right, Mr. Townsend. I presume you have investigated the matter. But there is another point to consider. I don't think – well, personally, I do not think it is altogether a good plan to – to bring women of that sort into contact with women like Mrs. Jones and Miss Mildred."

He turned to Millie, his expression one of delicate concern and appeal.

"It's fine of you to speak like that, Mr. Thomas," she said, flushing slightly, "but mother and I have talked over all that. We do not mind. And, besides, I don't think it right for us to feel that way about it. I'm sure most of those women are nice – and maybe they need just the sympathy and care we can give them."

Lemuel Townsend, on hearing Thomas's statement, had sat bolt upright. "Sir," he said, in tones of personal injury, adjusting his glasses and eying Thomas from head to foot, "I think that a rather broad and sweeping statement for you to make. Miss Mildred is perfectly correct in her surmise. I must remind you that I am a Nevada attorney. I have known, in my life, many of these young women, and I have found them most estimable!"

"Ye like 'em, don't you, Lem?" remarked Bill, chuckling.

Townsend flushed; he looked appealingly at Mrs. Jones and Millie, his judicial manner gone. It must be confessed that Millie suppressed something resembling a giggle.

"You old fogies up here in the mountains have the wrong idea!" Townsend said, turning to Bill. "Why should two people be hitched together when they are pulling in different directions? That doesn't get them any place." He rose and reached for his hat on the veranda rail. "Well, I must be off. I'll get to work at once, Mrs. Jones. The Reno papers shall have your ad. to-morrow, and I'll get busy on some other things at once."

The two women rose, profuse in their thanks, which he smilingly waved aside. With a nod to Bill, and a rather formal bow to Thomas, he went down the steps.

Thomas resumed his seat and his dazzling smile; there was nothing in his manner to show that he had been thinking quickly. He crossed his legs easily and drew out another cigar.

"Have you ever thought of selling the place, Mrs. Jones?" he asked, suddenly.

"Why – why, no! Can't say as we have!" she answered, evidently surprised. "An' I don't know as we could if we wanted to. Ain't much call for a place like this, Mr. Thomas!"

"But you can't always tell about these things, my dear lady," said Thomas, addressing himself exclusively to Mrs. Jones. "It might not be so hard to find a purchaser, and at a good price, too."

"I – I don't think Bill would like to sell," she replied, doubtfully. "Would you, Bill?"

Her husband made no reply. He sat gazing straight ahead, his eyes half shut as usual.

"Perhaps Mr. Jones is indifferent on the subject," Thomas resumed. "Now I am sure that if he felt that you and Miss Mildred were well provided – "

"Say, you're kinder full of ideas yourself, ain't you?" Bill interrupted, unexpectedly turning and bringing his thin, unshaven face close to the other man's, quite unwonted force and anger in his manner.

"Daddy!" Millie cried, while his wife stared at him.

The anger left his face and the old, shrewd, humorous light crept back into his eyes.

"I don't believe in more 'n one idea at a time," he said, grinning. "No – I guess mother an' me an' Millie 'll try out that little busted-heart notion o' mine first, afore we tackles any other notions. Guess I'll turn in, mother – had a kinder tall day. Look sorter all in yourself. Better come along. Tirin' business, havin' ideas. If Mr. Thomas 'ain't been entertained ernough, maybe Millie 'll stay down an' keep the show goin'." And he got up slowly, stuck his hands in his pockets, and ambled into the house.

"I think we'd better go in, too, mother," said Millie, rising. "I know you're just fagged out, and it's late, anyway. You won't mind if we leave you to finish your cigar, Mr. Thomas, will you?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" Thomas exclaimed, with his smile. "A thousand pardons for keeping you up so late – it was thoughtless of me!"

He sprang to the screen door, held it open for them, and called a cheery "Good-night!" as they disappeared up the stairs. Then he sat down again and thoughtfully finished his cigar. He appeared to have a lot to think about, to figure out. When finally he went up to his own room a light burned there for an hour longer.

In the morning Bill Jones was up and about unwontedly early. He got himself some breakfast, then went to the little desk where the few boarders habitually left the letters they had written the night before for the outgoing mail, which he took to the post-office. He found some half-dozen letters on the desk this morning, and he examined the addresses deliberately. One in particular seemed to interest him immensely. It was in a handwriting he had seen before and recognized as that of Raymond Thomas. He put a finger to his cheek and gazed up at the ceiling – which is the same as saying that Bill Jones was making a careful mental note of the name and address on that letter. It was addressed to one Everett Hammone, the Golden Gate Land Company, San Francisco. It was quite obvious that Bill Jones had a strong desire to know the contents of that letter; but he dropped it carelessly among the rest, bundled them up with a string and stuffed them in his pocket as he strolled out of the house on his daily journey.

