

'I ain't scar't o' work,' she retorted valiantly, 'but—'

It's settled, then,' said Arthur, in his masterful way. 'If you'll get down I'll unhitch the mule and put him in the barn. My brother will show you the house.'

She descended, protesting, but we could not catch the words that fell from her lips.

'You must tell us your name,' said Arthur.

'It's Gloriana,' she faltered.

'Gloriana! Gloriana—what?'

'Jest—Gloriana.'

'She is a type,' said Arthur a few days later.

'A type of what?'

'Of the women who suffer and are not strong. I'd like to hear her story. Is she married or single? old or young? crazy or sane?'

'Gloriana,' I answered, 'satisfies our appetite, but not our curiosity.'

As time passed, her reticence upon all personal matters became exasperating. At the end of the first month she demanded and received her salary. Moreover, refusing our escort, she tramped three dusty miles to the village post-office; and returned penniless but jubilant. At supper Arthur said:

'It's more blessed to give than to receive—eh, Gloriana?'

She compressed her lips, but her eyes were sparkling.

During the month of October she spent all her leisure hours locked up in her own room. We often heard her singing softly to herself, keeping time to the click of her needle. When pay-day came she demanded leave of absence. The village, she told us, was sadly behind the times, and with our permission she proposed to drive her mule and buckboard to the country seat—San Lorenzo.

'I've business of importance,' she said proudly, 'ter transack.'

She returned the following evening with a 'larger parcel than the first.'

'I've bought a bonnet,' she confessed shyly, 'an' trimmin's.'

We prevailed upon her to show us these purchases: white satin ribbon, jet, and a feather. The 'locating' of this splendid plume was no easy task.

'Maxims,' sighed Gloriana, 'is mostly rubbish. Now, fine feathers—an' there ain't a finer feather than this in San Lorenzy county—don't make fine birds. A sparrer is always a sparrer, an' can't look like an ostridge noway. But, good land, feathers is my weakness.'

She burned much oil that night, and on the morrow the phoenix that sprang from the flames was proudly displayed.

'I bought more'n a bonnet yesterday,' she said, with her head on one side and a slyly complacent smile on her lips. 'Yes, sir, stuff ter make a dress—a party dress, the finest kind o' goods.'

Arthur stared helplessly at me. The mystery that encompassed this woman was positively indecent.

'An' shoes,' she concluded. 'I bought me a pair, hand-sewn, with French tips—very dressy.'

Later, inspired by tobacco, we agreed that the problem was solved. Our head vaquero, Uncle Jap, gaunt as a coyote, and quite as hungry, had fallen a victim to Gloriana's charms as a cook.

The November rains were unusually heavy that year, and confined us to the house. Gloriana had borrowed a sewing-machine from a neighbor, and worked harder than ever, inflaming her eyes and our curiosity. We speculated daily upon her past, present, and future, having little else to distract us. We waxed fat in idleness, but the cook grew lean.

'You are losing flesh, Gloriana,' said I, noting her sunken cheeks and glittering eyes.

'In a good cause,' she replied fervently. 'Any ways, ther ain't a happier woman than me in the State o' Californy! Well, I'm most through with my sewin', an' I'd like ter show yer both what I've done, but—'

'We have been waiting for this, Gloriana,' said Arthur tartly. 'As a member of the family you have not treated my brother and myself fairly. This mysterious work of yours is not only wearing you to skin and bone, it is consuming us with curiosity.'

'Ye're jokin', Mr. Arthur.'

'This is no joking matter, Gloriana.'

She blushed and glanced indecisively at two solemn faces.

'Ye've bin more'n good ter me,' she said slowly, 'but a secret is a secret till it's told. I hate ter tell my secret, an' yer both young unmarried men. It's reely embarrassin'.'

'Your secret is no secret,' said my brutal brother. 'Somebody, Gloriana, is about to get married—eh?'

'Good land! How did ye come to guess that?'

'Uncle Jap has not said a word.'

