

One Life's Influence.

In the depth of the gulch it was still dark. Along the topmost ridges of the hills facing the east were faint traces of the coming day.

All the houses in the gulch were quiet and dark, except for the hotel and saloons. They were never either dark or quiet. One "all night restaurant" was dimly lighted and a Chinaman, small and wizened and yellow stood with folded arms gazing into the muddy street.

The air was good, it was full of spring and the sweet breath of pine trees.

The hotel door opened and two men stepped out. They stood just without the door, leaning against the building.

"Fine night, Mac."
"Humph!" the other grunted.
"How's the coach, on time?" the first one ventured.

"Yep."
"She ought ter be long directly," he paused and listened. A faint rumble of something could be heard down the gulch. "Thar she comes. I'd better hit fer the stable," and he was off in the dim, grey darkness.

The other waited until the big lumbering Tally-ho, with six horses, drew up in front of the hotel. Then he crossed the narrow sidewalk and opened the coach door. A woman stepped out of the black interior. She was the only passenger.

"Step right inside, Miss," he said. "I'll lug the bag."

"Thank you," she answered pleasantly.

"That a hot load o' passengers ye bring me," he called to the stage driver.

"Best I cud do, Mac. Too many Injuns down the line. They's all skeered out," and with a crack of his whip he sent the stage lumbering up the street.

Mac went inside. The woman, or was she a girl? stood leaning against the office desk. Mac went around behind this and handed her a pen and pointed to the register. She took the pen and hesitated a moment, then wrote simply, "Meriam."

Mac looked at her an instant. "Merriam what?" he said gruffly. "Just Meriam," she answered, and her eyes dropped.

"Umph! Hey boy! Show the lady to No. 16."

PART II.

The house stood well back from the dusty street. It was a two-story house, large, square and white, shaded by tall chestnut and tulip trees so that the sun rarely found it. The grounds were large and well kept. Neat walks bordered by beds of mignonette and foxglove led here and there. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

A tall, lithe, young man sat on the railing which ran around the deep portico of the house, smoking a cigarette and lazily watching the thin rings of bluish smoke rise slowly in the humid atmosphere.

John Wait was known throughout the little village of Oroville as shiftless. His father was well to do through speculations in oil; his mother was dead and his one sister shunned him because of the company he kept. So he kept his fast companions, gambled and drank with the best of them, and lost large sums of his father's money on horse races.

He had not always been this way, and his "going" had been gradual. His mother was a southern woman of great beauty and charm and an affection had existed between her and her son of the deepest and most beautiful nature. She had been taken from her family suddenly and John was completely broken. His sister's grief, after the first heart ache, had been expressed entirely by her black attire. His father was a man of few words and had little in common with his children. Beyond supplying them with money and a home, he did little for them.

John after his mother's death turned first to his father, but his offers and appeals for sympathy were met coldly. His sister was of her father's temperament.

Gradually he drifted away from the life his mother had taught him. His heart was hardened by constant rebuffs and he sought new scenes and pleasures in the hope of finding forgetfulness.

As he sat on the porch that July

morning the words of his father, who had just left him, kept ringing in his ears. "You'll turn over a new leaf, young man, or I'll give you your allowance of my money and turn you out of here. Understand, sir; no one can live under my roof and act as you do."

John had not answered him and his father had walked slowly away.

He sat silently smoking for over an hour. At last, throwing away the stump of his cigarette he stood up and stretched himself.

"Well, I suppose I'd better decide," he said, yawning.

He drew a coin from his pocket. "Heads I stay, tails I go," he said softly. The coin glittered in the air a moment, then dropped to the floor. "Tails up."

PART III.

"We're all good, rollicking fellows. We're all good, rollicking fellows. We're all good, rollicking fellows. And drink the best on call."

"Oh, come. You fellows forget that you never sang in grand opera, and let's get something to eat. I'm starved."

The two who had been singing linked arms with the third, and they moved on up the street.

It was a moonless night, but the stars were brilliant and the blue of the heavens was deep and dark, but in the depths of the gulch the night was black, so that the light streaming from the windows of an "all night" restaurant was visible a long way off. Towards it the three young men wound their way.

"Now, John, my boy, being that you're now here, and so is she, I want to tell you about her."

The tallest of the three was speaking and talking to the one in the middle, while the one on the farther side was smoking a cigarette and still humming softly—

"We're all good, rollicking fellows."

"You see, I'm the one that got you started towards this 'fairy' tonight, by bringing you along to get something to eat, so I want to give you fair warning. Oh, my boy, she's a stunner. She has the eyes that do the work, put the blinders on Johnnie before you look at her, or you're sure a gone one."

