

A Short Story by Joseph A. Altsheler

The Broken Journey

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The road turned at the crest of the mountain and began its winding descent toward the lower levels, but Wharton stopped a few moments to inhale the keen air and to gaze into the white mist that rolled up the valleys and the slopes almost to his feet. He sat there on his horse, a figure of elastic strength, the young member from his county, serving his first term at the capital of his state, and proud alike of the honor and responsibility.

Wharton had been summoned suddenly in the middle of his term by the serious illness of his father, and he had gone, in all haste, to his mountain home, a journey of no little consequence, for the country was nowhere within fifty miles of a railroad and the time was winter. But his father's recovery had been rapid, and now he was on his way back to the capital, eager to be again in the great legislative contest that was

shaking the state.

Amid the silence, as he sat there on the mountain, he was going through those mental processes that strengthen the will and prepare it for a great work. He knew that he would need all his faculties. The bill to recreate the judicial system of the state was vital, the fight over it was already long and bitter, and only the final vote could tell which side would win.

He spoke to his horse and began the winding journey down the slopes, dipping soon into the narrow valley that ran like a ribbon between the ridges. Then the trail turned once more, and he began the ascent of the farther slope that helped to hem in the valley. Here the mountain was bleaker, with upheaved stony sides, scanty shrubs and dwarfed bushes clinging in the clefts.

Wharton looked uneasily about him and his blood grew chill. Within the last half-hour the scene had become repellent and dreary to the full. The mists were creeping higher and were turning from white to a sombre gray. He increased his speed again, his good horse responding quickly to his word, but the sodden clouds continued to pile

up in the sky, and out of them presently came something white and soft, which fell cold and damp upon his face. It was but a brief vanguard, for the storm rushed quickly afterward in flood tide, and the air was full of the driving flakes. Wharton, who could not now see any road before him, pulled his collar a little higher and his hat a little lower, and let the horse choose the way. He went on in this manner more than an hour, when the snow began to thin enough for him to raise his head and look about him.

He found that he was climbing a narrow path in a ravine, between two steep slopes, and the country was strange. It was in his mind to turn back and retrace his steps until he came to the road, but he had lost so much time already that it would certainly mean a night on the mountain, and second thought induced him to go on, in the hope that he might reach a cabin, where he could find shelter until the morning.

At a turning he heard faint sounds behind him, and then out of the mists rode a big dark man on a big dark horse.

“Which way, stranger?” he asked Wharton in

friendly fashion.

“I should like to tell you, but I don’t know.” replied Wharton.

The big man laughed and stroked his dark beard with a big hand clad in a buckskin glove.

“It’s nothing to wander from the path in a snowstorm so thick that one can’t see,” he said. “I’ve done it myself and I live in these parts, straight ahead about two miles. You are going to spend the night there with me.” Wharton nodded and gave him his thanks.

The path was broad enough for two, and the big man rode up beside him, the horses touching noses in friendly fashion.

“I’ve seen you before,” said the stranger, after sweeping Wharton from head to foot with a concentrated gaze, “and I’m glad that I can save you from a wild night that might end badly for you.”

“So you know me,” said Wharton in some surprise.

“Aye,” replied the man tersely, “you’re Albert Wharton, an’ you’re the member from Rupert

County. I've heard you speak."

"I hope the fact has not made you my enemy," said Wharton, laughing a little—he had some pride in his oratorical powers.

"You can talk well enough," continued the stranger, "and as for me, my name is Farrell—Nick Farrell. As I told you, I live in the cove ahead. I farm some, and I hunt more."

The snow ceased presently, and the gorge opened out to a fair width. Trees appeared; a brook, with ice at the edges, ran swiftly over pebbles, and on a shelf of land in a small but thick grove rose a house, larger and better than the usual mountain home.

Host and guest soon had the horses between walls, with oats and corn in their cribs. Then they walked together to the house, and now the dark had come completely. A single light burned from a window before them.

Farrell opened the door and led the way into a large room that seemed to be a kind of family apartment, a great fire of mountain logs crackling and blazing in a huge fireplace on one side.

“Just take off your overcoat, Mr. Wharton, and warm yourself while I see about supper,” said Farrell.

