

THE SAFETY OF NUMBERS.

GWENDOLEN OVERTON, IN THE ARGONAUT.

MRS. DENNISON had begun life by choosing the wrong man. In the resulting misery, the fact of having plenty of company gave her no consolation. She had many suitors, both because of the idyllic life within a radius of a half-hundred miles, and because she was a very nice and pretty one. Only Leslie and Dennison had ever had a chance, and Dennison had won because no one could quite tell why, Maggie herself least of all, probably, Leslie would have been the match chosen financially, and looks were in his favor very decidedly.

But Maggie chose Dennison with the usual wisdom of her kind; and having no particular religious preferences one way or another, went with him to the nearest adobe town and there married by a padre, as being the easiest and quickest way out of it. And thereafter for three years Dennison had treated her abominably. He made nothing whatever of beating her; he overworked her; he drank. His conduct was the scandal of the surrounding country. Knowing Maggie's proclivities and her own disposition, the wonder to every one was that she did not shoot Dennison and have done with it. Since nothing of the kind happened, the only possible conclusion was that she loved him. Why she did if he had neglected her she might perhaps have had recourse to a stick-shooter; but it is at least having some notice taken of you to be knocked down and Maggie frequently was.

The treatment told her good looks after a while, the more especially as they were of the sort that are of youth alone. The plains and hard usage age a woman early. So when Maggie was twenty-four she looked ten years older than that.

Then Dennison let her. He found somebody he liked better, one day when he went over to the railroad town seventy-five miles away, and took her away with him. Maggie had no notion where he had gone, else she would probably have followed him. Instead, she stood on the porch and hoped and pined. She carried on the ranch alone, it being one of those plain ranches having no especial boundaries, no special fields or crops, and only a scrawny mile or two and a few chickens. There were a couple of hundred head of stock, cattle that grazed the country and were, to all intents, wild, and some broncos of much the same sort. These required no care, so Maggie spent most of her days sitting on the sill of the back door of the adobe and staring off toward the mountains and thinking about Dennison.

The Mexican woman who lived with her squatted on the ground—in the shade in summer, in the sun in winter—with a black topalo over her head, smoking cigarettes until the hard soil in her neighborhood was covered with straw-paper stumps. She had four children. Maggie had none. There had been a baby, but it had died. A whitewashed board fence upon the top of a knoll that was to be seen from the back door marked where the grave had been before the coyotes had torn it up. Besides the woman and the fourteen children there were two "graser" vaqueros, whose duties were not burdensome, who ate jerked beef and frijoles, and helped Maggie wait for Dennison to come back.

But though she sat day after day with her falling eyes looking toward the mountains beyond which was the railway and from which came the road, no Dennison appeared. Other people came by at long intervals. Twice Leslie had ridden up. There had been a year's space between the visits. And at the second one Maggie had seemed no nearer consolation or common sense than at the first. Then he had left eighteen months elapse.

When he came down the road this time he saw Maggie, from afar off, sitting on the door-sill with her chin in her hands, the Mexican woman hugging a narrow strip of shade, for it was near noon, and some chickens and children variously disposed. He dismounted with a clanking of spurs and led his bronco to the water-trough.

Maggie rose without haste and went over to him. She might have seen him five minutes before from any sign of surprise or pleasure she made. Hers was the apathy of the woman of the frontier ranch, to whom life is a bare outlook upon the wild—dead, fruitless and dry. She took him into the house when the pony was turned over to a vaquero. Had he heard news of Dennison, she wanted to know. Leslie looked serious, so serious that she leaned forward with her yellow hands clasped hard. What was it, she asked. Dennison was dead. It was that he had come to tell her. He had just returned from the other side of the Colorado, and had had news of her husband there, quite by chance.

"Tell me," said Maggie, "is that the whole thing? I want to know."

Leslie told her, tipping back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head, and his buckskin legs crossed with a swing.

"Well," he started, "it was this way, you see. He hit out with a woman—a bad egg from over Central way." (Central City was the railway town.) "They went into California, and they set to keeping a restaurant at Meyer's mine. He got tired of her by and by, and he vanished the ranch there, too, and went down near to Los Angeles. He got into a scrap there—and the other fellow was a better shot, I guess. That's all."

"Who told you?" asked Maggie.

"Two fellows that was on the coroner's jury," he answered her.

"What did he fight for?"

"Woman," he told her, curtly. "She was the other man's wife."

Maggie's face was so near the color of the alkali sand outside that it could not turn pale. And the only expression which her eyes had yet been capable of was a dull hopelessness. So there would have been no guessing how the news affected her except that her fingers strained until the joints of them were livid. "Where's he planted," she asked.

He told her the name of the town, "if you'll marry me now, I'll take you to see his grave."

