

The Marriage of Sad Mary

“They say the truth will set a man free,” said the old man, “but if it be so, the Superstitions must’ve always drawn folk bound together in iron.

“The Apaches said there was once an ocean right here beneath our feet, and standing above that water was the Superstitions. One day it dried up, but them peaks stayed. The savages said the passage to hell were found deep within the belly of the Superstitions, and they hid their gold in them at the behest of their heathen gods. If you listened closely, they said, you could hear issuing hence the howls of wretched souls, and any man who beat about for their riches would be cursed.

“Them tales was malarky, of course. And even the Dutchman, he weren’t nothing but a damned Hun. But I do know for certain he placed himself under the hand of Providence and set out in pursuit of the gold for which the Peraltas was fearfully massacred by the Apaches during the war with Mexico. By the by, I say good riddance to all of them infernal black peoples, savages and Mexicans the same.

“Now when the Dutchman made his discovery of the Mexican-Apache gold after the war for secession, that started the fever. For years the population were drained from Mesa, and Phoenix, and all parts of the territory, of men hunting the precious metal. The Superstitions was overtook with fortune seekers crazed on the subject of deep diggings, and every find seemed to promise a continuance of greater wealth.

“Sometimes, they said, a man was clean swallowed whole by the wilderness, never to be seen again. Ever trudging across the caliche, never getting no closer to the Dutchman’s lode. And all the while the cactus parishioners in the scrubland remained fixed in time, some of them climbing desperatelike up the nave at the foot of the rock altars, some of them staking claims on top.

“On a red clay hill in the shadow of the Superstitions, the town of Goldwash was established. With the pounding of the Mammoth mill rustling up a cloud of dust you could discern for miles, up went, in the twinkling of an eye, the saloon, apothecary, butcher, blacksmith, livery.

“And as it has always, since Rahab housed the spies of the Israelites, with the miners come into that land of plenty persons of the fairer sort in search of their same pots of gold. Like the Dutchman’s damned

nigger woman nurse, who combed the hills for her master's ore, but never once come up with a single nugget. And like old Sad Mary.

“If you haen't heard the account of Sad Mary, I reckon that comes out on top of all that other twaddle. She arrived in Goldwash by coach on the third of July, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and ninety seven, as the watery element swept away ten tons of high-grade ore down the shaft of the Mammoth. It seemed an omen, what that it come before the summer rains. Some said it was her tears what filled that which the heavens did not. To compound things, the next day the stope cut loose on ol' Jack Stevens. The poor soul was entombed for two weeks until, with the aid of a band of angels, excited arms could withdraw him from the shaft.

“Anyhow, Mary were what you might call a lady of easy virtue. Some years previous, she had fallen through the influence of her womanly charms, and in her conquests become noted in many places. She drifted with the tide, and carried no household truck. Outwardly she seemed a gay sort, prone to excessive merriment. But oftimes, it will be remembered, she wrecked in the gulf of despair and dissolution.

“They spoke of a report from the *New Mexican* of Santa Fe of her well-nigh shuffling off this mortal coil in consequence of her having consumed an abundance of laudanum. A doctor rubbed her in liniment, said the rag, and pumped her full of mustard until she relieved her innards. Thus she were spared departure from this life. Afterwards she said the remedy were for cramp colic, but ... well, folks knew better. And they knew what trade she come to ply.”

A moonlit stillness had settled upon the town, and the mountains, which had baked in the summer sun all day, blackened in patches like simmering coals on a campfire. Mary raised the red shade above her window, and luminescence splashed on a lean, milky white face, with thin lips and deep eyes that betrayed an inborn curiosity about the world, yet concealed a fascination with reshaping it within her consciousness.

She looked beyond the petals and vines etched in the wrought iron railing at the commerce below. The night's enterprise was ebbing, and corridors of pale light illuminated the frock coat and mantilla of M. and Mde. Sullivan as they paraded stiff-leggedly down Main. Behind them a pair of miners in suspenders

and duck canvas foundered and bore each other up, and paused on occasion before a clapboard facade to empty their beans onto the red dirt street.

The room was less than commodious, the four walls covered in a pallid flock wallpaper that barely looked fit to line a cupboard. The narrow confines could scarce hold a toilet, shabby dresser and nightstand, and rickety bed, in which to sleep Mary had to buckle her long, slender legs like an infant not yet departed the womb. All her worldly store was contained within a small blue doll trunk, save for a printed calendar that adorned the wall opposite the bed.