He disappeared through a door at the far end of the room, but came back in a few moments and drew up a chair for himself.

“Supper in five minutes,” he said hospitably. As he was now without his overcoat Wharton could see better his great proportions. He had the frame of a giant, and, lean as he was, he must have weighed two hundred pounds.

The door through which Farrell had gone opened again, and a girl, entering with light step, raised the leaves of a table near the wall and began to set it with dishes. Wharton could not see the girl without turning in his chair in too obvious a manner, and he caught only a glimpse of a plaid red and black linsey dress.

“Bring up your chair, Mr. Wharton. Supper’s ready,” said Farrell, and Wharton took his chair to the table, where the girl was standing in a waiting attitude.

“My sister, Cynthia,” said Farrell. “Cynthia, this

is Mr. Wharton, the member of the Legislature from Rupert County.”

Cynthia Farrell nodded, but did not speak, and as there was no light in the room save that from the fire, which was on the far side, Wharton could not see her distinctly. But he knew that she was a tall, slim, mountain girl, with a face gleaming whitely from encircling masses of coal-black hair. The dress seemed to be of home-made material, but it fitted the lithesome form and indicated well-molded arms and shoulders beneath. She was far younger than her brother.

The fact that she neither sat down nor spoke was of no significance; nearly all mountain girls are shy in the presence of strangers, and it is the custom, too, even in the homes of parents of substantial means, for them to wait upon the table. Cynthia Farrell, stepping lightly and with a singular, supple grace, served them, going to the kitchen for hot cakes and filling the coffee-pot again. Once, when she poured a fresh cup for him, Wharton noticed that her wrist was white and beautifully turned. The hand, too, was small, and the tapering fingers were unspoiled by hard

work.

“It’s good to have you here with us, Mr. Wharton,” said Farrell genially. “I hear of you often, and the reputation that you’re making. Now, Cynthia, you’ve done enough work. Just sit down with us and eat a bite yourself.”

She obeyed without a word and drew a chair to the table. Wharton politely put food upon a plate and passed it to her. She accepted with a “Thank you,” the first words that she had spoken. The accent was of the mountains, but the tones were full and rich, and Wharton at last had a good view of her face. She had none of the sallowness so common in that region; instead, her skin was remarkable for its white clearness. Her eyes were lowered mostly, but once he caught her swift glance at him and he thought that it bore a trace of uneasiness. He concluded that it came from shyness, and to help on the evening he began to talk of that world beyond the mountains to which he was an official delegate and of which they must be ignorant. He possessed the gift of tongues, and he talked well. Meanwhile he heard the beat of hail on the windowpanes in a steady

patter and the darkness inclosed the house in walls of black.

“We’ll sit before the fire a while, Mr. Wharton.” said Farrell when the supper was over, “and Cynthia, as soon as she has cleared away the things, will join us for a spell.”

Wharton nodded in assent, and they drew their chairs in front of the great open fireplace.

Cynthia was noiseless, but Wharton knew that she was yet in the room, clearing the table, and presently he shifted a little in his chair until he could see her with the corner of his eyes. His first glance startled him. She was regarding him with a blended look of pity and apprehension, marked in either case, and, though wondering somewhat about its cause, his chief interest then was in noticing how well the look became her. He knew that beauty of a rare and delicate kind, usually doomed to wither too soon under hard toil, sometimes bloomed in the mountains, even in the most unlikely places, and it seemed to him that he had found such a flower now. But he had an innate refinement, and when he saw that she was slightly confused at meeting his gaze he turned

his eyes.

She took away the last of the dishes in a few moments, let down the leaves of the little folding table and put her hand upon a third chair, with the evident intention of joining them by the fire. Wharton sprang up, took the chair and put it between his and Farrell's. She did not speak, but gave her thanks with a slight bow and sat down in the chair.

Farrell glanced at his sister, put his pipe back into his mouth and relapsed into silence. She said never a word, and Wharton, feeling an odd embarrassment, paused and lost his tongue. There was no noise in the room but the crackling of the hickory logs under the eating flames, and a great constraint laid hold of Wharton. He began at last to be dimly conscious of some strange influence, the quality and power alike of which were yet hidden from him. It troubled him, got upon his nerves, and his sense of satisfaction was dimmed.

