

for him. In some trepidation, she had told him the story of his fiancée's projected errand of mercy.

'What! go to a plague-stricken hut in order to nurse her favourite pupil through smallpox? I shall soon see about that. Are you coming, Ruth?' he called sharply.

Miss Mason came in, looking in nowise ashamed of her delinquency.

'It is useless to raise any objections, Thornton,' she said composedly. 'The child will die if she is not properly cared for, and I intend to nurse her.'

'I should have thought you had better, sense to risk your health and good looks for the sake of a miserable little Papist,' declared Thornton. Best angrily, forgetting Mrs. Dillon's presence.

Ruth had plenty of spirit, in spite of her gentleness.

'I should have thought,' was her prompt rejoinder, 'that a man like you, professing to be a Christian, would have more charity than to allow one to die for want of attention.'

Mrs. Luke, kneeling distressed, essayed to pour oil upon the troubled waters; but Mr. Best's authority was not to be ignored in this fashion.

'Very well, then,' said he. 'Since you have so little regard for my wishes, perhaps it would be better for our engagement to end here and now.'

'The sooner the better,' answered the young lady calmly, drawing off the ring which she had worn for the past eighteen months and placing it on the table in front of him.

Mr. Thornton Best left the precincts of the Bower with his dignity sadly ruffled.

'I hate to see you go alone, Ruth,' said Mrs. Luke a few minutes later, as the two women said good-bye to each other at the head of the trail. 'Heaven knows that I should go with you, were it not for Luke and the children.'

'I know dear,' answered the girl. 'Dick and uncle are away, and my pupils on their holidays; so, you see, it seems as if Providence meant me to look after that poor friendless child.'

Ruth had need of all her faith and courage in the next two hours. She found poor Carmela lying on a pile of ragged quilts in a corner of the abode, muttering deliriously in Spanish. Her father sat in a chair, his head bowed in his hands, his attitude one of utter despondency. He looked up as Ruth entered, but did not speak.

'I have come to take care of Carmela,' she said softly.

'Yes,' as if he did not understand.

'I want you to get me some good, clean water, and then there are other things you must help me with,' she said authoritatively, for she thought the man needed rousing.

He rose obediently, and taking the pail, went out. Ruth looked around in despair. The veriest necessities of life seemed lacking. If only she had Dick's camp bed and a few comfortable chairs!

There was a knock at the door.

'Come in!' she responded, thinking Señor Diaz had returned.

The knock was repeated. She opened the door, and stood face to face with Robert Dillon. He had a large bundle in his arms. Placing it in her arms, he said hurriedly, while his keen eyes took in the poverty of the room:

'Here are some children's garments and bedding that Margaret sent for your patient, Miss Mason.'

Without waiting for a reply, he bounded down the trail, and was gone out of sight before she had time to shut the door.

'Well,' said the girl to herself, 'one would think that a man of his splendid physique would not be afraid of such a thing as smallpox. But they are all alike, I suppose,—with deep disgust.'

Carmela's father having returned with the water, she got him to build a fire in the cracked stove standing in a dilapidated shed close to the abode; then she prepared some beef tea, which was eagerly drunk by the fevered child. A bath and change of linen seemed further to refresh the little one, and she presently grew quieter under the soothing ministrations of her gentle nurse.

An hour or more passed in this manner, and then there was the sound of wheels outside. Laboring up the trail came the delivery waggon from Dillon's general store. Beside the driver, old Con Reardon—a well-known figure at the Gulch,—sat Robert Dillon. He jumped nimbly to the ground, and with Con's assistance, deposited thereon a couch, a camp bed, some chairs, and various boxes and packages. From the open door Prospero Diaz watched him in wonder. Bob

approached, courteously lifting his hat to the Mexican.

'Will you kindly help me to move these things inside?' he said. 'I am a friend of the senorita, and have come to help you and her take care of the sick child,—if you will permit me, senor.'

'I thank you very much, senor! but that is for the senorita to decide,' Diaz replied with equal politeness.

'No, no Mr. Dillon!' said Ruth, coming forward. 'You must not think of coming in. It was very good of you to bring these things, and I shall never forget your kindness, but Señor Diaz and myself can easily move them inside.'

Dillon's reply was to lift one end of the couch, signalling to Diaz to lift the other. Then, when everything had been carried into the abode, he turned to the girl rather shamefacedly.

'If you will allow me inside, I can stay in the shed; but I cannot go away now, either to Luke's place or the ranch.'

For once in her life, Miss Mason found nothing to say. It was too late to protest, and in her heart she rejoiced that she had been mistaken in her former estimate of the man before her. Unconsciously he had grown to be her hero, and she could not suppress a certain elation of spirit, at the thought that it was for her sake also he was braving contagion and discomfort. True, the primness inherited from a long line of Puritan ancestors caused her to demur a little at the unconventionality of the whole proceeding; but then, her common sense told her that here was a case where less conveniences must yield to grim necessity.

All these thoughts passed through her mind, while Dillon assisted her in moving the little patient onto the camp bed, and setting the room to rights with the deft touch of a ranchman accustomed to do for himself. Prospero Diaz, now that he could see that something was being done for his child, roused himself to help; and it was the two men who prepared supper in the outhouse, while Ruth sat beside her patient.

Thus the night began—the longest night that our hero had ever spent. She noticed with alarm, that the little sufferer's breathing seemed to grow more difficult every minute, though she was less feverish; and her pitiful cries of 'Mama! mamaita!' had ceased. Once Robert Dillon stood beside the bed and looked down long and earnestly at the flushed face upon the pillow.

'As soon as it is daylight,' he said in a low voice, 'I am going over to Tuscon to fetch Doctor Ybara. He is said to be very clever, and at least he will be sober.'

Ruth nodded without speaking.

Soon after midnight Diaz came to her.

'If the senorita will lie down on the couch for an hour, the Senor Dillon and myself can watch Carmela,' he said.

She shook her head. 'I am not sleepy, believe me, senor,' she replied, and indeed she was too uneasy about her charge to feel any desire for repose just then. A few minutes later Dillon brought her a cup of strong black coffee.

At the first lightening of the eastern sky he left the abode quietly, and walked swiftly down the trail to Conner Gulch, where he had left his mount tethered in his brother's stable. The hours that followed seemed interminable to Ruth. She could not conceal from herself the fact, that her patient was growing weaker, although she faithfully administered both nourishment and stimulants.

Shortly after noon, there was a sound of horse's hoofs outside, and Robert Dillon entered, accompanied by two gentlemen. In one of these Ruth recognised Padre Miguel, the mission priest at Tuscon, who occasionally visited the Gulch to look after the spiritual needs of his flock. She coloured nervously as Dillon introduced the Father. She had never before spoken to a Catholic priest.

Doctor Ybara—a stout fussy little man, with large gold-rimmed glasses, and thick, rumpled hair as white as John Anderson's 'pow,'—was bending over Carmela, taking her temperature in a business-like manner. He straightened himself up presently.

'What foolishness to talk of smallpox!' he exclaimed sarcastically. 'The little one has congestion of the lungs, complicated with chicken-pox. She is a very sick child, but she has not smallpox.'

Then, seating himself without ceremony, he lifted a capacious black satchel on his knee and began to prepare some powders. In the meantime he addressed himself to Ruth:

'You are the nurse, senorita. It is well. Your face looks reliable. But you have watched all night, and you must have sleep, else we shall have a second patient here. Is there not some motherly woman who