It was a slow night in madam's house of ill fame, as it had passed since the miners began fleeing the encampment upon the steady depletion of the Mammoth. Mary she had hardly attended a dozen men. But a visiting bird in madam's dove-cote, who held a reputation that had sparked considerable interest, had entertained scores as the hours ticked by, only exiting her chamber to repose in the saloon below. Several other courtesans also made the night hideous with their bacchanalian revels, and Mary was not yet ready for sleep to take possession of her.

A blend of bitter tobacco smoke and rancid rotgut wafted into her nostrils from the canteen, and, droplets of sweat forming under her corset besides, she cracked open the window for reprieve. The warm night air forced itself into the room, and she watched as one of the sheriff's deputies hoisted a bumper onto the wooden porch of the pint-sized adobe jailhouse below, who all the while protested he was just fine in the head. "He'll be let out once he cools off," thought Mary.

The streetscape was silent for a moment, then the hurdy-gurdy struck up from behind the walls of the saloon across the street, an eight-bar *schottische* cranking out of its strings. Though Goldwash's more principled constituents had recently advanced an ordinance that would strictly forbid the admission of ladies into the saloons, she knew full well the Bull Dog would put forth no objection to the fancy girls in their finery plying the men with drink, collecting their coins, twirling them about the floor, then fading into the recesses of the structure.

The front door of the Bull Dog opened, and for a moment Mary's heart stirred as a broad-shouldered frame emerged underneath the saloon's freshly painted sign. But it was only a faro cheat

stepping out to emblazon a match onto a fag as he contemplated the night's winnings, and not her beloved Jim, come to spirit her hence at last.

"Love for a fair price," interjected a sing-songy voice from below the brothel's balcony. "All offers will be appraised. Love for a fair price." The Apache woman and her Mexican compatriot had darkened the entrance to madam's establishment for two nights now, conspiring to poach from the already diminished traffic.

"Hola vaquero, necesitas compañía esta noche?"

"Ain't no cowboys here nohow, *señorita*," came the reply, "but if yer willing to accept dirt I'll happily trade with you."

"Chinga tu madre, pendejo," she retorted, and the man's guffaws echoed down the street.

The Apache's solicitations resumed a brief spell, and then were abruptly interdicted by the thwacking open of the saloon door below. "This business again!" barked the madam. "I warned you contemptible sneaks once, either you hitch up to madam's stable, or you skedaddle out of town on broken legs."

The Apache pleaded their case. "Before you pass judgment, ma'am, please know we're starved, and only in want of enough to fix a square meal for the night."

"If it's small change you require, look no farther than within," the madam held forth. *"Come thou, fear not. Though you change place, you need not change trade. I'll be your tapster."*

There was a pause as the interlopers weighed the madam's offer. "We honor your charity, ma'am," said the Apache. "But when put to consideration, we are compelled to refuse, as we are of the notion that, in the end, we would fare better out here, where we can retain a full percentage of our wages."

The madam roared her disapproval at the rejection. "Then seek another front to haunt!" A slight commotion ensued, and Mary saw from the window the curvy frame of the madam shove the Apache into the street. "Away to the hog ranch, two-bit harlot!" She struck a blow upon the Apache's face, which drew simultaneously blood and a yelp from her lips. "And you," the madam addressed the Mexican, "find yourself another *doña* to latch onto!"

She rained several more licks and maledictions upon them as they scampered away. By now the melee had attracted the attention of the deputy, who had materialized in front of the jail. "Everything in order, Jennie?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes, 'tis but a trifle," she replied, and Mary heard no more as she shut the window again.

Upon a time, Mary may have shared the madam's resentment for the streetwalkers horning in on their livelihood. But in due course all of Mary's cares would be allayed, and at that, why should not one of them assume her place in the sinful den? Her eyes strayed, as they had many a time while performing her duties through the course of evening, to the calendar, and the date, encircled in pencil. She was to be a June bride indeed. From that point she would depart this dreary existence, never to return, and wipe clean the slate of her past.

She had been drawn at a tender age to the arc lamps along Broadway. In the autumn of 1880 her father had taken a full day's earnings from his perch as night soil watchman, and redirected it toward admission to the new tragedy at Booth's Theatre. Mary fancied herself, like that ill-fated *madame*, collapsing onstage in a heap from poison roses as the curtain fell about her. Then up would go the veil to a tremendous handclapping, and from all parts of the stage would come a shower of silver quarters, half dollars and dollars.

The day of general independence for the fair sex had not yet dawned. In point of fact, it was exceedingly rare in that age that a woman would garner a living, the least of which in the dramatic arts, and thus they had to subsist on the bread of another in deep humility. It was the general practice that she would reside with her birth family, cultivate a delicate manner, and, if it occasioned it, faint. And then one day a man's attention would be captured, and he would lead the poor relation from a state of dependency to the queenship of a homestead.