“A wild night that grows yet wilder,” said Farrell at last. “I doubt if you can go on tomorrow.”

Although he used the word “doubt” his tone was that of finality, and it pressed upon Wharton’s troubled senses. A sudden light of terror leaped into the girl’s eyes. Wharton was not a man to have his course laid out for him by others.

“I cannot trespass too long upon your hospitality,” he said. “As I am of the mountains and know all their tricks, I shall go on in the morning.”

Farrell’s lips moved as if he would speak again, but he changed his mind and put the pipe back in his mouth.

“You’ve had a long, hard day, Mr. Wharton,” he said after a while, “and as it’s a sin to keep you up I’ll show you to a bed now.”

Wharton was glad to go, because he wished to escape from the oppression that was now heavy upon him, and because he really needed rest.

“Good night, Miss Farrell,” he said.

She did not reply, but when her brother, turning his back, walked across the room toward a door that evidently led to the apartment in which

Wharton was to sleep, she suddenly approached him, with swift, soundless steps.

“Remember that I did not want you to come—that I am sorry you are here. Always remember that,” she said in an intense whisper, so charged with fear and emotion that Wharton was startled.

“I do not—” he began to say, but, quickly as she had come, she was gone as quickly, and Farrell, having opened the door, was showing him the way.

Farrell was the genial host once more as he led him into the little room.

“If the looks of your eyes don’t belie you, you are very sleepy,” he said, “and so I’ll tell you good night.”

“Good night,” said Wharton, his head still so full of Cynthia’s extraordinary words that he paid little heed to the bedroom. But there was nothing remarkable about it, merely four walls, two narrow windows cut like slits in the logs, a chair, a washstand and a bed. And it was the truth, too, that he was sleepy despite his wonder. After so long a day and such a strain, an overwhelming

desire to close his eyes and find rest came upon him. He did not seek to resist it, but hastily undressing went to bed, and in five minutes was sleeping soundly.

When he awoke in the morning a brilliant sunlight was shining in at the narrow windows and from his bed he saw the ridges and peaks, deep in glittering white snow. There was a knock at the door and Farrell entered.

“You have slept late and so have all of us, Mr. Wharton,” he said—“late for country people. But the beating of hail on a house, when you are warm and inside it, always makes a man sleepy.”

“That’s so,” exclaimed Wharton, dressing quickly. His spirits took a fine bound, due partly to physical and partly to mental causes.

“Elias has fed your horse,” said Farrell. “There Elias is now, going across the yard.”

Wharton glanced through the window and saw Elias, a man of years and of most unusual figure, combining the maximum of height with the minimum of girth. He seemed to Wharton to be at least six feet three and of wonderful slimness,

with a face all seams and wrinkles, and hands all cords and knots.

The breakfast was in almost every respect a duplicate of the supper. The girl both served and shared, and, as before, spoke little.

Wharton, an intense Democrat and a mountaineer, had learned more than his fellows through his experience at the capital, and he knew that in the earlier times people of education and breeding had settled here and there in these mountains. Blood could carry through more than one generation, and it pleased him to think that the qualities going with it were present now in Cynthia.

When he rose from the table and glanced casually at the window, he noticed that the skies were again overcast, menacing brown clouds indicating a probable return of the snow. He did not like these signs, but he had no fear of them, because Farrell would tell him the straight road, and before night he would be at the station.

“I owe much to both of you for shelter and courtesy,” he said, “but I must hasten on. I am

due in the capital tomorrow.”

Cynthia looked at Farrell and a pallor, sudden and deadly, overspread her face. Farrell, too, had risen, but he was smiling, and it was a benevolent, protecting smile.

“Mr. Wharton,” he said, “don’t you see the clouds out there? Look how they are gathering again! We shall have another snowstorm. If I were you I wouldn’t go on yet. It would be dangerous. You might lose your life, and we can’t spare you.”

“It’s very kind of you, Mr. Farrell,” said Wharton, smiling in his turn, “to make such an offer, but I must be in the capital tomorrow.”