Out on the trail a bit, his ambling feet came to a pause. He took out his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette. Lighting it, he turned around and gazed up the mountain, his eyes blinking in the morning sunlight as they rested on the dot that was John Marvin's cabin. For a moment it seemed as if Bill had it in mind to change his direction and go up the mountain.

"I sure would like to have er talk with John," he mused. "Sure would. 'Ain't had a talk with him for some time. But I guess as John is pretty put to it with that there timber proposition – things must be gittin' some excited up there! Maybe I'll go up to-morrer."

And having characteristically decided to do it to-morrow, Bill continued his morning stroll toward the post-office.

CHAPTER III

For reasons obvious and otherwise, Bill Jones did not carry out his intention of visiting John Marvin's cabin "to-morrow." In spite of himself, Bill naturally was drawn into the vortex of work and preparation necessary to turning his home into the Calivada Hotel. The period of change was a nightmare to Bill, the only leaven in his misery being the astonishing fact that he actually evolved quite a number of ideas – ideas which Mrs. Jones, Millie, and Lem Townsend not only O.K.'d, but put into instant execution – and found exceedingly workable. He made many attempts to disappear from the premises, but his wife, or Millie, or Lem always had an eye on him and managed to frustrate his hasty sorties or more subtle schemes to take French leave. This went on day after day, and now Bill had endured nearly six weeks of more or less pleasantly enforced captivity.

In the mean time the mysterious "excitement" up the mountain about which Bill had mused that morning on the trail had come to a head, and John Marvin's little cabin seemed to be the center of it.

It was shortly after sundown one evening that a big, red-headed lumberjack, obviously a Swede, put his head in the door of the cabin and glanced quickly around the one room. Seeing that there was no one inside, he entered, closing the door behind him. Going to the window, he looked out through the thick grove of pines and cedars, but evidently could see no one. He was breathing hard, as if from running, and he sank into a chair.

His rest was short-lived. There was a rap at the door, which was instantly pushed open, and a lanky, sinewy man in sombrero and riding-breeches, with two revolvers at the belt, strode in. The Swede, on his feet in an instant, recognized the intruder as Nevin Blodgett, sheriff of Washoe County.

"What you want?" the lumberjack asked, in his heavy voice.

The sheriff did not answer at once, but took a quick survey of the cabin's contents, his eyes lighting up as they rested upon the unwashed dishes on the table, telling of a recent meal. There was a self-satisfied swagger about the sheriff as he walked up to the Swede.

"You're John Marvin, ain't you?" he demanded.

"No, sir," replied the Swede, with a heavy frown.

The sheriff looked puzzled for a moment; then it seemed to dawn on him that it was just possible that a big, red-headed Swede was not likely to be John Marvin.

"Well!" he snapped. "Then I guess you're working for him, ain't you?"

The lumberjack shook his head and went close to Blodgett, emphasizing his words, "Who I work for bane my business!" There was no fear in his manner as he stood looking into his interrogator's face with a grin that boded ill for any one looking for trouble.

Blodgett backed away, his eyes following the breadth of the Swede's husky shoulders and the line of his powerful arms.

"None of that!" he said. "You're with the gang that's been chopping down that timber out there. You know well enough that Marvin's stealing that timber, don't you?"

"Stealing?"

"Yes! He's stealing it from the Pacific Railroad Company, and I'm here to arrest him for it!"

"Humph!" The Swede shrugged his shoulders and wheeled around, gazing anxiously out of the window, where the path through the forest was visible.

"You know where he is, don't you?" Blodgett asked.

"He gone away."

"Where?" Blodgett stamped his spurred boot.

"I doan' know."

"When did he go?"

"Maybe – yesterday."

"When's he coming back?"

"I doan' think he coomin' back." The Swede deliberately put a kettle on the stove and whistled indifferently.

Blodgett was evidently torn between a desire to maintain his dignity and authority as sheriff and a rather healthy reluctance to have any trouble with the great, hulking Swede.

"It's going to be hard for you if you're lying – "

He got no farther. The Swede stepped up to him with blazing eyes.

"You call me liar?" he yelled. "I throw you out the door!"

Blodgett backed quickly away – very quickly. His hand sought the latch behind him. "If you threaten me, the next thing you know you'll find yourself in jail!" he cried, shaking his fist.

The Swede's only answer was an ugly grin. Blodgett opened the door, slamming it after him as he went away.

The big lumberjack stood quiet for several minutes, listening to the sounds of retreat beaten by the hoofs of Blodgett's horse. Assured that the sheriff was safely out of the way, he crept to the window, thrust his head over the sill, and gave a low whistle.

There was a stir in the soap-plant outside and Marvin emerged, hurried around to the door, and entered the cabin.

"Good work!" he exclaimed, laughing and clapping the grinning Swede on the back. "You got rid of him very well, Oscar! Now I'll go on with my supper!"

He took off his coat and went over to the stove, where he began to shake the damper to let out the ashes. Oscar came and stood beside him.

