

TOMORROW'S TANGLE

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TOMORROW'S TANGLE



"THAT'S MY LIFE,—TO WORK IN WILD PLACES WITH MEN"

PROLOGUE

TOMORROW'S TANGLE

CHAPTER I THE DESERT

"To every man a damsel or two."

—JUDGES.

The vast, gray expanse of the desert lay still as a picture in the heat of the early afternoon. The silence of waste places held it. It was gaunt and sterile, clad with a drab growth of sage, flat as a table, and with the white scurf of the alkali breaking through its parched skin. It was the earth, lean, sapless, and marked with disease. A chain of purple hills looked down on its dead level, over which a wagon road passed like a scar across a haggard face. From the brazen arch of the sky heat poured down and was thrown back from the scorched surface of the land. It was August in the Utah Desert in the early fifties.

In the silence and deadness of the scene there was one point of life. The canvas top of an emigrant wagon made a white spot on the monotone of gray. At noon there had been but one shadow in the desert and this was that beneath the wagon which was stationary in the road. Now the sun was declining from the zenith and the shadow was broadening; first a mere edge, then a substantial margin of shade.

In it two women were crouched watching a child that lay gasping. Some distance away beside his two horses, a man sat on the ground, his hat over his eyes.

One of the thousand tragedies the desert had seen was being enacted. Crushed between that dead indifference of earth and sky, its participators seemed to feel the hopelessness of movement or plaint and sat dumb, all but the child, who was dying with that solemn aloofness to surroundings, of which only those who are passing know the secret. His loud breathing sounded like a defiance in the silence of that savagely unsympathizing nature. The man, the women, the horses, were like part of the picture in their mute immobility, only the dying child dared defy it.

He was a pretty boy of three, and had succumbed to one of the slight, juvenile ailments that during the rigors of the overland march developed tragic powers of death. His mother sat beside him staring at him. She was nineteen years of age and had been married four years before to the man who sat in the shadow of the horses. She looked forty, tanned, haggard, half clad. Dazed by hardship and the blow that had just fallen, she had the air of a stupefied animal. She said nothing and made no attempt to alleviate the sufferings of her first-born.

The other woman was some ten years older, and was a buxom, handsome creature, large-framed, capable, stalwart—a woman built for struggles and endurance—the mate of the pioneer. She, too, was the wife of the man who sat by the horses. He was of the Mormon faith, which he had joined a year before for the purpose of marrying her.

The sun sloped its burning course across the pale sky. The edges of the desert shimmered through veils of heat. Far on the horizon the mirage of a blue lake, with little waves creeping up a crescent of sand, painted itself on the quivering air. The shadow of the wagon stealthily advanced. Suddenly the child moved, drew a fluttering breath or two, and died. The two women leaned forward, the mother helplessly; the other, with a certain prompt decision that marked all her movements, felt of the pulse and heart.

“It’s all over, Lucy,” she said brusksly, but not unkindly; “I guess you’d better get into the wagon; Jake and I’ll do everything.”

The girl rose slowly like a person accustomed to obey, moved to the back of the wagon, and climbed in.

The man, who had seen this sudden flutter of activity, pushed back his hat and looked at his wives, but did not move or speak. The second wife covered the dead child with her apron, and approached him.

“He’s dead,” she said.

“Oh!” he answered.

“We must bury him,” was her next remark.

“Well, all right,” he assented.

He went to the wagon and detached from beneath it a spade. Then he walked a few rods away and, clearing a space in the sage, began to dig. The woman prepared the child for burial. The silence that had been disturbed resettled, broken at intervals by the thud of the spade. The heat began to lessen and

a still serenity to possess the barren landscape. The desert had received its tribute and was appeased.

The rites of the burial were nearly completed, when a sound from the wagon attracted the attention of the man and the woman. They stopped, listened and exchanged a glance of alarmed intelligence. The woman walked to the wagon rapidly, and exchanged a few remarks with the other wife. Her voice came to the man low and broken. He did not hear what she said, but he thought he knew the purport of her words. As he shoveled the earth into the grave his brow was contracted. He looked angrily harassed. The second wife came toward him, her sunburnt face set in an expression of frowning anxiety.

“Yes,” she said, in answer to his look, “she feels very bad. We got to stop here. We can’t go on now.”

He made no answer, but went on building up the mound over the grave. He was younger by a year or two than the woman with whom he spoke, but it was easy to be seen that of her, as of all pertaining to him, he was absolute master. She watched him for a moment as if waiting for an order, then, receiving none, said:

“I’d better go back to her. I wish a train’d come by with a doctor. She ain’t got much strength.”

He vouchsafed no answer, and she returned to the wagon, and this time climbed in.

He continued to build up and shape the mound with sedulous and evidently absent-minded care. The sweat poured off his forehead and his bare, brown throat and breast. He was a lean

but powerful man, worn away by the journey to bone and muscle, but of an iron fiber. He had no patience with those who hampered his forward march by sickness or feebleness.