Farrell shook his big head and shut his thin lips together in a way that meant resolve.

“I can’t let you go, Mr. Wharton,” he said. “If anything happened to you, all the mountains would say I was to blame.”

Wharton detected a new ring in his voice, a tone that annoyed him. It had the savor of a reproof, addressed by a man to a boy, and he resented its implication.

“You need not trouble your man Elias,” he said, with some slight decline in the suavity of his manner. “I can bridle and saddle my own horse.”

Again the great mountaineer shook his head, and seemed to thrust forward his massive chin.

“It comes to this, Mr. Wharton,” he said in his old, protecting manner. “I feel that a sort of chance has put you in my care, and I’ve got to live up to the responsibility. I can’t let you risk your life out there in all that snow and wildness with another storm coming on.”

The blood of the younger mountaineer suddenly grew hot in every vein.

He lifted his overcoat from the chair where it lay, put it on, and took one step toward the door. Then he found the great form of Farrell barring the way.

“I told you, Mr. Wharton, that I could not let you go,” said the mountaineer, “and I am such a good friend of yours that I will keep my word, even if it comes to force. You are a strong man, but I am stronger. Nor are you armed. Come, let’s go into your room there and talk it over.”

It was not the fear of hurts in a struggle, but of suffering indignity in the presence of Cynthia that made Wharton accept this offer of a moment's truce.

“Very well,” he said. “Miss Farrell ought not to be frightened by violence, and I confess that I should like to hear your reason for this extraordinary act.”

He bowed to Cynthia and went with Farrell into the little room. “Now,” he said, “you will please explain this!”

“Do you not see,” said Farrell suavely, “that your life is safe only here with us? I am your best friend.”

“I am no child!” exclaimed Wharton. “And this is nonsense! If that is all you have to say, get out of the way, because I am going at once.”

Farrell raised his great arm.

“Do not get excited, Mr. Wharton,” he said soothingly.

His tone was so ironical, so exasperating, that Wharton could endure no more. All his blood flew to his head and he sprang toward Farrell,

aiming a blow directly at the smiling mouth. He never knew the exact order of procedure, because it was all so quick, but his clenched fist was caught in a palm that shut up on it with a deadly grip, and the next moment he was forced back against the wall, where he was pinned, breathless and unable to move.

“I warned you,” said Farrell in a manner that was even fatherly. “Now, will you promise to be good if I let you loose?”

Wharton could only nod, and Farrell released him. He stood for a while, panting and alternately red and white with rage.

“Will you tell me the reason for all this?” he cried at last.

Farrell laughed softly and with the utmost good nature.

“Now you are impeaching my word,” he replied, “and if I were hot-tempered like you I might get angry, but I won’t. It’s just as I say, I can’t let you risk your life.”

Wharton uttered an angry cry and struck his open palm against the wall.

“Am I a man or am I not?” he exclaimed.

Farrell examined him critically. “You are a man, but a very young one,” he replied in a judicial tone.

“You can’t keep me here,” exclaimed Wharton.

“Oh, yes, I can,” said Farrell, smiling. “We have no neighbors. This house is built of logs. The windows there are but clefts and you can’t crawl through them. Elias will do anything that I tell him, and either he or I will be before you if you choose any other road. It’s just the easiest thing in the world, Mr. Wharton, to keep you with us. Why not make the best of it and be a happy guest instead of an ungrateful one who is trying to get away?”

Despite himself Wharton was compelled to smile, though somewhat sourly.

“Come back into the big room,” said Farrell, “and we’ll sit there and talk.”

Wharton went without a word. Although troubled and mortified to the verge of desperation he was recovering control of himself, and he resolved to affect a calmness that he did not feel.

They sat down again before the fire, and Farrell was all the genial host. Cynthia passed through the room, and when she gave a swift glance at the pair, sitting there, apparently such friends, color came back to the cheeks that had been so white.