"He tell me – "

"I know what he told you," Marvin interrupted, continuing to shake the ashes.

"Do that land belong to the railroad?" There was a slight note of alarm in the Swede's voice.

"It does now, Oscar," Marvin replied, throwing some paper and wood into the stove and lighting it; "but I sold the timber a long time before the railroad got the property, and I'm trying to save the timber for the man who bought it from me."

"Oh!" The Swede turned toward the door, as if to go. "Bane they arrest you for that?"

"Not unless they find me!" Marvin chuckled.

"An' me an' the boys – can they arrest oos?"

"No, Oscar," Marvin laughingly reassured him. "You fellows are working for me and you are not supposed to know anything about my affairs."

"Oh!" The Swede gave a satisfied nod of his head. "I see – you know that from – from your books." He jerked his thumb toward a table in the corner on which some law-books stood.

"Yes," said Marvin, looking into the coffee-pot. "Anyhow, you'll be gone in the morning. The job's done, thanks to you and the boys."

The lumberjack stood for a moment, nodding his red head; then he turned slowly and went out.

Marvin put the coffee-pot on the stove, watched it a minute, and then sank thoughtfully into the shabby but comfortable arm-chair at the end of his reading-table – which also served as a dining-table. He sat there for several minutes – until the coffee, boiling over on the stove, brought him out of his reverie and to his feet. At the same moment he caught the sound of remote but high words coming from that part of his land where the recently cut timber was stacked.

"I tell you he bane gone away!" he heard, in Oscar's heavy, threatening voice.

Hurriedly pushing the coffee-pot on to the back of the stove, he sprang to the door, but before he could reach it it was thrust in against him and he was thrown back into the middle of the room, where he stood, perforce, facing a tall, athletic-looking man in motor togs. The man's strong, intellectual face, undoubtedly pleasant and agreeable ordinarily, was now clouded with anger, his jaw set and grim.

At sight of him, however, Marvin's fists unclenched and he smiled amiably, despite the other's attitude.

"Why, hello, Mr. Harper!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand. "You're just the man I've been looking for! But you seem a bit upset. What's the trouble?"

Ignoring the outstretched hand, Harper threw off his duster and tossed it, with his gloves, on the table.

"Just a minute, young man," he said, with a grim tightening of his jaw and his keen eyes boring into Marvin's. "Just a minute. I came here to have a look for myself and to see precisely where I stand." He turned and carefully closed the door.

Marvin went to the stove and calmly poured himself a cup of coffee. "Well," he remarked, with a laugh, "won't you have a chair and some coffee first – you can shoot just as easily sitting down."

Harper, his hand at his belt, glared at him.

"You don't think I mean business, do you?" he said, grimly. "Or perhaps you think you have beaten me to it, eh? Now what sort of man are you and what nice little game is this you are playing? Here I buy a grove of timber from you, and while my back is turned you sell the property, timber and all, to the railroad! I want an explanation and I want it now!"

"You have the facts a bit mixed up," Marvin replied, still smiling and nodding toward the chair, at the same time placing the coffee on the table. "Sit down and we'll talk it over – and I think you'll decide not to shoot!"

Harper, however, was adamant.

"All right," said Marvin. "In the first place, when I sold you the timber you said you were going to cut it at once – "

"Correct – correct! But something came up and I could not attend to it – and I don't see how that exculpates you in the least!"

"It doesn't," replied Marvin, adding, as he took up his coffee, "if you won't join me, I'll have to go it alone, as this is the first I've had since morning. Well, when I sold you that timber I never thought I would sell any of this property. My mother loved every inch of it. It was our dream that when I received my diploma and established a practice we would make a home here; but she was taken sick – "

"Yes, I remember your telling me about her being in the hospital." Harper's voice softened a bit.

Marvin was silent a moment. "I took her to San Francisco. She died there."

Harper fumbled with the buckle of his belt. His heart went out to the younger man; yet he felt that right was on his side. He picked up a picture of Mrs. Marvin that stood in a small frame on the table. "I'm deeply sorry," he said, softly. "I did not know."

"There is no need to apologize," Marvin answered, quietly. "You have a perfect right to demand an explanation about that timber." With a last swallow of coffee, he put down his cup and stood squarely facing Harper, and his own expression was grim as he continued:

"When we got to San Francisco – mother and I – a lawyer in whose office I had been a student came to the hospital and got into her good graces. He had taken a great interest in me and I would have taken an oath as to his integrity. But when I came up here to sell you the timber – and mother and I needed the money desperately at the time – this man took advantage of my absence to persuade mother to deed him fifty acres, nearly the whole of the property! It was to be a pleasant surprise for me when I returned! Instead of cash, he gave her a batch of stock in the Golden Gate Land Company, stock of which I have been unable to dispose. And the next day he resold the property to the Pacific Railroad Company for three or four times the price represented by the stock he gave mother. I found that out later, of course. Well, after mother's death I hurried up here, only to discover that you had not cut the timber I sold you *before* the property was sold. I got busy at once and have been staying on here until the gang out there finished cutting it and piling it on what is left to me of the property. Your timber is ready for you, Mr. Harper, any time you are ready to haul it away."