'Well—why should he?'

'He's as close as a clam—the old sinner. So we can congratulate you, Gloriana?'

'Ye kin, indeed.'

We shook hands, and she led the way to her room. There, spread upon her bed, lay some dainty garments, exquisitely fashioned—a regular trousseau! Even to our inexperienced eyes the beauty of the workmanship was amazing.

'A woman,' she murmured, 'likes ter look at sech things. An' I do think these air good enough.'

'Good enough!' we repeated. 'They're fit for a queen.'

'An' a queen is goin' ter wear 'em,' said Gloriana proudly—a queen of beauty.'

We stared blankly at each other.

'They air ter Miss Miriam Standish, who was queen o' beauty at the San Lorenzy carnival. Miss Standish is the granddaughter of Dr. Standish. Ye've heard o' him, of course.'

She glanced keenly at Arthur, who rose to the occasion with an alacrity that I trust the recording angel appreciated.

'Of course,' he said hastily. 'Dr. Standish is a man of mark.'

'And his granddaughter,' said I, 'is about to marry—'

'Mr. Hubert Leadbetter. I should say Professor Leadbetter, who keeps the biggest drug store in town.'

We had bought drugs from the professor, and were happily able to testify to his personal charms. Gloriana beamed.

'There ain't a finer young man in the land,' Mr. Arthur.

'You are going to attend the wedding?' said I, thinking of the wonderful bonnet.

'If you please,' said Gloriana. 'I jest couldn't stay away. Why, I've made things for Miriam Standish ever since she was born. That is how I learned ter sew as few women kin sew.'

Arthur touched one of the garments lightly.

'This work will bring you many shekels, Gloriana. I had no idea you were such a needlewoman as this.'

'What,' she cried, her face crimson, 'do you think I'd take money from Miriam Standish? Why—'

She stopped short in confusion, and covered her face with her trembling hands.

'I beg your pardon,' said Arthur gravely; 'I wouldn't hurt your feelings, Gloriana, for the world.'

She looked up, irresolutely.

'I reckon I've said too much or too little,' she said slowly. 'Ye're both gen'lemen, an' ye've been awful kind ter me. I kin trust ye with my secret, an' I'm going ter do it. The Standishes air high-toned an' mighty particular. I come from Wisconsin, an' it was in Wisconsin that I first met Dr. Standish. I lived there with—with my sister. She, my sister, was a real pretty girl then, but of a prettiness that soon fades. The doctor was a good man, an' a kind one, but she paid back his kindness by runnin' off and marryin' his only son.'

'Surely,' said Arthur gently, 'the son was also to blame?'

'No, sir, my sister was ter blame, an' she knew it. He died, an'—an' my sister died, an' nothin' was left but the sorrow an'—Miriam.'

The name fell softly on a silence that we respected.

Presently she continued:

'Dr. Standish offered to take the child, an' I dared not keep her. His terms were awful hard, but just. He told me he'd take Miriam ter Californy, bring her up a good Catholic, but that she must never know the story of her mother. That was right, Mr. Arthur—eh?'

'I don't know, Gloriana. Go on.'

'I promised him never ter speak ter the child, an' I've kept my word; but he let me make her things. That was kind of him—very kind.'

'Very kind indeed,' said Arthur.

'I followed 'em ter Californy, an' worked out, an' sold books, an' peddled fruit, but I've kept track o' little Miriam.'

'You have never spoken to her, you say?'

'Never. Dr. Standish kin trust me. He's posted me too. He tole me o' the wedding. I got word the first night I went ter the village.'

Arthur began to pace up and down the room. His fists were clenched. I felt certain that he was about to interfere in matters that did not concern us.

'Miss Standish should be told the truth,' he said at last.

'No, no,' she exclaimed. 'I done wrong in tellin' the secret, but yer sympathy jest twisted it outer me. Promise me, Mr. Arthur, that ye'll never give me away.'

We pledged our word and left her.