Maggie began to cry then. Even when Dennison had departed she had not shed a tear. So it was all the worse now. Tears had back for four years from eyes, heat-dried, some painfully.

Leslie thought for a while that she was going to die. And that would be his fault. It occurred to him that he had perhaps said a bad word. They said never seen a woman cry, because women had not entered much into his scheme of things. For a while he sat

and shifted on his chair and watched, very unhappy indeed. Then he got up and went to her and put his hand on her shoulder tentatively. She pushed it off—and he felt that he had been unwise again. So he walked to the door and stood there, his feet wide apart, considering the glaring flat and looking back at Maggie, over his shoulder, now and then.

She cried for a good half hour, and the whole experience frightened Leslie so much that it was not until nearly sunset that he dared get up to the subject again. He meant to go at it tactfully, this time, but it came at the end of a long, strained pause. "Say—what about our getting joined in wedlock and all that—anyway?" He held his breath for fear she would cry again.

But she took it quietly this time. "I ain't sure he's dead," she answered.

"I am," said Leslie. "But I'll go fetch the fellows that told me about it, and you can find out for yourself."

He went out and saddled his bronco, and departed by the way he had come. "I'll be back," he said.

He had no idea where the fellows were to be found. They had been prospectors, and might be anywhere in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado or California by now. But though his phrasing might have been less polished, his sentiments were identical with those of Calonne—if it were but impossible, it should be done. It took him four months to do it. But at the end of that time he rode up to the adobe again. There were two men with him, and they went into details that caused Maggie to be convinced.

"All right," she said to Leslie that night. "I'll marry you." It was not enthusiastic, but Leslie made allowances, and took what he could get.

So, the next morning, the ranch was left in charge of the two vaqueros, the Mexican woman, the fourteen children, and five mongrel dogs. And Maggie and Leslie rode off, side by side, with the two men bringing up the rear. The same pair who had made her Mrs. Dennison made her Mrs. Leslie now, and gave her his blessing. She took it stolidly. Then she and her husband took the train for California, to see Dennison's grave.

The head-board to it had the surname in black letters on a plain board ground. Maggie did not like that, so Leslie paid for a new one—white-painted with the Christian names as well. When it was duly put up, they went on their way. The way was toward the Mojave. Leslie had mining interests up there, and being in the general neighborhood, he took the opportunity of looking them up.

At Mojave they left the train, hired a wagon and proceeded toward the interior. All day they drove along a road that wound between soft-rolling hills, pale brown, shrub-flecked. The sun scorched. Near the railway there were small cultivated bits where green things grew. But they stopped after a while. By afternoon it was desolation.

"Where'll we put up tonight?" Maggie asked—the first time there had been a word in two hours or more.

"There was a house about," he told her. He had inquired as to that. It was thirty-five miles from the railway—more or less—and it belonged to one Dennis it seemed.

They came to it in due time, but Dennis himself was not around just then. His wife explained that he had gone to drive in a heifer and her calf. She took charge of them herself, in the meanwhile. She was a pretty little thing, tragically young, considering the hardships and the loneliness of her life. Her eyes were innocent and big, and her countenance was of a sweetly insipid cast, with a skin still of peaches and cream. She was glad to see Maggie. Probably she would have been glad to see any one, for the sake of human speech. However that was, she gave Maggie attentions of a kind she had never thought of.

And Maggie was feminine at heart, though she had little enough chance to realize it. The gentle coddling of the little thing melted her. Within half an hour she had learned to like her—perhaps even more than that—to have some affection for her. They were hand in hand, on the edge of a bank, talking, when Dennis came in. Dennis was merely Dennison with a last syllable the less and a beard the more.

Maggie knew him at once. And he knew her. His jaw fell.

"This is my husband," said the girl. "The tone of adoration and possession made Maggie sick—but only for a short instant. She stood up and put out her hand. Dennis hesitated, then he came forward and took it. His terror was making him quaver. "I didn't," said Maggie, with stress on the name, and looking him straight in the eyes.

His own fell. "Sure!" he agreed, lamely. He tried to smile. "I got to go to the corral," he said.

He faced her. "Instead of to the corral, he went to his room and locked himself in and examined his revolver, against an emergency."

But Maggie went out to the stable. She found her husband rubbing down the stock, "say," she said, standing beside him with her hands on her hips. "say—he ain't Dennis at all. He's Dennison. He's my husband."

It was Leslie's turn to have his jaw drop. "Did you know it?" she demanded.

He faced her. "I did not, Mag. I wouldn't have played you any such dirty trick."

"All right," she said. She knew the truth when she heard it. "It's done and there ain't any sense making the girl pay for it. Let on he's Dennis as long as we're here." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Now you can go to get her into it. And, if you can't, you can tell Leslie and he'll do it for you."