It was Harper's turn to put out his hand. "I'm mighty sorry I misunderstood you, Marvin!" he exclaimed, as the latter returned the clasp. "But look here! Can't you do anything about this fellow, this lawyer? What's the rascal's name?"

"Raymond Thomas. He's up in these parts quite frequently of late. Made himself solid with some dear friends of mine, I'm sorry to say, and I'm worried about it. I can't help believing that he's up to some new game, though I can't just see what it is. He's a remarkably smooth customer. It's very hard to pin anything on him. I'm going to make him disgorge my property if I can, but I shall have a difficult legal fight on my hands."

Harper nodded understandingly. "I see, I see – covered himself cleverly. I don't know the gentleman, but I'll be only too glad to do anything to help you, Marvin." He took a turn about the room, while Marvin leaned against the table. "I'll have the timber hauled away at once. I didn't have it cut, myself, because – well, I've had a lot of trouble myself. Had a strike at the mill, and – oh, hang it all! It's my wife, Marvin! She's packed up in a hurry and left me!"

He flung himself into the chair and stared ruefully, comically, at the younger man, who, not knowing what to say, said nothing.

"I didn't mind the strike so much, nor this timber mix-up!" Harper rushed on, with the air of a man who must tell some one or explode. "It was my wife, young man! It's her being so unreasonable that makes me sore. I bought her a present when I was East and had it shipped to the office. It happened to arrive about the time Mrs. Harper was to come to the office in the machine to take me home, and she walked in just as I was showing it to my stenographer. Of course my wife thought I bought it for Miss Robbins, and – well, what's the use of talking about it?"

With a gesture of dismissal for the subject, he stood up and took out a wallet.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked. "I figured it would cost about eight hundred dollars to do that job out there –"

Marvin put up a deprecatory hand. "I can't take it now, Mr. Harper," he interrupted. "You haven't got that timber yet, and –"

"The railroad will have some job on its hands to get it away from me!" said Harper. "And unless they do I owe you eight hundred dollars – do you understand?"

A faint noise outside broke into their conversation. With a warning gesture, Marvin tiptoed to the door and put his ear against it. Harper, thinking that it might be a railroad employee who had come to eavesdrop in order to report their plans, stood with his jaw set, his hand on the revolver at his belt. With a quick movement Marvin jerked open the door.

Instead of a railroad employee, or the sheriff, it was only Lightnin' Bill Jones who stood there, leaning idly against the doorframe, his hands in his pockets. He ambled silently into the middle of the room, his half-shut eyes blinking in the sudden light.

"I guess I must 'a' been out there some time, come to think of it," he remarked, meditatively, and addressing himself to the ceiling, quite as if he were alone. Then he turned carelessly to Marvin.

"I knocked, too – but I guess maybe you wasn't expectin' me."

CHAPTER IV

With a laugh, Marvin shut the door. "It's all right," he said, winking at Harper. Smiling, he went up to Bill and swung him around to face him.

"Hello, Lightnin'!" he exclaimed. "I'm mighty glad to see you. What do you mean by staying away from me all this time? And you were so quiet and mysterious outside there that we thought some one was spying on us!"

"I was a spy once – with Buffalo Bill," said Lightnin', conversationally. He stared interestedly at Harper. "Friend of yours, John?"

"This is Lightnin' Bill Jones, Mr. Harper. This is the gentleman I sold that timber to, Bill." The two men acknowledged the introduction.

"Have you had any supper, Bill?" Marvin asked, resuming operations at the stove. "If not, you'd better stop and have it with me."

Bill shook his head with an air of importance. "No; can't stop. Got to be home at the hotel at supper-time to see that everythin's goin' right. What time is it now?"

"Seven o'clock."

Bill shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, meditated, and announced: "Well, maybe they can get along without me. I got everythin' sys-sys-matized."

Marvin glanced at him quickly. "Bill, I'm afraid you've been having a drink or two?"

"Nope. Nope!" Bill repeated, with the debonair innocence of a mischievous and prevaricating school-boy. "I was just sayin' good-bye to the boys out there." He signified with a jerk of his head that the lumberjacks were responsible if he seemed in any way elated. "You see, they're breakin' up camp – an' I didn't want to hurt their feelin's, as they're all friends o' mine."

Harper, who had resumed his seat in the chair, glanced at Marvin.

"Does our friend Bill know – what we were talking about?"

"Everything!" said Marvin, readily. "Rest easy, Mr. Harper – you'll never find a better friend, nor a more trustworthy one, than Lightnin'. But, surely, you have heard of his hotel, haven't you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I guess you're the only man what 'ain't!" said Bill, emphatically, and gazing at the ceiling and thoroughly enjoying the fact that he was the subject of the conversation.