Seldomtimes a sincere affection would blossom, and Mary's mother and father were found within that exception. Upon her afternoon arrival from ward school, her mother would practice her letters with her, determined her charge not murder the people's English. At the advanced hour of the day, her father

would return to the tenement, stinking of Sixth Avenue's privies; and her mother would shoo him into the wash basin and lovingly scrub away the filth; and sometimes Mary would giggle and take a turn at his back; and her mother and father would sneak a kiss. It was an exceedingly happy time, and Mary's heart filled with glad tidings.

But as the poets would have it, all good things shall come to their finish, and so it was for the cauldron of equanimity and joy that was their household. Her father came home one evening, grumbling about cramps in his legs, and that his thirst could nary be slaked, then proceeded to expel the contents of his stomach into the bath. He laid up in bed for two days, his skin pale and clammy, frequently calling for more water, and the third day saw him expire.

Her despondent mother took to occupying a chair next to the kitchen table, staring forward at the basin. Mary quit the school to attend her mother's side, but one morning she dispatched her daughter to Essex Street for victuals. Upon her reentry, Mary discovered her dear mother, spread-eagled on the floor, a bottle of arsenious acid pressed in her fist. Mary's heart was broke.

As she had no means to furnish the rent, Mary was shown the door, and with no family as it were to call upon, she found shelter on a back stoop in the Bowery. It was there, near heaps of human waste and rotting horse carcasses, the man in the morning coat happened upon her making her nest on a barrel. The shadows around Mary's eyes giving off the semblage of a face painted with fatigue, she gazed upon the bearded man, who extended his grip and inquired if she coveted salvation.

Plucking her from the depths before the dime museums could lay a hand on her, the Society obtained passage for Mary on a rail train headed to Missouri. As the counting houses of Manhattan gave way to the smokestacks and farmlands of New Jersey, she busied herself with the one precious token she was able to salvage from her former home, and that was a weathered volume of Shakespeare's works. And so the dirty boys that – perhaps afflicted with a peculiarly Yankee strain of railway insanity – constantly tussled with one another in the corridors of the rail car, they became in her mind's eye rival Italian clans acting out ancient grudges upon one another; and the gentlemen and gentleladies in first class, who regarded Mary in different fashion, transformed into kings and queens viewing the dumbshow before them

with an intermixture of mirth and pity. Passing a grand terminus in Pennsylvania that looked for the all world like a cathedral from a European metropolis, all necks craned out their windows at the appearance of a tall buckskin-clad man with brown locks that draped about his shoulders, smiling as he was swarmed by idolizing newspapermen.

The air in the St. Joseph depot was thick with cigar smoke and the floors waxed in spit as the Society agent corralled the several dozen urchins down the platform. They passed men threatening fisticuffs over misidentified baggage and, upon reaching the street, they were herded onto wagons. Mary's pulse quickened as they were brought to a resplendent Renaissance opera house and hastened to the stage. Her anticipation switched to puzzlement as a door in the back opened and in filed a throng of hard-looking men and women in sack coats and tattered chemises. They examined the children as if they were but specimens in a museum, clinching their arms in search of muscle, and prying their mouths open to verify they contained a full set of teeth within. "She'll do," said one woman, a thumb juttet toward Mary. She exhibited a like reserve as they rode out of town and, happening upon a band of curiosity seekers surrounding a simple white home with green shutters, she met Mary's inquiry on the subject of their concern with silence.

The couple's farmstead was similarly plain, a two-room frame house on a hill overlooking five acres of cotton crops. Upon arrival, Mary was handed a brown camp dress, pinafore and pocket Bible, the latter comprising the sole contents of the family library. "Read this, child, and you'll never fall from God's grace," admonished her new mother. Mary rather busied her mind over the ensuing months – as she attended to her daily regimen of garment mending, floor scrubbing, cooking, and pot and pan cleaning – with such fancies as her rushing to the aid of a galleon that had wrecked upon the sea of bolls, or plucking a fair lover's verse from amongst their branches.

From this post, Mary might well have been expected to fulfill, within a few years' passing, her feminine avocation, perhaps with a young man or poor grieving widower from a neighboring farm. But her intent was still set upon scaling that platform with which she had been acquainted by her father three years previous. Thus, as a meager stipend for a hard day's toils, on occasion she persuaded her new parents to

hold an audience as she interpreted a passage from the master's omnibus. "*It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue,*" she commenced one evening during the first spring, her arms crooked and palms pointed skyward. As she proceeded, Ma's face was fixed with the usual disavowal of the frippery, while Pa stroked his beard and ran his eyes down the length of Mary.

