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A FIERCE WHITE FROTHING ABOUT HIM.—*Page 335.*

THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER

BY

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THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER

I

THE PORTENT

The hot weather had come suddenly, at least a month earlier than usual, and New York lay baking under a scorching sun when Miss Hetty Torrance sat in the coolest corner of the Grand Central Depot she could find. It was by her own wish she had spent the afternoon in the city unattended, for Miss Torrance was a self-reliant young woman; but it was fate and the irregularity of the little gold watch, which had been her dead mother's gift, that brought her to the depot at least a quarter of an hour too soon. But she was not wholly sorry, for she had desired more solitude and time for reflection than she found in the noisy city, where a visit to an eminent modiste had occupied most of her leisure. There was, she had reasons for surmising, a decision of some moment to be made that night, and as yet she was no nearer arriving at it than she had been when the little note then in her pocket had been handed her.

Still, it was not the note she took out when she found a seat apart from the hurrying crowd, but a letter from her father, Torrance, the Cattle-Baron, of Cedar Range. It was terse and to the point, as usual, and a little smile crept into the girl's face as she read.

"Your letter to hand, and so long as you have a good time don't worry about the bills. You'll find another five hundred dollars at the bank when you want them. Thank God, I can give my daughter what her mother should have had. Two years since I've seen my little girl, and now it seems that somebody else is wanting her! Well, we were made men and women, and if you had been meant to live alone dabbling in music you wouldn't have been given your mother's face. Now, I don't often express myself this way, but I've had a letter from Captain Jackson Cheyne, U. S. Cavalry, which reads as straight as I've found the man to be. Nothing wrong with that family, and they've dollars to spare; but if you like the man I can put down two for every one of his. Well, I might write a good deal, but you're too much like your father to be taken in. You want dollars and station, and I can see you get them, but in a contract of this kind the man is everything. Make quite sure you're getting the right one."

There was a little more to the same purpose, and when she slipped the letter into her pocket Hetty Torrance smiled.

"The dear old man!" she said. "It is very like him; but whether Jake is the right one or not is just what I can't decide."

Then she sat still, looking straight in front of her, a very attractive picture, as some of the hurrying men who turned to glance at her seemed to find, in her long light dress. Her face, which showed a delicate oval under the big white hat, was a trifle paler than is usual with most Englishwomen of her age, and the figure the thin fabric clung about less decided in outline. Still, the faint warmth in her cheeks emphasized the clear pallor of her skin, and there was a depth of brightness in the dark eyes that would have atoned for a good deal more than there was in her case necessity for. Her supple slenderness also became Hetty Torrance well, and there was a suggestion of nervous energy in her very pose. In addition to all this, she was a rich man's daughter, who had been well taught in the cities, and had since enjoyed all that wealth and refinement could offer her. It had also been a cause of mild astonishment to the friends she had spent the past year with, that with these advantages, she had remained Miss Torrance. They had been somewhat proud of their guest, and opportunities had not been wanting had she desired to change her status.

While she sat there musing, pale-faced citizens hurried past, great locomotives crawled to and fro, and long trains of cars, white with the dust of five hundred leagues, rolled in. Swelling in deeper cadence, the roar of the city came faintly through the din; but, responsive to the throb of life as she usually was, Hetty Torrance heard nothing of it then, for she was back in fancy on the grey-white prairie two thousand miles away. It was a desolate land of parched grass and bitter lakes with beaches dusty with alkali, but a rich one to the few who held dominion over it, and she had received the homage of a princess there. Then she heard a voice that was quite in keeping with the spirit of the scene, and was scarcely astonished to see that a man was smiling down on her.

He was dressed in city garments, and they became him; but the hand he held out was lean, and hard, and brown, and, for he stood bareheaded, a paler streak showed where the wide hat had shielded a face that had been darkened by stinging alkali dust from the prairie sun. It was a quietly forceful face, with steady eyes, which had a little sparkle of pleasure in them, and were clear and brown, while something in the man's sinewy pose suggested that he would have been at home in the saddle. Indeed, it was in the saddle that Hetty Torrance remembered him most vividly, hurling his half-tamed broncho straight at a gully down which the nondescript pack streamed, while the scarcely seen shape of a coyote blurred

by the dust, streaked the prairie in front of them.

“Hetty!” he said.

“Larry!” said the girl. “Why, whatever are you doing here?”

Then both laughed a little, perhaps to conceal the faint constraint that was upon them, for a meeting between former comrades has its difficulties when one is a man and the other a woman, and the bond between them has not been defined.

“I came in on business a day or two ago,” said the man. “Ran round to check some packages. I’m going back again to-morrow.”