There were hidden reserves and unplumbed mental depths in the gigantic mountaineer, who, though without education, talked that morning in a manner equaling in brilliancy and interest any conversation to which Wharton had ever listened. He had the gift of the story-teller, the power of narrative in its most appealing form, and a life of adventure, in the wild mass of mountains surrounding him, gave him ample material. Kindred blood was in the veins of Wharton. He, too, in his boyhood, had been, at times, a hunter, a fisherman and a rover and, despite his anxiety and hidden anger, he forgot himself under the spell of Farrell.

Dinner was spread by and bye in the same manner as the preceding meals, Cynthia first serving and then eating with them. It pleased Wharton to watch her, and he was constantly

discovering new beauty and grace in her. It seemed to him that her eyes, full and soft, could be capable of much tenderness, and certainly he had never seen a whiter or more beautifully rounded throat.

She was more composed now, and she had a dignity that he liked. He began to believe, too, that her apprehension had been for him—that she had no fear of her brother on her own account, and out of this belief came a resolve.

“Miss Farrell,” he asked, “will you tell me why your brother holds me here? It is very kind of him to care for my safety, but I cannot believe that it is the only reason.”

Deep color suffused her cheeks, and she looked at her brother. The look was in a measure defiant, and the glance that he gave her in return was not a threat so much as a request.

“I am sorry you asked me that question,” she said at length, “as I must not answer it.”

Most of the afternoon passed in much the same manner as the morning, but at last Farrell rose and asked his guest to excuse him, saying that he

would return in a few moments. Then he disappeared through the rear door and Wharton's heart gave a leap. Besides himself only the girl was now present in the room, and she did not have the power to stay him.

He went swiftly to the front door and put his hand upon the bolt, but Cynthia followed with a step as swift as his, and lighter, and her hand fell upon his arm.

"Don't try it," she said. "I ask you not to do so, because I wish you well."

"I am a free man," said Wharton with pride, "and I cannot be held in such a manner."

"Open the door if you will," she said in the same insistent tone, "but do not go beyond it."

He turned the bolt and swung wide the door. Elias, attentive, waiting, drawn up as if ready to spring, stood upon the porch. His long, thin, knotted form seemed alive with strength.

Wharton was a thoroughly brave man, but as he reflected swiftly that while he might overpower Elias, Farrell would surely come, he closed the door between them and the outer

world. He turned then upon Cynthia with an impatience he had not before shown toward her.

“Your brother is not here and you need not fear him. Now will you tell me the reason of these extraordinary actions?” he exclaimed.

She turned pale and her eyes lowered before his wrath. But from beneath the drooping lashes she shot him a glance that was none too cold. Then she shook her head.

The rear door was opened and Farrell bustled in, brushing the snow from his shoulders.

“I’ve been to the stable,” he said, “but I tell you it’s wild! How glad I am that I persuaded you not to go on today, Mr. Wharton!”

Then he resumed his easy talk, his flow of narrative, anecdote and description, and the long, slow day passed on. The darkness fell over the mountains, thick and heavy, with only the white gleam of the snow showing through, and Wharton knew that a whole day was lost.

That night he lay on his bed, fully dressed, and slept not at all. Lying there in the darkness he reviewed the events of the day, and his anger rose

rapidly as he recalled them. The spell of Farrell's power and of Cynthia's beauty was gone. It was intolerable that he should be detained in that lonely mountain home when his duty at the capital was calling him, and he resolved that the delay should not continue.

He rose from the bed and tried the door, finding it locked as he had expected. But he was not daunted. Farrell was right when he had spoken of him as unarmed, but he had one of those combination pocket knives that are a half-dozen useful things in one, and with it he skilfully picked the lock. Then he opened the door and stepped into the large sitting-room, where he and Farrell had passed so much time.

The great fire of hickory logs had burned down, leaving a bed of coals that cast ruddy but flickering bands of light across the floor. Most of the room, however, was in darkness.

Wharton stood there a few moments, and, as he stood, the door, leading to the rear of the house, opened. A figure, tall, slender and wrapped in a long black cloak, came out, and he knew by the motion that it was Cynthia.

The girl paused, and then, as, by the firelight, she saw the man standing there at the door, his figure bent slightly forward, his eager, intent face watching her. She started, but in a moment recovered herself and went to him.

“You have come this far by your own efforts,” she said, “and I will help you with the last steps as I would have helped you with the first if I had been in time.”