All sounds were hushed in silence that night, save for the gentle strains of Mary's sobbing as she lay under the covers and reflected upon happier days with her authentic forebears. So acute were the remembrances that she did not discern the patter of Pa's footsteps as he stole into the kitchen, where Mary's bed lay, and bent at her side. "There, there, child," he said, laying a spindly finger upon her cheeks. "Let me provide you with some small comfort." Surmising that he had obtained her consent to proceed, he rested his full hand upon her; and all the while the water gushed from her ducts; and Ma surveyed the scene from the adjoining room with one steely eye asquint.

The next day, Mary maintained a steady remove from her foster parents as she sewed and polished and baked. Upon nightfall, while Ma and Pa snored and wheezed, she crept into their chamber and removed a canvas bag stuffed with greenbacks and coinage, pitched the apron and pocket testament in the waste receptacle, and alighted from the premises. She navigated thickets of rushes to the banks of the Missouri and, employing the bluffs as her lodestar, traipsed some ten miles south to Iatan. When dawn at last bathed the forgotten hamlet in light, she secured a seat on a wagon, which then deposited her in two days' time in Kansas City.

She approached a boardinghouse near the riverfront on the subject of renting a room, and though the proprietor cast a wary eye upon Mary's young visage, she relented upon Mary's production of what appeared to be a genuine bank note. Being so much fatigued from her journey, Mary then collapsed on a hot bed and did not stir again until suppertime.

Her belly stuffed with sweetbreads and potatoes, Mary ventured out past the depot and stockyard and brick homes tucked behind rows of walnut trees. She had a sudden impression that, striding these wide boulevards with no crush of humanity, perhaps for the first time she stood apart. Happening upon a tall theater house, she purchased a half-dollar ticket for the evening's performance. From her balcony roost

soon found herself warmed to familiar pangs of melancholy at the account of the unfortunate waif who marries out of a sense of duty rather than earnest infatuation.

Making her way to the backstage after the curtain fell, she inquired as to whether the company might be desirous of an understudy. Her proposition meeting with a polite decline from the outfit's director – who indicated it was sufficiently stocked with female players – she insisted upon deliverance of one of her prairie-spun soliloquies. “Darling, you must learn to tame your expectations,” came the reply, with added intensity. “And surely you extrapolated from your readings that the greater part of the populace consists of spectators, not performers.”

Wearing a countenance coated in discomfiture, Mary repaired to the boardinghouse, where the other occupants had reverted to less formal attire and mingled about the well-furnished parlor with gentlemen callers. The proprietor asked why the clouds hung about her face so, to which Mary explained the hindrance she had encountered to pursuit of her dreams. “Don't fret, child,” said the elder lady, draping a reassuring arm around the shoulders of the guileless youth, “there are means by which you can entertain and rub two nickels together all the same.”

Benumbed by the late night air, Mary closed the window. The remembrances had conjured a surge of anguish that lodged in her throat, though she suspected it was, in the end, a lamentation for sorrows she would never know again. She heard the creak of the madam's footsteps ascending the steps to her floor, and discharged her mind of the reverie.

Madam Jennie barged in without so much as a knock, her stout frame covered in a velvet bustle dress that argued the status she assigned herself from years of lucrative operation in the town. “Buck up, Mary,” said the madam, pulling on a Cuban cigar jammed in her bejeweled fingers. “Customer downstairs asked to take a walk with you.”

“Who is he?” asked Mary, as if it were of any consequence.

“Digger,” said Jennie. “What else? I think it were one of the men from your spring vacation.”

Mary feared the hand of the splenetic madam, and had therefore not counseled her on the plan to abscond with her cherished barkeep. Peculiar it was that a john with such a fleeting association would request her company, but Mary reasoned little harm could come of one more liaison before the arrival of her intended.

“Well, send him this way,” said Mary, and affected a toothless smile.

Jennie brushed back a curl that had fallen across her brow from the pompadour nesting on her head. “Fair warning, he’s a bit of a roustabout, and at present, he’s coming off a bender,” she said. “But that should occasion a summary encounter, I would judge it. The drink *provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance.*” A grin broke her usual stonyhearted expression.

Mary allowed herself a moment’s affinity with the madam’s cultivated appreciation of the bard. “I’ve also heard tell that *no profit grows where is no pleasure taken,*” she said, and plastered the smile farther across her face.