“Well,” said the girl, “I was in the city, and came here to meet Flo Schuyler and her sister. They’ll be in at four.”

The man looked at his watch. “That gives us ’most fifteen minutes, but it’s not going to be enough. We’ll lose none of it. What about the singing?”

Hetty Torrance flushed a trifle. “Larry,” she said, “you are quite sure you don’t know?”

The man appeared embarrassed, and there was a trace of gravity in his smile. “Your father told me a little; but I haven’t seen him so often of late. Any way, I would sooner you told me.”

“Then,” said the girl, with the faintest of quivers in her voice, “the folks who understand good music don’t care to hear me.”

There was incredulity, which pleased his companion, in the man’s face, but his voice vaguely suggested contentment.

“That is just what they can’t do,” he said decisively. “You sing most divinely.”

“There is a good deal you and the boys at Cedar don’t know, Larry. Any way, lots of people sing better than I do, but I should be angry with you if I thought you were pleased.”

The man smiled gravely. “That would hurt. I’m sorry for you, Hetty; but again I’m glad. Now there’s nothing to keep you in the city, you’ll come back to us. You belong to the prairie, and it’s a better place than this.”

He spoke at an opportune moment. Since her cherished ambition had failed her, Hetty Torrance had grown a trifle tired of the city and the round of pleasure that must be entered into strenuously, and there were times when, looking back in reverie, she saw the great silent prairie roll back under the red sunrise into the east, and fade, vast, solemn, and restful, a cool land of shadow, when the first pale stars came out. Then she longed for the jingle of the bridles and the drumming of the hoofs, and felt once more the rush of the gallop stir her blood. But this was what she would not show, and her eyes twinkled a trifle maliciously.

“Well, I don’t quite know,” she said. “There is always one thing left to most of us.”

She saw the man wince ever so slightly, and was pleased at it; but he was, as she had once told him in the old days, grit all through, and he smiled a little.

“Of course!” he said. “Still, the trouble is that there are very few of us good enough for you. But you will come back for a little?”

Miss Torrance would not commit herself. “How are they getting along at the Range?”

“Doesn’t your father write you?”

“Yes,” said the girl, colouring a trifle. “I had a letter from him a few days ago, but he seldom mentioned what he was doing, and I want you to tell me about him.”

The man appeared thoughtful. “Well,” he said, “it’s quite three months since I spoke to him. He was stirring round as brisk as ever, and is rolling the dollars in this year.”

“But you used to be always at the Range.”

The man nodded, but the slight constraint that was upon him did not escape the girl. “Still, I don’t go there so often now. The Range is lonesome when you are away.”

Miss Torrance accepted the speech as one made by a comrade, and perhaps was wrong, but a tramp of feet attracted her attention then, and she looked away from her companion. Driven by the railroad officials, and led by an interpreter, a band of Teutons some five or six hundred strong filed into the station. Stalwart and stolid, tow-haired, with the stamp of

acquiescent patience in their homely faces, they came on with the swing, but none of the usual spirit, of drilled men. They asked no questions, but went where they were led, and the foulness of the close-packed steerage seemed to cling about them. For a time the depot rang to the rhythmic tramp of feet, and when, at a sign from the interpreter, it stopped, two bewildered children, frowsy and unwashed, in greasy homespun, sat down and gazed at Miss Torrance with mild blue eyes. She signed to a boy who was passing with a basket slung before him, and made a little impatient gesture when the man slipped his hand into his pocket.

"No," she said; "you'll make me vexed with you. Tell him to give them all he has. They'll be a long while in the cars."

She handed the boy a silver coin, and while the children sat still, undemonstratively astonished, with the golden fruit about them, the man passed him a bill.

"Now get some more oranges, and begin right at the top of the line," he said. "If that doesn't see you through, come back to me for another bill."

Hetty Torrance's eyes softened. "Larry," she said, "that was dreadfully good of you. Where are they all going to?"

"Chicago, Nebraska, Minnesota, Montana," said the man. "There are the cars coming in. Just out of Castle Garden, and it's because of the city improvements disorganizing traffic they're bringing them this way. They're the advance guard, you see, and there are more of them coming."

The tramp of feet commenced again, but this time it was a horde of diverse nationality, Englishmen, Irishmen, Poles, and Finns, but all with the stamp of toil, and many with that of scarcity upon them. Bedraggled, unkempt, dejected, eager with the cunning that comes of adversity, they flowed in, and Hetty Torrance's face grew pitiful as she watched them.

"Do they come every week like this and, even in our big country, have we got room for all of them?" she said.