Rapidly Marvin sketched the conception and success of the Calivada Hotel. "It was a real idea – "

"It was my idea," put in Bill, conversationally.

"It certainly was, Bill!" Marvin went on. "And the new hotel is a big success! You see, the state line runs right through the middle of the house – through the center of the lobby, in fact! There are two separate desks, one on the California side and one on the Nevada side. Women began to arrive, and they all wanted rooms on the Nevada side – and they wanted them for six months!"

Harper roared with laughter. "The Reno divorce brigade!" he exclaimed.

Bill fairly beamed at the attention his affairs were drawing. He sat down on the corner of the table and grinned at Harper, while Marvin went on:

"Exactly! Everybody knows what a woman goes to Reno for, but at Bill's hotel she can get a room on the Nevada side and still make her friends believe that she is at a California resort!"

Again Harper laughed. "A corking good business idea!" he said. "And so it was your idea, Mr. Jones? I congratulate you! I suppose you have been out West here a long time?"

"Sure – came out in the gold excitement," replied Bill, calmly.

Harper stole an amused glance at Marvin. "Why, the gold excitement was away back in forty-nine!"

"Well, they was still excited when I got here!" Bill gazed up at the ceiling, his half-shut eyes hiding their twinkle.

"It's too bad you didn't happen to be one of the lucky ones," Harper consoled him, arising from his chair.

"Lucky?" Bill scratched his head under his ragged slouch-hat. "Say, I located more claims than any man what ever came out here! I been a civil engineer."

The table was not a sufficient throne for Bill, so he slipped down from it and went close to Harper, peering up at him.

"You ought to be a rich man, Mr. Jones!"

"Always cheated out of my share." Bill shook his head sadly. "Crooked partners was the reason."

"Couldn't you do anything to them?"

"I shot some, put all the others in the penitentiary – all but one."

"What happened to him?"

"He died before I got him."

"Died of fright, perhaps?"

"I guess so."

Harper took his hat from the table, clapped Bill on the back, and said, laughingly, "I think I'll get out before you tell me any more!"

Marvin urged him to have a bite of supper, but Harper declined, explaining, as he went to the door, that he had to be in Truckee in two hours, and that it would take him fully that time to make it in his car. Bill, anxious to retain his audience, added his entreaty to Marvin's. That failing, he followed Harper to the door, searching for an excuse to hinder his leaving.

Harper paused at the door. "Well, Marvin," he said, "I'm going to send the trucks down here to-morrow and start hauling. And you might as well disappear from here for a while; then, if there's any kick, no one here will know anything about it. I'll keep you posted. Are you sure you don't want that eight hundred now?" He took out his wallet and again tried to make Marvin take the money, but again Marvin refused.

Bill had been listening to every word. Now he seemed to have hit on a way to detain Harper and at the same time prove his own personal importance. As Harper shook hands with Marvin, Bill took an envelop from his pocket. Drawing a paper from it, he offered it to Harper.

"If you want to get rid of some of that money," he remarked, easily, "maybe you'd cash that check for me."

Harper, examining it, saw that it was a government check. "Oh, a pension check! So you were in the war?"

"First man to enlist!"

Smiling, Harper handed him the check to "indorse" – which happened to be a new word on Bill.

"Write your name on the back of it," said Harper.

"I always do that," said Bill, as he complied. Then he held the check up to the light, pointing to the signatures on its face. "See all them names," he asked, "Secretary of the Treasury, and all of 'em?"

Harper nodded wonderingly.

"Well, they ain't no good at all – not unless I sign it!" said Bill, triumphantly.

Harper laughed; handed Bill the money for the check, and, with a final "Good-night!" hurried out of the door. Bill poked his head out, watching him crank his machine and drive away in the moonlight.

When the car was out of sight Bill turned back into the middle of the room and stood watching Marvin, who had sat down and was eating his delayed supper.

"Better join me, Bill," Marvin again invited, and at the same time noting a change in the old man's manner, now that they were alone.

"No," Bill said; "I had mine with the boys outside, as I told you – but I'll have a drink with you, John," he added, hesitatingly, knowing Marvin's disapproval of his drinking.

"I haven't anything in the house, Bill," said Marvin, as he went on eating. "You know that."

Bill edged slowly toward the table, his hand in the back pocket of his baggy, slouchy trousers. "Yes, you have," he remarked, producing a half-filled flask.

"You mean you have," Marvin replied, trying not to smile. "And you've had enough for to-night. Put it away, Bill, and promise me not to drink any more to-night."

"All right, John," said Bill, unconcernedly, and putting the flask back in his pocket. "I promise – an' I 'ain't never broke a promise yet! I'll keep this for – for emergencies. Say, Oscar told me the railroad had the sheriff after you. You remember the last promise what I give you?"

"What was that, Lightnin'?"