The coldheartedness returned to Jennie’s cheeks. “Fifteen minutes,” she said, spun about in her boots, and slammed shut the door. “Company, ladies,” the madam intoned from the hallway. “You’re not getting paid for a douse-the-lights.” Groans followed the edict, accompanied by the sounds of the girls bestirring to the evening’s last labors.

For a time, Mary was employed about Madam Mattie’s parlor in the same quotidian tasks that had defined her brief countryside sojourn, the earnings from which temporarily offset her rapidly dwindling cash haul. One evening shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Mary rummaged in the empty canvas sack with alarm. Fearing a resumption of her desperate existence in the gutters, she approached Mattie on the predicament.

Following some consultation on the mechanics of the establishment’s principal enterprise and the predicted returns for its performance, Mary permitted herself to be administered a sufficient quantity of laudanum. Overcome with a euphoria that nullified any displeasure she might have evinced, Mattie fixed the girl with a john who held a predilection for the uninitiated. As Mary passed into womanhood, the elder

woman clasped the girl's hand, and then again upon the act's consummation, as Mary curled up into agony and wept into her pillow.

What resolve Mary once held against such transgressions slowly melted away over the ensuing months, as she was instructed in methods of which she knew little. She was taught to pinch the cheeks and lips with rouge, and amplify her pupils with belladonna drops. Then she would don a handkerchief dress and stroll the boulevards, radiating an alluring half-smile at male passersby from underneath her parasol. Any prospects that appeared to be of means were forwarded invitations to soirées in Mattie's parlor. There they would be warmed with port wine and venison, and consort with the girls, who reclined on sofas in their streamlined attire of corset covers and underskirts.

With the madam's aid, Mary cultivated a particularly elegant pose, her long frame extended and trunk twisted slightly, sirenlike, and a feigned look of disinterest proving irresistible to the clientele. But it was when her lips turned upwards and exposed a perfect array of teeth, and she tittered gaily to the customer's perceived wit, and whispered elegant inducements – it was then Mary's innate talent truly prospered.

In the upstairs chambers, Mary was invested with her most profound lesson, which was that men were born with a weapon they were bent on thrusting upon the world and sowing general mischief with. If she were lucky, the skirmish would conclude within minutes, a few coins tossed coolly beside her on the sheets, and then it was back to the battlefield. A more hapless encounter might result in a full-fledged campaign, replete with the corpulent general commanding her to prostrate herself before him and crawl about like an animal, then return the favor with a furious whipping of his hindquarters. Mary grew to anticipate these more savage liaisons, and would steel herself for the sortie with a dose of the madam's opiate.

Collecting half of the girls' earnings, Mattie fared well enough by decade's end to retire to a country estate. With the boardinghouse sold to a developer who wished to convert it to a more reputable venture, the girls scattered to the winds. By her own reckoning, Mary had lain with at that point some one thousand

men, and she would accumulate several thousand more over the next seven years, as she strayed from a parlorhouse in Wichita, to a boardinghouse in Amarillo, and a brothel in Santa Fe.

On the surface of it, her path mirrored the rail and stagecoach routes, but often as not it was the lines building upon her face that drove her forward, as she feared they would betray her age and mark her as past her prime. From time to time she plotted a detour in her life's itinerary, such as when, answering an advertisement placed in the *New Mexican*, she took the train to Raton station and applied for a position with the Henry Restaurant therein. Though she had cleansed her face of any varnish, the manager, upon whiffing her perfume, informed her that her services would not be needed.

The weary traveler ultimately landed at Jennie's place on a tempestuous summer night, and soon embarked upon an endless procession of dalliances with filthy men baptized in the copper basin housed in the madam's bedchamber. At the height of the season, with all twenty stamps of the Mammoth dropping on the ore around the clock, Mary was expected to churn through a miner every quarter hour, her night's tally at times gracing upwards of seventy men.

By spring of 1898, she had reached a nadir. The constant pain around her lower extremities, and within her heart, prompted her to consume a cupful of laudanum on some days, and she was convinced her monthlies would not gush henceforth. The occasional threat of aggression from a disgruntled customer had also spurred her to secure protection in the form of a single-shot pistol.

Any illusions about another life had long since faded, and the gaiety that had once governed Mary's manner had all but evaporated. Never obliging the flattery of hope to deceive her, upon waking each day she merely summoned the strength to draw another breath.

