

[COMPLETE STORY.]

The Tale of the Bluebird Mine

By Harold Bindloss

THE white peaks were fading into the darkening east, and the mist which rises at sunset rolled like steam among the pines, when Harry Jardine sat talking with Eva Tourmaine on a hillside of British Columbia outside her father's ranch. Tourmaine owned lands and cattle, as well as mining stock, and at first was not pleased when his only daughter, who might have made a brilliant match in Victoria smiled upon Jardine. The latter had studied engineering theoretically before he left the old country, and after a mixed experience in the Canadian Dominion had purchased a small holding on mortgage in that valley. Tourmaine hinted that it would take him ten years to clear it sufficiently to make a poor living, but Jardine said he did not intend to try. He expected there would be mineral developments presently. The rancher slowly changed his opinions when Jardine creditably executed contracts for building rude bridges and blowing rocks clear of new wagon roads, and finally agreed that when Jardine could accumulate 4000dol. and build a decent house he might claim Eva, who would not go to him portionless.

"My daughter shall not wear herself down trying to do a man's work in the bush as her poor mother did. It's better to do without the good things than get them too late," he said, with a sigh. "So if you want her, use all the grit that's in you. You can't get much for nothing in this world, Harry."

Jardine had done his best, and as he leaned over the back of Eva's chair hard, and lean, and brown, but a handsome man and vigorous from the clean life of the woods within, he looked back on the struggle as well as out across the valley. One snow peak still flamed crimson in the last glow from the west, but intensified by the song of the river the lush of the summer evening brooded heavily over the darkening earth below.

"What are you thinking of, Harry? You are quiet," said the girl, looking up at him from under long, dark lashes, while the light from an open window touched her winsome face, ripened into warm bloom by mountain wind and sun.

"I was thinking of the first day I saw you, and remembering how you hired me at the railway to pack in a box for you," answered Jardine, smiling, and Eva coloured.

"Don't. That isn't kind," she said. "How was I to know, Harry? And you really looked so—"

"Like a wandering hobo. Well, that was what I was," interposed Jardine.

And this time Eva laughed as she answered:

"No. I was going to say—hungry."

"I was hungry often in those days," said Jardine, a little grimly. "I am sometimes tired now. Things have gone dead against me lately, but we have our legal improvements on the mine almost complete. There is no doubt about the richness of the ore, and the Vancouver folks will finance me as soon as I get the patent. Then—"

Eva blushed prettily and turned away her head. But she had inherited her father's shrewdness, and said: "It is pity you did not take my advice instead of delaying the development work so long."

"We hardly thought the claim worth exploiting until that Vancouver broker came along and offered us 5000dol. to clear out. That gave us a hint, for we guessed the old Kootenay miner who drilled for us knew him. As you know, it was shortly afterwards we found—what we did. I hadn't a chance to tell you that the broker fellow offered 2000 dol. recently. It's a close race to get the legal improvements in, but nobody about here would jump us."

"No," said Eva looking serious. "I don't think they would, but I would be afraid of that city man, Harry."

"I am afraid of waiting any longer for Eva Tourmaine," was Jardine's answer. "The mine will give me a fair start towards prosperity, and it would break my heart to lose it. We have been working night and day and only need to put in the timber ready to constitute sufficient improvement. In fact, I must stay with the work until I get

the Crown grant, and come back to claim you—victorious."

He straightened his tall frame wearily, and then, as he stooped to kiss her, Eva said: "You look worn, Harry. I shall count the hours until the work is done."

Jardine tramped back down the winding valley, blundering over fir roots and into thickets, for he had toiled with shovel and cross-cut saw all the preceding night, and his eyes were heavy from want of sleep. This, perhaps, explained why he did not notice that a thicker vapour than the mist rolled up above the dark pines on a shoulder of a hill. The air was also heavy with the smell of burning, but bush fires were common at that season. At last, however, he halted with a shock of consternation, for the great trunks on the rise before him were silhouetted in ebony against a sea of flame, and then, forgetting his fatigue, he broke into a breathless run. A bush fire of the fiercest kind raged about the Bluebird mine.

When he reeled panting into the clearing where his camp had been tent and tool shed had gone, white heaps of glowing embers fanned into flame mark-



He could see the dark pines sliding quickly up stream, and knew the big whirlpool lay ominously close below.

ed where the great hewn down trunks had lain in swaths. The timber had been intended for use in the mine. The forest crackled all around, streams of flame hung themselves from resinous branch to branch, and red tongues of fire licked up to the topmost sprays of the giant cedars. The heat was that of a furnace, but Jardine pushed on through it until he found his grizzled partner standing blackened all over, shaking his clinched fist at the blaze and choking out strange epithets.