When he had finished the mound the sun was declining toward the tops of the distant mountains. The first color of its setting was inflaming the sky and painting the desert in tones of strange, hot brilliancy. The vast, grim expanse took on a tropical aspect. Against the lurid background the chain of hills turned a transparent amethyst, and the livid earth, with its leprous eruption, was transformed into a pale lilac-blue. Presently the thin, clear red of the sunset was pricked by a white star-point. And in the midst of this vivid blending of limpid primary colors, the fire the man had kindled sent a fine line of smoke straight up into the air.

The second wife came out of the wagon to help him get the supper and to eat hers. They talked a little in low voices as they ate, drawn away from the heat of the fire. The man showed symptoms of fatigue; but the powerful woman was unconquered in her stubborn, splendid vigor. When she had left him, he lay down on the sand with his face on his arm and was soon asleep. The sounds of dole that came from the wagon did not wake him, nor disturb the deep dreamlessness of his exhausted rest. The night was half spent, when he was wakened by the woman shaking his shoulder. He looked up at her stupidly for a minute, seeing her head against the deep blue sky with its large white stars.

“It’s over. It’s a little girl. But Lucy’s pretty bad.”

He sat up, fully awake now, and in the stillness of the night heard the cat-like mew of the new-born. The canvas arch of the wagon glowed with a fiery effect from the lighted lanterns within.

“Is she dying?” he said hurriedly.

“No—not’s bad as that. But she’s terribly low. We’ll have to stay here with her till she pulls up some. We can’t move on with her this way.”

He rose and, going to the wagon, looked in through the opened flap. His wife was lying with her eyes closed, waxen pale in the smoky lantern-light. The sight of her shocked him into a sudden spasm of feeling. She had been a fresh and pretty girl of fifteen when he had married her, four years before at St. Louis. He wondered if her father, who had given her to him then, would have known her now. In an excess of careless pity he laid his hand on her and said:

“Well, Lucy, how d’ye feel?”

She shrank from his touch and tried to draw a corner of the blanket, on which her head rested, over her face.

He turned away and walked back to the fire, saying to the second wife:

“I guess she’ll be able to go on to-morrow. She can stay in the wagon all the time. I don’t want to run no risks ’er gittin’ caught in the snows on the Sierra. I guess she’ll pull herself together all right in a few days. I’ve seen her worse ’n that.”

CHAPTER II

STRIKING A BARGAIN

“How the world is made for each of us!
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moments’ product thus,
When a soul declares itself—to wit:
By its fruit, the thing it does!”

—BROWNING.

Where the foothills fold back upon one another in cool, blue shadows, and the tops of the Sierra, brushed with snow, look down on a rugged rampart of mountains falling away to a smiling plain, Dan Moreau and his partner had been working a stream bed since June. Placerville—still Hangtown—though already past the feverish days of its first youth, was some twenty-five miles to the southwest. A few miles to the south the emigrant trail from Carson crawled over the shoulder of the Sierra. Small trails broke from the parent one and trickled down from the summit, by “the line of least resistance,” to the outposts of civilization that were planted here and there on foothill and valley.

The cañon where Moreau and his “pard” were at work was California, virgin and unconquered. The forty-niners had passed it by in their eager rush for fortune. Yet the narrow gulch, that steamed at midday with heated airs and was steeped in the pungent fragrance which California exhales beneath the ardors of the sun, was yielding the two miners a

good supply of gold. Their pits had honeycombed the stream's banks far up and down. Now, in September, the water had dwindled to a silver thread, and they had dammed it near the rocker into a miniature lake, into which Fletcher—Moreau's partner—plunged his dipper with untiring regularity, at the same time moving the rocker which filled the hot silence of the cañon with its lazy monotonous rattle.

They had been working with little cessation since early June. The richness of their claim and the prospect that the first snows would put an end to labors and profits had spurred them to unremitting exertion. In a box under Moreau's bunk there were six small buckskin sacks of dust, joint profits of the summer's toil.

Moreau, a muscular, fair-haired giant of a man, was that familiar figure of the early days—the gentleman miner. He was a New Englander of birth and education, who had come to California in the first rush, with a little fortune wherewith to make a great one. Luck had not been with him. This was his first taste of success. Five months before he had picked up a "pard" in Sacramento, and after the careless fashion of the time, when no one sought to inquire too closely into another's antecedents, joined forces with him and spent a wandering spring, prospecting from bar to bar and camp to camp. The casual words of an Indian had directed them to the cañon where now the creak of their rocker filled the hot, drowsy days.

Of Harney Fletcher, Moreau knew nothing. He had met him in a lodging-house in Sacramento, and the partnership proved to be a successful one. What the New Englander furnished in money, the other made up in practical experience and general

handiness. It was Fletcher who had constructed the rocker on an improved model of his own. His had been the directing brain as well as the assisting hand which had built the cabin of logs that surveyed the stream bed from a knoll above. The last remnants of Moreau's fortune had stocked it well, and there were two good horses in the brush shed behind it.