"That if they goes to court, I'll come an' be a witness. I can swear them trees was cut when you sold the property, an' I'll – "

"No, Bill!" said Marvin, putting down his knife and fork and staring at the old man, whose half-shut eyes had the suggestion of a flash in them. "No; I couldn't let you swear to anything like that."

"You can't help yourself – I got a right to swear to anythin' I want!" There was an unexpected finality in Bill's usually drawling voice.

"But I haven't got to prove when those trees were cut," said Marvin.

"I know it," Bill responded; then, catching the smiling doubt in the other's eyes, he added, "I was a lawyer once."

"Then why don't you practise?" asked Marvin, inwardly chuckling.

"Don't need no practice." And Bill resorted to his bag of tobacco and papers, rolling himself a cigarette. By this time Marvin had finished his meal.

"Look here, Lightnin'," he said, as he cleared the table, "you seem to have something on your mind. How are things going up at your place? Anybody at home know that you are here?"

"Not unless they're mind-readers."

"I thought so. Well?"

"It's a wonder you 'ain't come up to take a look yourself," Bill countered. "You 'ain't even been up to – to see Millie," he added, thoughtfully.

Marvin flushed. "That's true, Bill," he said, slowly. "But I've been mighty busy with this timber here, as you know; and, besides – well, Millie seems to be a bit interested elsewhere."

"That's just the trouble, I guess," said Bill, settling himself on the corner of the table.

Marvin looked at him quickly. "What do you mean, Bill?" he demanded.

Lightnin' crossed his legs, took a final puff of his cigarette, and let it drop from his fingers.

"Oh, there ain't nothin' much to that, John!" he replied. "Nothin' to worry about. But it's what lays back o' that."

"For the Lord's sake stop talking in riddles, Lightnin'!" Marvin exclaimed. "What lies back of what?"

"Well," said Bill, looking up shrewdly, "this here Thomas has shown his hand – an' we gotter admit, John, that he plays a mighty smooth an' slick game! He wants to buy our place, waterfall an' all."

"So that's it!" Marvin knew that Thomas had been buying up property in the section, and he knew from experience what sort of treatment the sellers were likely to get. That old Bill and his family should now be involved filled him with concern and anger.

"But surely you're not going to sell, Bill!"

Lightnin' looked up, then down. "The property belongs to mother, John; an' this here Thomas person sure knows how to go after what he wants! He made himself solid with mother an' Millie some time ago, as you know. They think he's Santa Claus, or somethin'. Why, he's got mother an' Millie all het up so's they don't know whether they're standin' on their head or feet! Mother's kinder

simple about some things, John – but Millie oughter have more sense! He's been tellin' them that this here hotel idea won't pay for long, an' that he's willin' to buy the place at once for a good price. He tells 'em as how they can enjoy themselves an' live comfortable on the proceeds – an' I can have a nice, easy old age! He 'ain't said much to me, o' course – I don't give him a chance to find me around, much. But he's got the womenfolk all fed up, eatin' out o' his yaller gloves, an' crazy to sell. An' – an' mother an' Millie is kinder sore at me 'cause I ain't takin' much interest in the proposition. Say, what was the name o' that feller what acted as agent for the railroad an' bought your property from Thomas when he done you out of it?"

"Hammond, Everett Hammond," said Marvin. "Go on, Bill – I'm listening!"

"Hammond, eh? To – be – sure. Well, Mister Everett Hammond is up at the hotel now, John, with Thomas – Hammond come up in a hurry, an' they got a deed to the property all ready fer mother an' me to sign. Mother's crazy to sign, but I ain't – not yet. An' it seems they gotter have my name on it, to make sure."

"What – you mean to say it has gone that far!" exclaimed Marvin.

"Sure thing," said Bill, rolling another cigarette. "An' say, I happen to think them two – Hammond an' Thomas – has been in cahoots fer some time – got an idea they is actually partners."

"What makes you think that?"

"I was a detective once," said Bill, with a sudden return to his usual manner, as he lighted the cigarette.

Marvin made an impatient gesture. "Hang it! This is really too bad, Bill! Look here, I'll see if I can do anything! I'm going to come up to the hotel to-morrow as soon as I can get away from here! You're not going to sign that deed, are you, Lightnin'?"

"No," replied Bill, slowly, a little nervously; "no – but mother an' Millie is kinder hot on my trail fer to make me do it. Them two fellers has sure got 'em goin', John! Well, I guess as they'll all be in bed by the time I gets back now, so I'll be gettin' along. You'll be up to-morrow, John?"

"I'll come – don't worry, Lightnin'," said Marvin. "Better go now, Bill; you've got a long walk ahead of you, you know."

He dropped into his chair and reached thoughtfully for one of his law-books. Bill opened the door; then turned back for a moment.

"Studyin' them books?" he inquired.

"Trying to," Marvin remarked, turning a page.

