

THE JUSTICE OF GIDEON

[Illustration: "_Alicia, I couldn't think nothin' that was agin--you_"]

THE JUSTICE
OF GIDEON

BY
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OF A PRAIRIE GIRL," ETC.

[Illustration]

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_To
Frank and Grace_

CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|------------------------|------|
| THE JUSTICE OF GIDEON | 9 |
| DOC | 42 |
| THE BOOMERANG | 77 |
| BUENAS NOCHES | 108 |
| LITTLE WATCHER | 122 |
| MISSY AND I | 133 |
| THE GENEVIEVE EPIDEMIC | 153 |
| AGATHA'S ESCORT | 185 |

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| A YELLOW MAN AND A WHITE | 218 |
| YEE WING, POWDER-MAN | 239 |
| THE SEARCH FOR THE SPRING | 259 |
| THE SILVER BELL OF LOS MORALES | 283 |
| THE REVENGE OF MANUELITA | 319 |

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The place of Justice in the little town of Manzanita was a low, square, cloth-and-papered room, bare save for the Judge's unpainted pine desk and armchair; the two other chairs, wooden-seated and worn, that stood just in front of the desk, and were reserved at trials for the constable and his prisoner; the four long benches directly behind these; and the squat, round-barreled stove which, though it was midsummer in the little Northern California town, still held its place in the centre of the room, its four legs spraddled out as if it were determined to defy removal from its shallow sawdust box. There was but one spot of brightness in the whole dingy place. Back of the Judge's desk, draped against the fly-specked wall in careful folds, gleamed the red, white and blue of the Flag.

The colours brought the Judge into sharp relief. The courtroom being deserted, his coat was off, and hung near by him on a nail under his black, slouch hat; and he was seated on the small of his back, his long legs crossed and stretched out into the unrailed prisoner's dock, his elbows planted upon the arms of his chair, and his hands pressed against his temples, so that they shielded his eyes. About him were his books, calf-bound and heavy. They stood in front of him, to his right hand and to his left, in columns of six; in other columns they weighted the strip of matting under his feet, and flanked his chair at either side. One was open before him. It was set upon the middle button of his vest, and had for a rear support the front edge of the desk. He was deep in the study of it. Across its pages at intervals rolled a white cloud from his pipe-rolled like the smoke of his own silent battle for the Truth--and went floating upward to be dissolved and lost amid the dust-heavy cobwebs of the ceiling.

He lifted his eyes, presently; someone was approaching the front door. The rickety sidewalk leading up to the courtroom from the general merchandise store down the street acted as an unofficial herald to him; for one section of it, as unfixed as a raft, banged to the tread of all oncomers, and a couple of loose boards still closer at hand creaked and flapped when they were stepped upon. The footfall now nearing was

light. The Judge laid down his pipe, rose hastily, straightening out six feet of stalwart length, and reached for his coat.

The next moment the round, ruffled top of a white parasol curtained the small square of glass in the door. Then the parasol folded, a slim hand turned the knob and a girl stood on the threshold--a bareheaded, brown-haired girl in a white muslin dress.

"Oh, Alicia," said the Judge, giving a last settling jerk to his coat. A wave of colour swept up from the sunburned lower half of his face and reddened his forehead.