And then, as the constellation of Heaven's good fortunes sometimes arrange themselves, at the end of one of Mary's shifts in April, in walked the barkeep from across the way. He presented her with the requisite "good for one screw-bath-beans" token, then apologized for the late imposition. She permitted herself a hint of a smile, conducted him to bed, and proceeded to do the needful. It was over in a few minutes, but the ice that had hardened over Mary's heart over so many years shed a few droplets as she dismounted and witnessed a lone tear streak down Jim's cherubic, glowing face.

Thereafter the young barkeep called at least once a week, always commencing the session by begging her pardon for the inconvenience. With his short frame, and almond-shaped eyes set too far apart on his wan face, Jim was perhaps not Mary's type – though, truth be told, she had never endeavored to devise one. But his boyish gallantry slowly won her over. On a visit in early May, he asked if he could forswear the purpose of the engagement, and would she furthermore indulge him as he recited a few lines of verse he had composed for her. "*Love, before you my heart aroused but like an unborn child,*" he began, and she found herself by degrees enchanted by his sober reading.

There ensued several more weeks of similar discourse, each preceded by the conveyance of his latest stanza, and followed by an informal dialogue on the week's news in Goldwash, the antics of their respective clientry, what paths they would traverse if they could loose themselves from the traps of their lives, and the like. Then, on an evening in early June, Jim skipped the pleasantries, got on bended knee, and asked for Mary's hand. Her past and present dissolved; and what seemed like a thousand yeses escaped her lips; and she wept; and he embraced her tenderly.

They agreed upon a date on which they would ride in to Phoenix to do the deed. All that remained would be a telegram to Jim's relations back east.

In the meantime, Mary distracted herself with the solace at having been spared the dismal prospect of several more years under the madam's wing, until she was cast away as just another withered flower. She pictured herself promenading down Central Avenue in Phoenix in a white satin dress and pearls, her face unpainted for the first time in fourteen years, as men tipped their derbies and crossed to the other side of the dirt street to let her pass. Should it be warranted, she might feign a bout of vapors or hysterics to catch their attention, as was the fashion of the day. But above any fleeting promise of material gain, augmented with her own meager savings, Mary's heart sang at the inexpressible consolation that no societal strictures could tear asunder the harmony of a pair of elevated spirits.

So many thousands of times had Mary communed before the dresser – applying her professional tint and spraying herself with rose oil, its fragrance bringing to her mind the glow and colors of the eastern

skies – that she might well have carried out the rite while fast asleep. Her toilet prepared, and believing it her ultimate dalliance with the elixir, Mary then ingested two spoonfuls of laudanum. Her insides were soon engulfed in a vertiginous bliss, and a dim haze fell over her eyes, softening the crevices in the face reflected from the mirror.

The delirium was made short by a knock at the door. Mary ran a hand across the bed to expel any lingering vermin, then beckoned the customer to enter.

The miner stumbled, and the eyes widened on his leathery face as he took in the impaired vision before him. “Ev’ning, ma’am,” he said, his voice grated by whiskey.

“Well, aren’t you a belvidere,” said Mary, contriving a final display of jocundity. “Are we acquainted?”

“No ma’am,” he said. “Not closely, anyhow. I seen you,” he continued, then hiccupped. “Pardon me. I seen you when you called upon the tents a couple months back, but I don’t reckon your eyes ever fixed on me.”

“You are correct,” she said, then moved for the bed. “I don’t recollect having had the pleasure.”

But Mary did recall a coterie from the brothel being rounded up in a wagon in April and dispatched to the Mammoth encampment, where the brawny miners threw aside their picks and shovels and ran to the pavilions to line up for rolls in the bunks. At a juncture between rounds, Mary’s gaze drifted to a cot on which the head of a dead man peeked from under the blanket, his eyes frozen open as a silent, unheeded witness to the miners’ endemic insensibility. And as the wagon exited, she heard the men chortle over base remarks about the soiled doves, until they were drowned out by the mine signal bells, pealing forth their melody.

“Have a name, handsome?” Mary asked.

“They call me,” said the miner, and hacked and spat upon the floor. “Scuse me. They call me Gooseneck. On account of this long nape, I suppose.”

“Well, I should like to glimpse the expanse of it more closely,” Mary said, and folded one silk stocking-sheathed leg over another so that the end of her chemise dropped between the limbs. The miner’s

eyes protruded again, and he ran his tongue over his incisors as if he were striving to extract something from them. "Oh, here y'are," he said, and as he leaned forward and extended the brothel coin to her, she noted the tobacco juice glistening in his beard and mud stains on his boots.

"And I thank you," Mary said, flipping the token onto the dresser. She bent next to the bed, fetched an oilcloth from the doll trunk, and unfurled it on the footboard of the bed. "Alright, my sweet, let's not tarry," she said, then lay upon the bed and raised her chemise.