There was a curious gleam in the man's brown eyes. "Oh, yes," he said. "It's the biggest and greatest country this old world has ever seen, and the Lord made it as a home for the poor—the folks they've no food or use for back yonder; and, while there are short-sighted fools who would close the door, we take them in, outcast and hopeless, and put new heart in them. In a few short years we make them men and useful citizens, the equal of any on this earth—Americans!"

Hetty Torrance nodded, and there was pride but no amusement in her smile; for she had a quick enthusiasm, and the reticence of Insular Britain has no great place in that country.

"Still," she said; "all these people coming in must make a difference."

The man's face grew grave. "Yes," he said; "there will have to be a change, and it is coming. We are only outwardly democratic just now, and don't seem to know that men are worth more than millionaires. We have let them get their grip on our industries, and too much of our land, until what would feed a thousand buys canvas-backs, and wines from Europe for one. Isn't what we raise in California good enough for Americans?"

Miss Torrance's eyes twinkled. "Some of it isn't very nice, and they don't live on canvas-backs," she said. "Still, it seems to me that other men have talked like that quite a thousand years ago; and, while I don't know anyone better at breaking a broncho or cutting out a steer, straightening these affairs out is too big a contract for you."

The man laughed pleasantly. "That's all right, but I can do a little in the place I belong to, and the change is beginning there. Is it good for this country that one man should get rich feeding his cattle on leagues of prairie where a hundred families could make a living growing wheat?"

"Now," said the girl drily, "I know why you and my father haven't got on. Your opinions wouldn't please him, Larry."

"No," said the man, with a trace of embarrassment, "I don't think they would; and that's just why we've got to convince him and the others that what we want to do is for the good of the country."

Hetty Torrance laughed. "It's going to be hard. No man wants to believe anything is good when he sees it will take quite a pile of dollars out of his pocket."

The man said nothing, and Hetty fancied he was not desirous of following up the topic, while as they sat silent a big locomotive backed another great train of emigrant cars in. Then the tramp of feet commenced again, and once more a frowsy host of outcasts from the overcrowded lands poured into the depot. Wagons piled with baggage had preceded them, but many dragged their pitiful belongings along with them, and the murmur of their alien voices rang through the bustle of the station. Hetty Torrance was not unduly fanciful, but those footsteps caused her, as she afterwards remembered, a vague concern. She believed, as her father did, that America was made for the Americans; but it was

evident that in a few more years every unit of those incoming legions would be a citizen of the Republic, with rights equal to those enjoyed by Torrance of Cedar Range. She had seen that as yet the constitution gave no man more than he could by his own hand obtain; but it seemed not unlikely that some, at least, of those dejected, unkempt men had struck for the rights of humanity that were denied them in the older lands with dynamite and rifle.

Then, as the first long train of grimy cars rolled out close packed with their frowsy human freight, a train of another kind came in, and two young women in light dresses swung themselves down from the platform of a car that was sumptuous with polished woods and gilding. Miss Torrance rose as she saw them, and touched her companion.

“Come along, Larry, and I’ll show you two of the nicest girls you ever met,” she said.

The man laughed. “They would have been nicer if they hadn’t come quite so soon,” he said.

He followed his companion and was duly presented to Miss Flora and Miss Caroline Schuyler. “Larry Grant of Fremont Ranch,” said Miss Torrance. “Larry is a great friend of mine.”

The Misses Schuyler were pretty. Carolina, the younger, pale, blue-eyed, fair-haired and vivacious; her sister equally blonde, but a trifle quieter. Although they were gracious to him, Grant fancied that one flashed a questioning glance at the other when there was a halt in the conversation. Then, as if by tacit agreement, they left him alone a moment with their companion, and Hetty Torrance smiled as she held out her hand.

“I can’t keep them waiting, but you’ll come and see me,” she said.

“I am going home to-morrow,” said the man. “When are you coming, Hetty?”

The girl smiled curiously, and there was a trace of wistfulness in her eyes. “I don’t quite know. Just now I fancy I may not come at all, but you will not forget me, Larry.”

The man looked at her very gravely, and Hetty Torrance appeared to find something disconcerting in his gaze, for she turned her head away.

“No,” he said, and there was a little tremor in his voice, “I don’t think I shall forget you. Well, if ever you grow tired of the cities you will remember the lonely folks who are longing to have you home again back there on the prairie.”

Hetty Torrance felt her fingers quiver under his grasp, but the next moment he had turned away, and her companions noticed there was a faint pink tinge in her cheeks when she rejoined them. But being wise young women, they restrained their natural inquisitiveness, and asked no questions then.