“I know it,” said Wharton. Her act appealed to him as one of heroism and of sympathy, too, for him. The great cloak that wrapped her about had a high hood which was now drawn over her head. But he saw the tint of her face, within the encircling black folds, deepen into a crimson blush as he looked at her. But Wharton, was a gentleman to the bone, and he looked away.

“I knew that you would help me if you had the chance,” he said. “I have felt it from the first.”

“My brother sleeps soundly,” she said, “and so does Elias, but we should make haste.”

He noticed even at that moment how she used the word “we,” but she gave him no further time

for thought upon the point as she led the way at once to the front door, unlocked it, and stepped out upon the porch, followed by Wharton.

It was a wonderful, dazzling, white night. The snow had ceased to fall, but it lay deep on valley, slopes and peaks. A slice of silver moon hung in a sky of unbroken dusky blue, and it was so light on the mountains that Wharton could count the trees as they filed away in rows over the ridges. There was no wind, and silence overhung the wilderness.

“I owe you much, how much I do not know, nor do I know why,” he said to Cynthia, “but I will tell you good-bye now. Yet it is not for always. I mean to see you again, and nothing can prevent me except yourself.”

He seized her hand, and before she could rescue it he had held it rather longer and rather more closely than usual.

“You are not rid of me yet,” she said when the rescue was effected, and she laughed a little when she spoke, perhaps not with displeasure. “Do you mean to walk? Come, I will show you your

horse.”

She led the way through the snow to the little dark stable, and in its shadow he saw not one, but two horses, saddled and bridled, and one of the saddles was for a woman.

“It is a long, wild ride over the mountains,” she said, “and you do not know the road. I am going to show you the way.”

Wharton was anxious enough to escape, but there he stopped; no woman should risk herself in such a manner for him.

“I cannot let you do such a thing,” he said.

“It is not for you alone,” she said, turning laughing eyes upon him. “I am as anxious as you to get to Morrison—this house is no longer a place for me—and I have an uncle there who will take care of me. If it were not for you I could not go, for I would not dare the flight alone over the mountains. You serve me as I serve you.”

He gave her his hand, and, strong and agile, she sprang into the saddle. He was in his the next moment, and then they rode together down the cove. The snow was deep, the feet of the horses

making but little sound, but Cynthia showed the way with certainty.

The road curved and they began the ascent of the slopes. It was a sheltered path, much protected by trees and overhanging rocks from the snow, but Wharton saw that alone he never could have followed it.

They were far on the ridge now, and the cove and its house were lost behind them. Around them was a wonderful silence, and they two were alone between the white world below and the star-shot sky above. Wharton felt a great thrill of exultation as they rode together, he a mountaineer and she a mountaineer, her figure strong and reliant, her beautiful face showing now and then from the folds of the dark hood.

They began to talk by and bye, and she disclosed a pure, untroubled soul, one innocent in thought as well as action. Wharton reflected that he was doing a good deed in taking her away from her brother, and putting her with her uncle at Morrison, where she could have what a woman needed.

They rode all night without stopping, and their talk was easy, like that of an intimacy coming from long acquaintance. Day came out of a gray mist and the white world sprang into the glittering sunlight. Wharton suggested that they stop a little while and rest in a sheltered cove, and then from an unnoticed bag tied to her saddlehorn she produced food.

They rode on again, under skies of cloudless blue, and they talked little now. Small houses of logs, stowed snugly away in coves, began to appear, and at last the station rose up from the white expanse. They had passed the first straggling houses when he said to Cynthia in tones which she could not misunderstand:

“I should like to tell you how I wish to thank you, Miss Farrell, but I cannot. Now if you will show me which is your uncle’s house, I will take you to it.”

“Oh, you need not do that,” she replied. “I would rather go there alone.”

It seemed a natural thing to say when she was in such a position, but his attention was caught by

a certain trembling in her voice. He looked at her with eyes that sought out every expression of her own, and she shivered and grew afraid. The red in her cheeks deepened, and, unable to bear his gaze longer, she let drop her eyes.

It was a moment of revelation, like a thundergust to Wharton.