It was now September, and the leaves of the aspens that grew along the stream bed were yellowing. But the air was warm and golden with sunshine. Above, in the high places of the Sierra, where the emigrant trail crept along the edges of ravines and crawled up the mighty flank of the wall that shuts the garden of California from the desert beyond, the snow was already deep. Fletcher, who had gone into Hangtown the week before for provisions, had come back full of stories of the swarms of emigrants pouring down the main road and its branching trails, higgledy-piggledy, pell-mell, hungry, gaunt, half clad, in their wild rush to enter the land of promise.

There was no suggestion of winter here. The hot air was steeped in the aromatic scents that the sun draws from the mighty pines which clothe the foothills. At midday the little gulley where the men worked was heavy with them. All about them was strangely silent. The pines rising rank on rank stirred to no passing breezes. There was no bird note, and the stream had shrunk so that its spring-time song had become a whisper. Heat and silence held the long days, when the red dust lay motionless on the trail above, and the noise made by the rocker sounded strangely intrusive and loud in the enchanted stillness that held the landscape.

On an afternoon like this the men were working in the stream bed—Moreau in the pit, Fletcher at his place by the rocker. There was no conversation between them. The picture-like dumbness of their surroundings seemed to have communicated itself to them. Far above, glittering against the blue, the white peaks of the Sierra looked down on them from remote, aërial heights. The tiny thread of water gleamed in its wide, unoccupied bed. Save the men, the only moving thing in sight was a hawk that hung poised in the sky above, its winged shadow floating forward and pausing on the slopes of the gulch.

Into this spellbound silence a sound suddenly broke—a sound unexpected and unwished for—that of a human voice. It was a man's, harsh and loud, evidently addressing cattle. With it came the creak of wheels. The two partners listened, amazed and irresolute. The trail that passed their cabin was an almost unknown offshoot from the main highway. Then, the sounds growing clearer, they scrambled up the bank. Coming down the road they saw the curved top of a prairie schooner that formed a background for the forms of two skeleton horses, beside which walked a man who urged them on with shouts and blows. Wagon and horses were enveloped in a cloud of red dust.

At the moment that the miners saw this unwelcome sight, one of the wretched beasts stumbled, and pitching forward, fell with what sounded like a human groan. The man, with an oath, went to it and gave it a kick. But it was too far spent to rally, and settling on its side, lay gasping. A woman, stout and sunburned, ran round from the back of the cart, with a face of angry consternation. As Moreau approached, he heard her say

to the man who, with oaths and blows, was attempting to drag the horse to its feet:

“Oh, it ain’t no use doing that. Don’t you see it’s dying?”

Moreau saw that she was right. The animal was in its death throes. As he came up he said, without preliminaries:

“Take off its harness, the poor brute’s done for,” and began to unbuckle the rags of harness which held it to the wagon.

The man and woman turned, startled, and saw him. Looking back they saw Fletcher, who was coming slowly, and evidently not very willingly, forward. The sight of the exhausted pioneers was a too familiar one to interest him. The dying horse claimed a lazy cast of his indifferent eye. Moreau and the man loosed the harness, lifted the pole, and let the creature lie free from encumbrance. The other horse, freed, too, stood drooping, too spent to move from where it had stopped. If other testimony were needed of the terrible journey they were ending, one saw it in the gaunt face of the man, scorched by sun, seamed with lines, with a fringe of ragged beard, and long locks of unkempt hair hanging from beneath his miserable hat.

This stoppage of his journey with the promised land in sight seemed to exasperate him to a point where he evidently feared to speak. With eyes full of savage despair he stood looking at the horse. Both he and the woman seemed so overpowered by the calamity that they had no attention to give to the two strangers, but stood side by side, staring morosely at the animal.

“What’ll we do?” she said hopelessly. “Spotty,” indicating the other horse, “ain’t no use alone.”

Moreau spoke up encouragingly.

“Why don’t you leave the wagon and the other horse here? You can walk into Hangtown by easy stages. The Porter ranch is only twelve miles from here and you can stay there all night. The poor beast can’t do much more, and we’ll feed it and take care of your other things while you’re gone.”

“Oh, damn it, we can’t!” said the man furiously.

As if in explanation of this remark, a woman suddenly appeared at the open front of the wagon. She had evidently been lying within it, and had not risen until now.

When Moreau looked at her he experienced a violent thrill of pity, that the evident sufferings of the others had not evoked. He was a man of a deeply tender and sympathetic nature toward all that was helpless and weak. As his glance met the face of this woman, he thought she was the most piteous object he had ever seen.

“You’d better come into the cabin,” he said, “and see what you can do. You can’t go on now, and you look pretty well used up.”

The man gave a grunt of assent, and taking the other horse by the head began to lead it toward the cabin, being noticeably careful to steer it out of the way of all stumbling-blocks. The woman in the sunbonnet called to her companion in the wagon:

“Come, Lucy, get a move on! We’re going to stop and rest.”

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