The miner snorted, pulled his suspenders over his torso, and unfastened his breeches. He fell upon her, and she pivoted her head to evade the warm rotgut stink of his breath. He grunted as he had a few turns at her, then sat up and forced her over and onto her front. She transmitted several well-studied sighs and moans as he swatted her backside. Within a few minutes his loins had tired, and he flopped against the wall in a fit of wheezing.

The room quieted once more, save for theatrical refrains of passion seeping from other recesses of the house. Mary arose and, plucking a syringe filled with lemon juice from the dresser, sat upon the toilet. She inserted the tube between her legs, then spoke plainly. "I'll need another two dollars for provision of that service, sir."

The miner's ardor cooled, and a frown crept onto his face as he pulled up his suspenders. "Provision of what service?"

"For having had me from the rear, of course." She stood and dipped the sponge in a pitcher of water.

"I weren't informed about no extry charges," he protested. "That coin shoulda marked the entirety of the purchase. And besides," he snickered, "the sign below, they said it promises satisfaction will be guaranteed or money refunded. And I wasn't satisfied nohow."

Mary ran a comb through her hair, which had fallen about her shoulders. "I beg to differ. And you should have been told the price would inflate if certain acts were called for."

The man's face went flush. "You know the mine is near played out," he said, planting his hands on his hips, "and can't none of us afford that kinda tin for no whore."

Mary's lips quivered as a half-lifetime's worth of indignation boiled throughout her. "You can take it up with the madam," she said. "The price stays."

Of a sudden, a serious tack of mind and manner took possession of the man. His face screwed up, and there erupted from within him that rancor, begat from the theft of his potency, which has dwelled in the hearts of his ilk since the hour of Cicero and beyond.

He lunged forward and yanked Mary by the hair to the floor. Before she could scream, he clamped his palm over her mouth. "Don't you sass me, Jezebel," he snarled, froth and whiskey fumes exuding from his lips. He slapped her about the face. She yelped, then struck a blow on his nose, sending his hands to his face. "Filthy bitch!" he cried.

She dove for the trunk, ripped open the lid, and yanked the pistol from within. "Get back," she warned, her breathing labored as she leveled the gun at the miner's middle.

"Alright," he said, his arms raised at his sides. "Alright." In a flash, he smacked the pistol away with the back of one hand, and seized hold of her mouth with the other. She struggled mightily against his grip, jerking the gun to him. With a violent thrust, he forced the weapon into her chest and discharged it. He smothered a wail under his palm, and she fell back onto the floor.

Gooseneck rocked back on his haunches. As the prostrate Mary coughed up blood before him, it settled upon him how things had gone in a direction he never foresaw, and the sum of what he had done. He ran his hands through his hair as he sought the best manner to cover his tracks, then swiftly laid the woman's limp arm astride her chest and dumped a measure of the laudanum bottle into the toilet.

The door burst open and the madam stamped in. "Oh, my Lord!" she cried, agog at the red stain blooming on Mary's chest and the blood pumping from her lips. "What have you done?"

"I swear I never touched her!" said the miner. "Not like that. She done it to her own self."

Jennie bent to Mary and cradled her hand. "Mary, what happened?" she asked, and was met with weakened hacks. In the meantime, several other ladies, in varied states of dress and undress, had arrived at the door, and were screaming and covering their mouths with alarm. "Fetch the sawbones!" the madam barked. "And the deputy, and the preacher," she added as they made haste.

The madam bore fiery eyes upon the man, who now bathed in perspiration. "You'll swing for this," she seethed.

"On my mother's life, it weren't me," he insisted. "She were just sitting there at that very same bureau, weeping like a newborn on account of nothing, and before I could remove so much as a stitch, she turnt the iron on herself."

Mary clutched the madam's hand, and struggling to form words, vomited blood. "Oh Lord in Heaven," said the madam.

The miner, now reaching his own condition of hysterics, dug his fist in his pocket and produced a silver dollar. "It wasn't my fault nohow," he said, "but I can reward you for your trouble."

The madam scoffed. "One dollar? For a lady that could bring about fifteen of them in a night?"

He knelt before the madam and clasped his hands together. "I'll give you," he stammered, "I'll give you a day's wages too. Please, ma'am, don't let them send me to no hangman. I'm innocent."

Mary gurgled as her skin took on a blue shade. The madam regarded the nearly empty opiate bottle, then exhaled. "Is that the straight of it?"

"I swear on the angels above."