“You have no uncle in Morrison!” he said.

The head sank lower.

“And you have risked everything, everything that is dear to a woman, for me?”

“I wished to save you and to save him, too, who is my brother.”

With bent head and drooping glance she made a powerful appeal to Wharton, a man of high impulses.

“You cannot go back,” he said, and his tone was so earnest and soft that she flushed more than ever, “nor can you stay here alone, having come with me: then we must go together to—the capital!”

“Together? To the capital?” she exclaimed,

raising her head.

“Not as we are now, but as husband and wife. I love you already. How could I help it, seeing you as you are, the one woman in the world for me, and knowing that it will be the making of my life’s happiness for you to be my wife!”

He spoke with his heart in his voice and his soul in his eyes. She, hearing him and seeing him, knew that he spoke the truth, and, yielding a little at first, presently she yielded all.

“If you wish it so much,” she said, “then I will marry you.”

Morrison was a county seat, a license was soon obtained, a minister as quickly, and two hours later they were married in the parlor of the little hotel, a half-dozen of Wharton’s friends looking on and envying his great fortune. An hour afterward they were on the train for the capital, and the world in its robe of white looked very heavenly to both of them.

She did not speak for a long time, but after a while she said:

“Albert, you must not think too badly of my

brother because of what he has done. You will like him when you know him better.”

“I like him now,” he said. “Hasn’t he given me you?”

When no one was looking he kissed her.

The following day the House was assembling in the old Capitol, and everybody knew that it was to be a memorable session. The Judiciary bill, making great and vital changes, had already passed the Senate and today it would come up in the House, where it was known to all the public that the vote would be extremely close. But only the shrewdest of them knew that with Wharton, of Rupert County, missing the vote would be a tie, and hence the bill would be lost.

And Wharton was missing. That was one of the wonders of the little capital. The young member from the mountains had been so eager, so zealous in support of the bill, he had fought for it so valiantly and with such effect that people now could not understand his disappearance. It was known that his father was out of danger and

that he had departed for the capital in good time, but then the mystery followed. No one had seen or heard anything of him, and scandal was busy with his name, saying that he had inducements to stay away.

It was a clear, winter day, the ground deep in snow, and the sun glittering on roofs and walls. The members passed slowly into the Capitol, grave with the weight of responsibility, but speaking occasionally of Wharton and his strange absence.

Down in a dim corner of the lobby sat two men, saying little, but now and then exchanging a satisfied glance. They were lobbyists, skilful and supple of mind, and they were friends of a circuit judge in the mountain district, to whom public report recently had not been kind. It was said, and there were proofs, that he had notoriously failed in the performance of his duty, and everybody knew that the passage of the Judiciary bill would unseat him.

“It was a clever trick,” said one of the lobbyists at length, “and Nick Farrell was just the man to do it for us. It was lucky that he owed the judge a

good turn.”

“Right you are,” said the other. “Wharton will be too late, and the bill is lost as surely as you and I are sitting here.”

They said no more just then, but looked toward the floor of the House where the members were still coming in. Suddenly the man nearest to the floor turned white, and his companion, who followed his startled glance, forced an oath between his clenched teeth.

Albert Wharton, the member from Rupert County, was walking down the aisle on his way to his desk, and he bore himself very proudly. In his eyes shone a singular new light, the light of a quiet, intense happiness.

There was a buzz of excitement in both House and lobby, and the members began to crowd around Wharton and ask him questions. But he only shook his head and smiled.

“I will explain all presently,” he said.

The House went into session, the Judiciary bill was called up, and the vote was taken. When the name of the member from Rupert County was

called Wharton arose and said:

“I think I owe the House a word of explanation for my absence, which may have seemed a compromising thing at such a time. The fact is—

He hesitated, but, smiling proudly, looked over the House, which was silent and intent. Then he continued firmly:

“The fact is, I stopped on the way to get married.”

The House burst into applause, and, far back in the lobby, a young woman of remarkable beauty blushed deeply, but happily.

Then Wharton voted in the affirmative, the clerk continued calling the names, and, when the whole vote was taken, the Judiciary bill passed by a majority of one.



- **Credit**

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