In the meanwhile Grant, who watched them until the last glimpse of their light dresses was lost in the crowd, stood beside the second emigrant train vacantly glancing at the aliens who thronged about it. His bronzed face was a trifle weary, and his lips were set, but at last he straightened his shoulders with a little resolute movement and turned away.

“I have my work,” he said, “and it’s going to be quite enough for me.”

II

HETTY TAKES HEED

It was evening when Hetty Torrance sat alone in a room of Mrs. Schuyler's house at Hastings-on-the-Hudson. The room was pretty, though its adornment was garish and somewhat miscellaneous, consisting as it did of the trophies of Miss Schuyler's European tour. A Parisian clock, rich in gilded scroll work to the verge of barbarity, contrasted with the artistic severity of one or two good Italian marbles, while these in turn stood quaintly upon choice examples of time-mellowed English cabinet-work. There was taste in them all, but they suffered from the juxtaposition, which, however, was somewhat characteristic of the country. Still, Miss Schuyler had not spoiled the splendid parquetrie floor of American timber.

The windows were open wide, and when a little breeze from the darkening river came up across the lawn, Hetty languidly raised her head. The coolness was grateful, the silken cushions she reclined amidst luxurious, but the girl's eyes grew thoughtful as they wandered round the room, for that evening the suggestion of wealth in all she saw jarred upon her mood. The great city lay not very far away, sweltering with its crowded tenement houses under stifling heat; and she could picture the toilers who herded there, gasping for air. Then her fancy fled further, following the long emigrant train as it crawled west from side-track to side-track, close packed with humanity that was much less cared for than her father's cattle.

She had often before seen the dusty cars roll into a wayside depot to wait until the luxurious limited passed, and the grimy faces at the windows, pale and pinched, cunning, or coarsely brutal, after the fashion of their kind, had roused no more than a passing pity. It was, however, different that night, for Grant's words had roused her to thought, and she wondered with a vague apprehension whether the tramp of weary feet she had listened to would once more break in upon her sheltered life. Larry had foreseen changes, and he was usually right. Then she brushed these fancies into the background, for she had still a decision to make. Captain Cheyne would shortly arrive, and she knew what he came to ask. He was also a personable man, and, so far as the Schuylers knew, without reproach, while Hetty had seen a good deal of him during the past twelve months. She admitted a liking for him, but now that the time had come to decide, she was not certain that she would care to spend her life with him. As a companion, he left nothing to be desired, but, as had happened already with another man with whom Miss Torrance had been pleased, that position did not appear to content him; and she had misgivings about contracting a more permanent bond. It was almost a relief when Miss Schuyler came in.

"Stand up, Hetty. I want to look at you," she said.

Miss Torrance obeyed and stood before her, girlishly slender in her long dress, though there was an indefinite suggestion of imperiousness in her dark eyes.

"Will I pass?" she asked.

Flora Schuyler surveyed her critically and then laughed. "Yes," she said. "You're pretty enough to please anybody, and there's a style about you that makes it quite plain you were of some importance out there on the prairie. Now you can sit down again, because I want to talk to you. Who's Larry Grant?"

"Tell me what you think of him."

Miss Schuyler pursed her lips reflectively. "Well," she said, "he's not New York. Quite a good-looking man, with a good deal in him, but I'd like to see him on horseback. Been in the cavalry? You're fond of them, you know."

"No," said Hetty, "but he knows more about horses than any cavalry officer. Larry's a cattle-baron."

"I never quite knew what the cattle-barons were, except that your father's one, and they're mostly rich," said Miss Schuyler.

Hetty's eyes twinkled. "I don't think Larry's very rich. They're the men or the sons of them, who went west when the prairie belonged to the Indians and the Blackfeet, Crows, and Crees made them lots of trouble. Still, they held the land they settled on, and covered it with cattle, until the Government gave it to them, 'most as much as you could ride across in a day, to each big rancher."

“Gave it to them?”

Hetty nodded. “A lease of it. It means the same thing. A few of them, though I think it wasn’t quite permitted, bought other leases in, and out there a cattle-baron is a bigger man than a railroad king. You see, he makes the law—all there is—as well as supports the industry, for there’s not a sheriff in the country dares question him. The cattle-boys are his retainers, and we’ve a squadron of them at the Range. They’d do just what Torrance of Cedar told them, whatever it was, and there are few men who could ride with them in the U. S. Cavalry.”

“Then,” said Flora Schuyler, “if the Government ever encouraged homesteading in their country they’d make trouble.”

Hetty laughed. “Yes,” she said drily, “I guess they would, but no government dares meddle with us.”

“Well,” said Flora Schuyler, “you haven’t told us yet who Larry is. You know quite well what I mean.”