Jennie took the measure of the situation, then stood. "It is probably for the best that the matter be laid to rest expeditiously and without trial," she said, and aimed a thick finger at the miner. "But don't you try and buffalo me, high-grader. *Two* days' wages, to be provided at fixed intervals."

"As you would have it," he said.

Following his examination, the surgeon determined the ball had entered Mary's person through the chest, where it had likely passed into the lung and lodged within. There was nothing, he feared, that could be done to contain the bleeding, and any efforts to revive her would prove unavailing. He deposited a token the madam had presented to him moments earlier in his surgical bag, then bid the assemblage good evening.

Mustering her considerable prowess as a dramaturge, Jennie succumbed momentarily to a dizzy spell. She recovered upon opening of the window, then notified the deputy that Mary, whose penchant for

melancholy was of a certitude known in those parts, had had an apparent quarrel with a sometime lover and, reaching the point of despair, robbed herself of life. The madam then beseeched that it would be a pity to see a pall cast over an honest institution like hers, whose ledger with the city had always remained on the credit side. What's more, she averred, if the tragedy were to make its way to tribunal, it would surely draw unwanted scrutiny upon a town whose wherewithal was undergoing such tumult.

After considerable reasoning, the deputy, limping from an injury sustained years prior in a saloon incident, rendered his finding. Knowing the facts of the matter, he said, which were, there was a bullet wound on Mary the effects of which she was dying, and, without the presence of any extenuating circumstances, it bore evidence it was a death by her own hand. Pending the coroner's final inquest, he saw no obligation to further investigate, and deemed the matter closed as it applied to the miner.

For her part, Mary attempted one last testimonial, managing to eke out a single rasped word. To the party's ears, it seemed as if she were merely conveying her own name; never once did it occur to them she might invoking some thwarted ambition.

The madam shooed the ladies back to their chambers as the pastor stood over Mary and prayed. "Almighty God," he declaimed, projecting a pitiable aspect toward the ceiling, "we give thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this, our sister, out of the miseries of this sinful world." The miner executed a feeble sign of the cross, then departed.

Below the window, the madam could be heard negotiating terms with the Apache and Mexican for a slot within her consortium. "Though her transgressions may have been many," continued the pastor, "and she will go to the resting place for the wicked 'neath the earth, we must be like the Prophet, who forgave the woman of the Pharisee that did wet his feet with her tears, and make allowance for the sins of this sister."

None of it breached Mary's ears. As she drew in her last breaths, she was miles away, poised onstage in a creamy bodice dress and lace veil, her arm proffered to a waistcoated Jim and her parents shedding gladsome tears at their side. "We commend her to the merciful protection of our heavenly father," said the

pastor; and a man in the audience held aloft a wooden box and doused Mary with a sanguine liquid; and the curtain pole came crashing down from the rafters and fell upon the deck.

“So peaceful and natural was the expression of her features where she lay, it gave off the appearance Mary had not died by violent means,” the old man said. “A few recollected the ill portent under which she arrived in town, and suspicioned she were just caught under that mountain curse. Does make one cogitate, dunnit, how them spectral wails could be heard coming off the Superstitions, but hardly a soul could make out a whimper from Mary that night.

“Anyhow, not privy to her habits of mind or mental inclinations, nobody ever reckoned why she done it. If she did have an intended, he never did show his face that night. But for the why of it, well, you would have to appeal to a higher oracle. I can’t hazard a guess.

“I do know hers were a life surrounded by vice, and the giver of all good, what put such beauty in them hills, will punish the wicked the same. She were a fallen woman, yes sir. As such, she couldn’t be committed to consecrated ground, and so, in her thirty-first year, she were laid to rest in an unmarked grave.

“Madam Jennie, she got out of the business whilst the getting was good. Before she succumbed, she willed her nest egg to the city of Phoenix, and they used it to build on to the sanitarium.

“As for the miner that were with Mary when she done it,” he cleared his throat, “well, folks didn’t hear much of him after the sorry affair, other than he learnt his letters, and read the Scriptures mostly, and made a break with his whoring ways.” He paused, kicked the mud off his boots, and fiddled with his suspenders. “But in the end, I suppose there weren’t more to him than just another sap in search of the leavins of El Dorado.

“Well, mister,” he concluded, spitting brown juice onto the porch, “you suppose you got enough for your paper there?”

“Fascinating,” said the bespectacled journalist, his attention drifting to the roadster parked just outside the cabin. “But in the end, it’s just another story about a prostitute whose life was cut short. What happened to the town?”

“Hell, the new century come,” said the old man, “and with the gold vein dried up, and the stamp mill quieted, and the mountains hushed, the whole area turnt again into dust.”

END