"That's right – that's how I got *my* start!" said Bill, as he went out.

CHAPTER V

The following morning, rising at dawn, Mrs. Jones again tried to awaken her husband to a full sense of his shortcomings anent his foolish reluctance to sign the deed to the property. Bill, however, merely turned on the pillow, gave her a brief smile, and dropped quickly into a gentle snore. After several more attempts to awaken him and impress on him the fact that his absence the day before had kept Thomas and Hammond on a day longer when they had important business calling them to the city, she gave up in despair and went below to look after breakfast, taking with her the packet of letters that should have been in the hands of the guests the afternoon previous.

The morning was a busy one for Mrs. Jones and Millie. Bill, coming down unexpectedly, escaped them, calling through the door, on his way out, that he was going for the mail. When noon came and Bill did not turn up, Mrs. Jones's anxiety reached fever pitch, and she sought Millie in the hope that she could offer some solution of the problem of forcing the deed through Bill's unwilling hands.

At breakfast, Thomas and Hammond again had painted to her and Millie golden pictures of the ease and even luxury that would be theirs as a result of the sale of the property. Trembling with anticipation, Mrs. Jones had then and there put her name to the deed which disposed of her last bit of land; and she was determined that, no matter what it cost her in seeming coldness and harshness toward him, Bill should be made to place his name directly under hers. She made up her mind that he should be brought to terms as soon as he got back; hence her extreme annoyance as the morning went by without his showing up.

As she went about the house, looking for Millie, her determination took on a hard and bitter aspect which was only softened when she caught the sound of Raymond Thomas's voice. He was speaking softly to Millie in the lobby. Mrs. Jones belonged to a generation not so long past when eavesdropping was not considered a wholly unworthy occupation if it tended to place the culprit in a position to know the inner secrets of those bound by the tie of relationship. For some time, so cleverly did he manage her, Mrs. Jones had felt a motherly tenderness for Thomas springing up within her, and she hoped and dreamed that her affection would have a chance to express itself. That Thomas was in love with Millie she had fully decided on. It was for this reason that the very sight of John Marvin, whom she knew to be a poor young man with no particular prospects, filled her with displeasure. Then, too, she did not approve of her husband's friendship with Marvin, having a strong suspicion that Marvin was influencing Bill against Thomas, and an intuition that Bill, in his unworldliness, would stand back of Marvin's love for Millie.

And so it was that the sight of Millie smiling up at Thomas as he looked earnestly down into the girl's brown eyes set Mrs. Jones's heart beating hopefully – and sent her behind a curtain to listen to what was being said.

Thomas had just come in from the veranda, where he had begged to be excused from accompanying two prospective widows on a walk to see the waterfall at the edge of the place. He was smiling with affected indifference when he met Mildred, who had just come down one of the stairways, of which there were two, one leading to the Nevada side of the house and the other to the California side. "It's a shame to miss a stroll with them!" belying his words with a sneering toss of the head and shrug of the shoulders.

Millie's brow was drawn thoughtfully into wrinkles and there was a wistful pucker to her mouth.

At once he was all attention. "What is the matter, Millie?" he asked, a note bordering on tenderness in his voice.

"It's daddy again. He did not get back until midnight, and he was off again this morning before mother or I could prevent him. I just heard the boarders complaining about the mail service. It's all so hard on mother, and yet" – she hesitated, her mind reverting to her foster-father's kindness to her

through all the years of her babyhood and girlhood – "and yet," she went on, "he's really so good and kind at heart, he really would feel dreadfully if he understood what he puts us through." She stood by the newel-post, her eyes pleading for advice.

Thomas took her hand and looked at it thoughtfully.

For a moment Millie let it lie in his; then her lids dropped and she blushed, withdrawing her hand and walking slowly toward one of the desks, of which there were also two, one on each side of the hall.

Thomas followed her, bending down and looking into her face. "I would not let his absence bother you. I'm going up-stairs to pack my grips. As soon as I finish I'll go after him," he said, soothingly, as, one hand in pocket, he let the other flip a pack of cards on the table.

"Oh, you've been too kind already," Millie protested, again meeting his eyes and turning away, her lips quivering.

"Oh, I'm not so kind as you think!" He laughed, an honest humor rising to infrequent expression. "I've got to see Lightnin' myself before I go. He hasn't signed the deed yet, and – "

"I really can't see what he's got to do with it!" Millie interrupted. "The place is mother's. Oh, well" – she sighed and shook her head in despair – "I suppose to be safe his signature must be obtained. I do hope he'll turn up before you leave. It's too bad – "

"Well, if he doesn't, maybe you and Mrs. Jones can make him see the light. I'll leave the papers with you, and when he signs them you can send for me and I'll be up and – "

"You don't know how much I appreciate all you've done for us. Now don't say it's nothing." Millie turned and put her hand on his arm, her eyes resting intently on his.