Hetty smiled. “I called him my partner when I was home. Larry held me on my first pony, and has done ’most whatever I wanted him ever since. Fremont isn’t very far from the Range, and when I wanted to ride anywhere, or to have a new horse broken, Larry was handy.”

Miss Schuyler appeared reflective, but there was a bond of confidence between the two, and the reserve that characterizes the Briton is much less usual in that country.

“It always seemed to me, my dear, that an arrangement of that kind is a little rough on the man, and I think this one is too good to spoil,” she said.

Hetty coloured a trifle, but she smiled. “It is all right with Larry. He never expected anything.”

“No?” said Flora Schuyler. “He never tried to make love to you?”

The tinge of colour grew a trifle deeper in Hetty’s cheek. “Only once, and I scarcely think he meant it. It was quite a long while ago, and I told him he must never do it again.”

“And since then he has tamed your horses, and bought you all the latest songs and books—good editions in English art bindings. It was Larry who sent you those flowers when we could scarcely get one?”

Hetty for some reason turned away her head. “Don’t you get things of that kind?”

A trace of gravity crept into Flora Schuyler’s blue eyes, which were unusually attractive ones. “When they come too often I send them back,” she said. “Oh, I know I’m careless now and then, but one has to do the square thing, and I wouldn’t let any man do all that for me unless I was so fond of him that I meant to marry him. Now I’m going to talk quite straight to you, Hetty. You’ll have to give up Larry by and by, but if you find that’s going to hurt you, send the other man away.”

“You don’t understand,” and there was a little flash in Hetty’s dark eyes. “Larry’s kind to everyone—he can’t help it; but he doesn’t want me.”

Flora Schuyler gravely patted her companion’s arm. “My dear, we don’t want to quarrel, but you’ll be careful—to please me. Jake Cheyne is coming, and you might be sorry ever after if you made a mistake to-night.”

Hetty made no answer, and there was silence for a space while the light grew dimmer, until the sound of voices rose from without, and she felt her heart beat a trifle faster than usual, when somebody said, “Captain Cheyne!”

Then there was a rustle of draperies and Mrs. Schuyler, thin, angular, and considerably more silent than is customary with women of her race, came in, with her younger daughter and a man in her train. The latter bore the stamp of the soldier plainly, but there was a distinction in his pose that was not the result of a military training. Then as he shook hands with Flora Schuyler the fading light from the window fell upon his face, showing it clean cut from the broad forehead to the solid chin, and reposeful instead of nervously mobile. His even, low-pitched voice was also in keeping with it, for Jackson Cheyne was an unostentatious American of culture widened by travel, and, though they are not always to be found in the forefront in their own country, unless it has need of them, men of his type have little to fear from comparison with those to be met with in any other one.

He spoke when there was occasion, and was listened to, but some time had passed before he turned to Mrs. Schuyler. “I wonder if it would be too great a liberty if I asked Miss Torrance to give us some music,” he said. “I am going away to-morrow to a desolate outpost in New Mexico, and it will be the last time for months that I shall have a treat of that kind.”

Flora Schuyler opened the piano, and Hetty smiled at Cheyne as she took her place; but the man made a little gesture of

negation when Mrs. Schuyler would have rung for lights.

“Wouldn’t it be nicer as it is?” he said.

Hetty nodded, and there was silence before the first chords rang softly through the room. Though it may have been that the absence of necessity to strive and stain her daintiness amidst the press was responsible for much, Hetty Torrance’s voice had failed to win her fame; but she sang and played better than most well-trained amateurs. Thus there was no rustle of drapery or restless movements until the last low notes sank into the stillness. Then the girl glanced at the man who had unobtrusively managed to find a place close beside her.

“You know what that is?” she said.

Carolina Schuyler laughed. “Jake knows everything!”

“Yes,” said the man quietly. “A nocturne. You were thinking of something when you played it.”

“The sea,” said Flora Schuyler, “when the moon is on it. Was that it, Hetty?”

“No,” said Miss Torrance, who afterwards wondered whether it would have made a great difference if she had not chosen that nocturne. “It was the prairie when the stars are coming out over Cedar Range. Then it seems bigger and more solemn than the sea. I can see it now, wide and grey and shadowy, and so still that you feel afraid to hear yourself breathing, with the last smoky flush burning on its northern rim. Now, you may laugh at me, for you couldn’t understand. When you have been born there, you always love the prairie.”

Then with a little deprecatory gesture she touched the keys again. “It will be different this time.”