"She came in on the stage a few weeks ago, nobody seems to know exactly where from, and registered at the hotel as 'Meriam,' that's all Mac could get out of her. A week after she came she went to work waiting table for Sing Lee and she's been at it ever since. When she first started she was pretty green. I guess this is her 'debut.' You wait till you see her, John—say—I didn't mean that as a pun on your name. John Wait's too good a name to bandy about. But here we are. Now, Harvey, my boy, you'll have to loose that little song of yours. That's right, 'cast' it in the gutter with your cigarette."

"All right, Prince. But here," he plucked the other's sleeve and pulled him into the shadow.

"Can you work any money out of Wait?" he whispered, hurriedly. "I'm dead broke. Is he 'Johnnie Wise,' or can you spring some of the old grafts on him. Steer him down to Bunce Jim's crap game."

"I'll try it, little one," the other replied, and pushed him into the restaurant ahead of him. Wait was already within.

The three seated themselves at a table facing the swinging doors at the rear of the rather long and narrow room. These soon opened and the girl, Meriam, came through into the dining room. Wait looked at her first carelessly, then noticed her closely, as she came up to them.

She was of medium height, rather slender; dressed in a tight fitting gown of plain, dark blue stuff. Her hair was combed back from her forehead plainly, and done in a simple knot low down on her neck in the back. It was a reddish brown in color, and there was much of it. The face was round and full, and the deep blue eyes held a questioning, patient, hopeful look. The mouth was small and delicate. The nose was long and straight, the nostrils delicately formed. In every sense the face was refined.

She looked up and caught Wait's glance, held it an instant and then her eyes dropped and she flushed slightly. Wait looked down and shuffled his feet uneasily. His own face was not pale. She took their orders in silence and left them.

"Well, John, what thinkest thou?"

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Prince asked.

"I don't think, I know. She doesn't belong in a place like this. I'd like to know more about her, and Gad! I will, too; even if I have to ask her."

PART IV.

To the inhabitants of Woldron very few things appeared strange. They asked no questions of you and wished the same courtesy shown them. Of course, there were men who lacked these niceties of understanding, but they were not considered legitimate representatives of the town.

Two men who fell without the pale were Prince and "The Little One," as they were known. They dressed well and were good to look upon, but that was all. They gambled from sun up till moonset, no one knew when they slept, much less cared. Where they came from was an equal mystery; they simply "came," and "were," that was sufficient.

To the class of men who were familiar with them, it was a source of comment that a fellow of the seeming character of John Wait should have dealings with the pair. Strange as it seemed, a close intimacy grew up between the three. Prince and "The Little One" were not refined, while everything about Wait was.

Moreover Wait and Meriam became great friends. They were often seen together and seemed happy in simply being with each other.

Not one word had been said against Meriam since she came. To such men as Prince she gave as he expressed it, "the marble stare." Prince's vocabulary was a wonder in itself. He was not a profane man, gambling had taught him a different lesson.

Wait did nothing but run through, as fast as possible, the money he had. He often wondered, to Prince, what he would do when it was gone, and would receive the reply, accompanied by a

suggestive shrug of the shoulders:

"Don't give up the ship!"

"That's no answer," Wait retorted, one day. "I'll answer it for myself. I've got to go to work."

"Oh——" Prince drawled. "The girl's after you. Yes?"

"That's none of your — business," Wait flashed back, and walked off up the street.

"I see I'll lose you pretty soon, honey," Prince mused after him, "but I'll fleece you of every cent you've got before she gets you. Ah! There's 'The Little One.'"

PART V.

Prince and "The Little One" sat in a small room which opened off the rear of "Jim's Place." There were a table between them on which rested glasses and a bottle. Prince was speaking earnestly. "The Little One" drummed on the table and smoked.

"I guess the game's up, 'Little One.' I'm afraid our goose with the golden egg has flown the coop. When it comes to dealing with women like that Meriam, I'm out. She's one too many for me. You see Wait's known her now for three months, and for the past two he's been with her every day; he's got it bad, and from what I can see, I guess it's mutual. I can't discount her influence."

"Well, did he shake you for good?" the other demanded.

"I guess he did. Told me that our interests weren't in common any more, that he'd at last come to his senses. Said he was much obliged to you for the lessons we taught him. I told him to keep the change."

"I reckon he did," drawled "The Little One." Prince smiled and drained the bottle on the table, and the two sat in silence for some minutes.

"We've been in this camp about long enough, don't you think, 'Little One?'"

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