He bent over her for a minute, then straightened up as he heard a slight movement in the portière, a gleam of wisdom illuminating his face. He smiled with a nonchalant disregard of his former intention and backed away from the girl.

Millie's color mounted her forehead. Shyly she withdrew her hand from his arm and fumbled with the bunch of keys about her neck. After an awkward silence she continued:

"You've been so good to us. When mother and I've been in such distress that we did not know where to turn and mother was nearly frantic, you come forward and in no time arrange everything so that mother and daddy are going to be better off than they ever dreamed of. For years, you know, mother and I have worried about her and daddy's old age. Piece by piece we've sold the land and the timber. Even if this place does pay it will only be running expenses, with nothing saved up, as you said. And then the Nevada divorce laws might change. Oh! You've been so kind," she breathed, in deep sincerity.

"Now don't make me ashamed," Thomas coaxed in his soothing way, backing slowly toward the stairs on the California side. "What I've done is just the simplest thing in the world. I grew to be very fond of you when you were in my office, Millie, and I'm glad to be of what service I can."

As he was half-way up the stairs, Mrs. Jones emerged from behind the portière. He stopped and bent in a nattering bow, a twinkle in his eye. "Why, good morning, Mrs. Jones!" he called down.

"Oh, excuse me!" Mrs. Jones, a guilty conscience bringing his courtly sarcasm, which would otherwise have escaped her gullible nature, into notice, stepped back, turning to the kitchen, whence she had come when she stopped to listen. But Millie followed her, and, with arm around her waist, drew her into the room and seated her near the table.

"You're not going into that hot kitchen again to-day," remonstrated Millie, planting a daughterly kiss on her cheek. "You've been out there working like a slave for three mortal hours."

Mrs. Jones hid her hands awkwardly under her apron and reddened as she glanced up at Thomas, who had come back from above-stairs.

"I don't look presentable," she murmured, fidgeting in the chair.

"Come now, you mustn't mind me," said Thomas, Millie adding her word to his: "Please stay there just for a few minutes, mother. You look ready to drop."

"She's always tellin' me that." Mrs. Jones showed her pleasure in Millie's concern by beaming knowingly from one to the other, an act which sent Millie to the desk, where she pretended to look at the register.

Thomas smiled. "Millie's right," he responded. "You do work a great deal too hard; but it won't be long now before you can say good-by to hard work for the rest of your life."

"Oh, Mr. Thomas!" Mrs. Jones arose, forgetting the red, hardened hands she had been endeavoring to hide behind the blue and white checked apron, and hastened to Thomas, holding them toward him in a gesture half of gratitude, half of pleading. "I can scarcely realize that all this is going to come true and we owe it all to you. I only wish I could tell you how grateful I am."

Thomas was quite determined to escape further enthusiasm, either on Millie's or on Mrs. Jones's part. His game nearly played, he wished to withdraw gracefully and without detriment to a certain lurking decency which had not quite been swept away. Thwarting Mrs. Jones's attempt to wring his hand in gratitude, he took two light bounds up the stairs, stopping to laugh back: "Well, I'm going to get out for fear you'll spoil me with a thankfulness I don't deserve. Hang on to her, Millie." He directed a gleam toward the young girl as she went up to her mother. "Make her take a rest."

"Oh dear! Do you think I've driven him away?" There was genuine concern in Mrs. Jones's voice as she sank back into the chair and gazed anxiously after Thomas.

"No, you haven't." Millie smoothed the brown hair which was fast streaking with gray from her brow, damp with excitement. "He is going up-stairs to pack. He's arranged everything about selling the place, and there's nothing more for him to stay –"

"You're here, ain't you?" Mrs. Jones folded her arms stiffly across her chest and assumed a rigid position in her chair as she questioned Millie with eyes suddenly grown fierce with the look of an angry hen when she thinks her brood has been disturbed.

"Oh, mother!" The girl pursed her lips into a pouting smile as she leaned over the back of the chair, an affectionate arm on Mrs. Jones's shoulder. "Please get that foolish idea out of your head. You know –"

"Know nothin'." Mrs. Jones's head jerked vehemently while she insisted: "Every letter you wrote home all the time you was workin' in his office showed that he cared for you."

"I never wrote anything of the sort!" Millie drew a surprised breath as her mouth was drawn into a tiny O of expostulation. "Never!" she reiterated, with a slight stamp of her foot, as she went to the California desk and became absorbed in the register.

"Oh, I could read between the lines! I ain't that stupid. If he isn't in love with you, why is he plannin' for us to come and live in San Francisco? Oh, won't it be grand!" Mrs. Jones, carried away by the recollection of a long-ago visit to the city, and by a dream of what a permanent life there would be, resumed her own hearty enthusiasm. "I want to live in the city real bad, but I'm just skeered to death I won't know how to dress. I want to get a lot o' pretty things 'n' be like the women I saw when I was at the Palace. Do ye think Bill 'll think I'm getting crazy?"

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