Cheyne glanced up sharply during the prelude, and then, feeling that the girl’s eyes were upon him, nodded as out of the swelling harmonies there crept the theme. It suggested the tramp of marching feet, but there was a curious unevenness in its rhythm, and the crescendo one of the listeners looked for never came. The room was almost dark now, but none of those who sat there seemed to notice it as they listened to the listless tramp of marching feet. Then the harmonies drowned it again, and Hetty looked at Cheyne.

“Now,” she said, “can you tell me what that means?”

Cheyne’s voice seemed a trifle strained, as though the music had troubled him. “I know the march, but the composer never wrote what you have played to-night,” he said. “It was—may mine be defended from it!—the shuffle of beaten men. How could you have felt what you put into the music?”

“No,” said Hetty. “Your men could never march like that. It was footsteps going west, and I could not have originated their dragging beat. I have heard it.”

There was a little silence, until Cheyne said softly, “One more.”

“Then,” said Hetty, “you will recognize this.”

The chords rang under her fingers until they swelled into confused and conflicting harmonies that clashed and jarred upon the theme. Their burden was strife and struggle and the anguish of strain, until at last, in the high clear note of victory, the theme rose supreme.

“Yes,” said Flora Schuyler, “we know that. We heard it with the Kaiser in Berlin. Only one man could have written it; but his own countrymen could not play it better than you do. A little overwhelming. How did you get down to the spirit of it, Hetty?”

Lights were brought in just then, and they showed that the girl’s face was a trifle paler than usual, as closing the piano, she turned, with a little laugh, upon the music-stool.

“Oh!” she said, “I don’t quite know, and until to-night it always cheated me. I got it at the depot—no, I didn’t. It was there I felt the marching, and Larry brought the prairie back to me; but I couldn’t have seen what was in the last music, because it hasn’t happened yet.”

“It will come?” said Flora.

“Yes,” said Hetty, “wherever those weary men are going to.”

“And to every one of us,” said Cheyne, with a curious graveness they afterwards remembered. “That is, the stress and strain—it is the triumph at the end of it only the few attain.”

Once more there was silence, and it was a relief when the unemotional Mrs. Schuyler rose.

“Now,” she said, and her voice, at least, had in it the twang of the country, “you young folks have been solemn quite long enough. Can’t you talk something kind of lively?”

They did what they could, and—for Cheyne could on occasion display a polished wit—light laughter filled the room, until Caroline Schuyler, perhaps not without a motive, suggested a stroll on the lawn. If there was dew upon the grass none of them heeded it, and it was but seldom anyone enjoyed the privilege of pacing that sod when Mr. Schuyler was at home. Every foot had cost him many dollars, and it remained but an imperfect imitation of an English lawn. There was on the one side a fringe of maples, and it was perhaps by Mrs. Schuyler’s contrivance that eventually Hetty found herself alone with Cheyne in their deeper shadow. It was not, however, a surprise to her, for she had seen the man’s desire and tacitly fallen in with it. Miss Torrance had discovered that one seldom gains anything by endeavouring to avoid the inevitable.

“Hetty,” he said quietly, “I think you know why I have come to-night?”

The girl stood very still and silent for a space of seconds, and afterwards wondered whether she made the decision then, or what she had seen and heard since she entered the depot had formed it for her.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I am so sorry!”

Cheyne laid his hand upon her arm, and his voice trembled a little. “Don’t be too hasty, Hetty,” he said. “I would not ask you for very much just now, but I had ventured to fancy you could in time grow fond of me. I know I should have waited, but I am going away to-morrow, and I only want you to give me a promise to take away with me.”

It was with a visible effort the girl lifted her head and looked at him. “I feel horribly mean, Jake, but I can’t,” she said. “I ought to have made you realize that long ago, but I liked you, and, you see, I didn’t quite know. I thought if I waited a little I might be more sure of what I felt for you!”

“Then,” said the man, a trifle hoarsely, “give me what you can now and I will be patient.”

Hetty turned half way from him and closed one hand. The man was pleasant to look upon, in character and disposition all she could desire, and she had found a curious content in his company. Had that day passed as other days had done, she might have yielded to him, but she had been stirred to the depths of her nature during the last few hours, and Flora Schuyler’s warning had been opportune. She had, as she had told him, a liking for Jackson Cheyne, but that, she saw very clearly now, was insufficient. Destiny had sent Larry Grant, with the associations that clung about him, into the depot.

“No,” she said, with a little tremble in her voice, “it wouldn’t be honest or fair to you. I am not half good enough for you.”

The man smiled somewhat mirthlessly, but his voice was reproachful. “You always speak the truth, Hetty. My dear, knowing what the best of us are, I wonder how I dared to venture to ask you to share your life with me.”