"Are the sawn props safe?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Gone!" growled Miner Marston. "Every blame one of them. We're burnt out, ruined, busted. The drills are melting, and there's a jam of 200 foot hemlocks right over the adit. I lit out to meet Freightler Davis bringing the powder in, and when I came back the whole bush was blazing."

"It's all up," said Jardine, whose face turned a curious grey under the fitful glare as he sat down limply, mopping the sweat from his forehead, and for several minutes there was only the roar of the fire. Then, because he was a sanguine man who had faced disaster before, he caught at a faint hope, adding: "It's cruel hard luck. Still, none of the folks round here would be mean enough to jump us before we've straightened things up. Accidents will happen, and—"

"Accidents be blamed!" growled Marston. "This isn't an accident. Some of them thieves who gave out they were hunting timber rights have burnt us out, and the company man at Vancouver started them in. Can't you

smell kerosene on this?" And see here!"

Marston held out a half-burnt ray and a couple of unused matches before he continued: "Storekeeper Pierre don't sell that kind. We use silent smellers here. Crown mining recorders stand like cast iron by the law, and says the law: If you've not put your legal improvements on your claim in time anybody can relocate it. Begin to catch on, eh? Bush fires are common, aren't they? And them scoundrels knowing it have burnt us out so we can't put through the improvements before they jump us."

Jardine said nothing for a space, only set his teeth and clinched his hard right hand, recognising that a cunning enemy had outwitted him. He also knew that the poor man who fights an unscrupulous capitalist over a disputed claim generally goes under. But he was a stubborn man, who, dealing justly

with others, clung grimly to his rights, and there was an ominous flash in his grey eyes when he answered at last:

"Then they shall fight for it. I'm not going to lie down while any man robs me, and if they want the claim they must take it—the best way they can. Start now for Vancouver, borrow \$500 from our friends there, and pay it into crown offices as composition for work not done. Then get hold of Lawyer Elmore and stand by to strike the rascally broker for conspiracy."

"And what are you figuring to do?" asked Marston, and Jardine answered quietly:

"Stay here and stand all jumpers off the claim."

The elder man looked at the speaker approvingly, but he shook his head. "There's sand in you, but it won't work out that way, and the law's too strong to buck against," he said. "It's forty miles to the railway, and by the time I got there the Pacific express would be through. It's too late for the composition already. You're young and innocent, Harry, or I guess you'd know how the case would go if you started to bluff off with two matches mine riggers who could put down \$10 for every cent we show."

"Then," said Jardine, hoarsely, "is there nothing we can do?"

"Not much, kept to sleep over it. Maybe we'll see light in the morning; we're badly played out now."

It sounded absurd counsel, but Marston was right, for suspense with hope is torture, while a beneficent providence decrees that definite disaster often brings with it a mental numbness which blunts the victim's senses. Therefore, when Jardine, who had mocked at the thought of sleep, rolled the thick blan-

ket round him among a hemlock's roots, he found the scent of cedars even more soothing than the boom of the river which seemed drifting him away to a peaceful region wherein claim jumpers were unknown. When he awoke golden sunlight touched the cold white peaks, dew glistened like diamonds on every cedar spray, and the world seemed fresh and beautiful until he remembered what he had to do; then all the brightness faded. Neither of the partners ate much breakfast, while, when the talk



that followed it was finished, Jardine plodded moodily towards Tourmaine's ranch and found Eva under the verandah. The sunlight kissed her face into brighter colour, heightened the shy pleasure in her eyes and the sparkle in her hair, and the man groaned inwardly. Then Eva started as she saw his face.

"You have had a misfortune with the mine?" she said.

"We have lost it. We are going to make a last stand, but all hope has gone!" said Jardine, huskily. Then the girl listened breathlessly to his hurried words until she clinched one hand as he concluded: "I shall stay until the curtain comes down and then go away to some place where a poor man has better chances than in this valley. How could I stay here to be a reproach to you?—and it may be years before I have a home to offer you. Some day I shall win the dollars, perhaps too late, but meantime, after the loss over Father's dam, I am a hopelessly ruined man. Heaven knows how this hurts me, but I must do the right thing, and, Eva, can't you see?"

"What would you do if you won those dollars?" asked the girl, with a wave of colour in her face.

"Come back, if it was from across the world, to Tourmaine's ranch," said the man, in a voice that was strained and hoarse.

"And find me waiting," said Eva, with a catch in her breath, "whether you come soon or late. It is perhaps well you should go, Harry, but when you return, with or without the dollars, it will make no difference. Two to make a bargain, sweetheart, and two to break it—and I hold you fast. There, you can let your exaggerated sense of hun-