She jerked her thumb at Leslie on her shoulder, "he'll keep a well-merited eye on you for the rest of your natural life. And we'll make it interesting for you if you don't talk Spanish. Sabe?"

Dennis was moved to gratitude. His voice shook when he thanked her, and so did his hand when he held it out. She looked at it, and her lips curled. Very nearly laughing. Then she lifted her eyes with one withering glance, and turned on her heel.

They drove off toward the sunrise between the eternal, rolling hills. Presently Leslie turned to her. "Do you care about that bad egg still?" he asked. She did not reply. His face was not as red as it was usually. "Do you?" he asked again. She shut her lips and looked hard at the white road ahead.

When the tall and muscular Senator Heitfeld entered the executive chamber this morning he received a cordial and what he described as a "genuine western welcome" from his president. "Do you remember when you and I were the whole senate?" inquired the president, as he grasped the hand of the senator. It is a question that behind this question was an interesting little story. When President McKinley died from the senate chamber to the east front of the capitol on that bleak, damp day last March he left the oath of his exalted office for the second time, the whole senate fled out behind him. The man who is now president had just taken the oath as vice president, and was presiding over the senate. In the excitement attending the departure of President McKinley to senator had thought to move the adjournment of the senate. As presiding officer of the body Mr. Roosevelt could not desert his post, nor could he, on his own initiative, declare the senate adjourned. For fully an hour he sat in lonely state upon the senate rostrum. Not another human being was in the great chamber, except the gaffer being called. Just about the time the unprecedented situation had ceased to be humorous to the new vice president, Senator Heitfeld strode into the chamber to get his share of the vote, which he had left in the Democratic cloak room. Taking in the situation at a glance, the senator, with grave face but suppressed laughter, said: "Mr. President—the senator from Idaho."

Mr. Heitfeld—I note that the senate do now adjourn until 12 o'clock, noon, tomorrow.

The vice president, looking vastly pleased, said: "The senator from Idaho moves that the senate now adjourn until 12 o'clock, noon, tomorrow. Is there objection?" The chair bears tone, and the senate stands adjourned until the hour named.

The vice president, embarrassed, "Oh, with a mighty thump of his gavel, and hastily descending from the rostrum, thanked the senator from Idaho for his action.

"I want to thank you again for that," said President Roosevelt today as he greeted Senator Heitfeld. "If it hadn't been that you forgave your railroad and had to return for it there is no telling how long I would have had to grovel over an empty seat."—New York Tribune.

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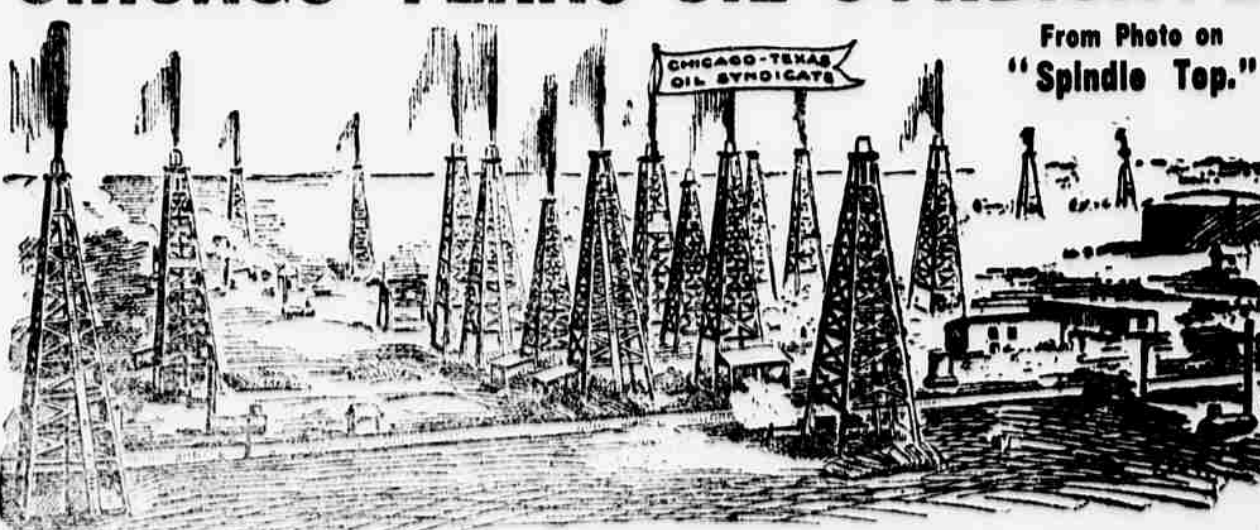
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