Hetty checked him with a little gesture. “Can’t you understand?” she said. “The girl who sang to you now and then isn’t me. I am selfish, discontented, and shallow, and if you hadn’t heard me sing or play you would never have thought of me. There are people who sing divinely, and are—you see, I have met them with the mask off—just horrible.”

“Hetty,” said Cheyne, “I can’t allow anyone to malign you, even if it’s yourself, and if you have any faults, my dear, I’ll take them with the rest. In fact, I would be glad of one or two. They would only bring you a little nearer to me.”

The girl lifted her hand and silenced him. “Jake,” she said appealingly, “please take your answer and go away. If I could only be fond of you in the right way I would, but I can’t, you see. It is not my fault—it isn’t in me.”

The man recognized the finality in her tone, but, feeling that it was useless, made a last endeavour.

“I’m going away to-morrow,” he said. “You might think differently when I come back again.”

The girl’s voice quivered a little. “No,” she said. “I have to be straightforward now, and I know you will try to make it easier for me, even if I’m hurting you. It’s no use. I shall think the same, and by and by you’ll get over this fancy, and wonder what you ever saw in me.”

The man smiled curiously. “I am afraid it will take me a lifetime,” he said.

In another moment he had gone, and Hetty turned, a trifle flushed in face, towards the house across the lawn.

“He took it very well—and I shall never find anyone half so nice again,” she said.

It was half an hour later, and Miss Torrance had recovered at least her outward serenity, when one of Mrs. Schuyler’s neighbours arrived. She brought one or two young women, and a man, with her. The latter she presented to Mrs. Schuyler.

“Mr. Reginald Clavering,” she said. “He’s from the prairie where Miss Torrance’s father lives, and is staying a day or two with us. When I heard he knew Hetty I ventured to bring him over.”

Mrs. Schuyler expressed her pleasure, and—for they had gone back to the lighted room now—Hetty presently found herself seated face to face with the stranger. He was a tall, well-favoured man, slender, and lithe in movement, with dark eyes and hair, and a slightly sallow face that suggested that he was from the South. It also seemed fitting that he was immaculately dressed, for there was a curious gracefulness about him that still had in it a trace of insolence. No one would have mistaken him for a Northerner.

“It was only an hour ago I found we were so near, and I insisted upon coming across at once,” he said. “You have changed a good deal since you left the prairie.”

“Yes,” said the girl drily. “Is it very astonishing? You see, we don’t spend half our time on horseback here. You didn’t expect to find me a sharp-tongued Amazon still?”

Clavering laughed as he looked at her, but the approval of what he saw was a trifle too evident in his black eyes.

“Well,” he said languidly, “you were our Princess then, and there was only one of your subjects’ homage you never took kindly to. That was rough on him, because he was at least as devoted as the rest.”

“That,” said the girl, with a trace of acerbity, “was because he tried to patronize me. Even if I haven’t the right to it, I like respect.”

Clavering made a little gesture, and the deference in it was at least half sincere. “You command it, and I must try to make amends. Now, don’t you want to hear about your father and the Range?”

“No,” said Hetty. “I had a talk with Larry to-day.”

“In New York?”

“Yes. At the depot. He is going back to-morrow. You seem astonished?”

Clavering appeared thoughtful. “Well, it’s Chicago he usually goes to.”

“Usually?” said Hetty. “I scarcely remember him leaving Fremont once in three years.”

Clavering laughed. “Then he leaves it a good deal more often now. A man must have a little diversion when he lives as we do, and no doubt Larry feels lonely. You are here, and Heloise Durand has gone away.”

Hetty understood the implication, for she had some notion how the men who spent months together in the solitude of the prairie amused themselves in the cities. Nor had she and most of her neighbours wholly approved of the liberal views held by Heloise Durand. She had, however, an unquestioning belief in Larry, and none in the man beside her.

“I scarcely think you need have been jealous of him,” she said. “Larry wasn’t Miss Durand’s kind, and he couldn’t be lonely. Everybody was fond of him.”

Clavering nodded. “Of course! Still, Larry hasn’t quite so many friends lately.”

“Now,” said Hetty with a little flash in her eyes, “when you’ve told me that you have got to tell the rest. What has he been doing?”

“Ploughing!” said Clavering drily. “I did what I could to restrain him, but nobody ever could argue with Larry.”

Hetty laughed, though she felt a little dismay. It was then a serious affair to drive the wheat furrow in a cattle country, and the man who did it was apt to be regarded as an iconoclast. Nevertheless, she would not show that she recognized it.

“Well,” she said, “that isn’t very dreadful. The plough is supreme in the Dakotas and Minnesota now. Sooner or later it has got to find a place in our country.”

“Still, that’s not going to happen while your father lives.”

The girl realized the truth of this, but she shook her head. “We’re not here to talk wheat and cattle, and I see Flo Schuyler

looking at us," she said. "Go across and make yourself agreeable to the others for the honour of the prairie."

Clavering went; but he had left an unpleasant impression behind him, as he had perhaps intended, while soon after he took his departure Flora Schuyler found her friend alone.

"So you sent Jake away!" she said.

"Yes," said Hetty. "I don't know what made me, but I felt I had to. I almost meant to take him."

Flora Schuyler nodded gravely. "But it wasn't because of that man Clavering?"

"It was not," said Hetty, with a little laugh. "Don't you like him? He is rather a famous man back there on the prairie."

Flora Schuyler shook her head. "No," she said; "he reminded me of that Florentine filigree thing. It's very pretty, and I bought it for silver, but it isn't."

"You think he's that kind of man?"

"Yes," said Miss Schuyler. "I wouldn't take him at face value. The silver's all on top. I don't know what is underneath it, and would sooner somebody else found out."

III

THE CATTLE-BARONS

It was a still, hot evening when a somewhat silent company of bronze-faced men assembled in the big living room of Cedar Range. It was built of birch trunks, and had once, with its narrow windows and loopholes for rifle fire, resembled a fortalice; but now cedar panelling covered the logs, and the great double casements were filled with the finest glass. They were open wide that evening. Around this room had grown up a straggling wooden building of dressed lumber with pillars and scroll-work, and, as it stood then, flanked by its stores and stables, barns and cattle-boys' barracks, there was no homestead on a hundred leagues of prairie that might compare with it.

Outside, on the one hand, the prairie rolled away in long billowy rises, a vast sea of silvery grey, for the grass that had been green a month or two was turning white again, and here and there a stockrider showed silhouetted, a dusky mounted figure against the paling flicker of saffron that still lingered upon the horizon. On the other, a birch bluff dipped to the Cedar River, which came down faintly chilled with the Rockies' snow from the pine forests of the foothills. There was a bridge four miles away, but the river could be forded beneath the Range for a few months each year. At other seasons it swirled by, frothing in green-stained flood, swollen by the drainage of snowfield and glacier, and there was no stockrider at the Range who dared swim his horse across.

Sun and wind had their will with the homestead, for there was little shelter from icy blizzard and scorching heat at Cedar; but though here and there the frame-boarding gaped and the roof-shingles were rent, no man accustomed to that country could fail to notice the signs of careful management and prosperity. Corrals, barns, and stables were the best of their kind; and, though the character of all of them was not beyond exception, in physique and fitness for their work it would have been hard to match the sinewy men in blue shirts, wide hats, and long boots, then watering their horses at the ford. They were as daring and irresponsible swashbucklers as ever rode out on mediæval foray, and, having once sold their allegiance to Torrance of Cedar, and recognized that he was not to be trifled with, were ready to do without compunction anything he bade them.

In the meanwhile Torrance sat at the head of the long table, with Clavering of Beauregard at his right hand. His face was bronzed and resolute, and the stamp of command sat plainly upon him. There was grey in his dark hair, and his eyes were keen and black, with a little glint in them; but, vigorous as he still seemed, the hand on the table was smooth and but slightly tinted by the sun, for Torrance was one who, in the language of that country, did his work, which was usually arduous, with his gloves on. He was dressed in white shirt and broadcloth, and a diamond of price gleamed in the front of the former.

His guests were for the most part younger, and Clavering was scarcely half his age: but when they met in conclave something usually happened, for the seat of the legislature was far away, and their will considerably more potent thereabouts than the law of the land. Sheriff, postmaster, railroad agent, and petty politician carried out their wishes, and as yet no man had succeeded in living in that region unless he did homage to the cattle-barons. They were Republicans, admitting in the abstract the rights of man, so long as no venturesome citizen demanded too much of them; but they had discovered that in practice liberty is usually the prerogative of the strong. Still, they had done their nation good service, for they had found the land a wilderness and covered it with cattle, so that its commerce fed the railroads and supported busy wooden towns. Some of the older men had disputed possession with the Indian, and most of them in the early days, enduring thirst and loneliness and unwearying toil, had held on stubbornly in the face of ruin by frost and drought and hail. It was not astonishing that as they had made that land—so they phrased it—they regarded it as theirs.

There were eight of them present, and for a time they talked of horses and cattle as they sipped their wine, which was the choicest that France could send them; and it is also probable that no better cigars ever came from Cuba than those they smoked. By and by, however, Torrance laid his aside.

"It's time we got down to work," he said. "I sent for ten of you, and eight have come. One sent valid excuses, and one made no answer."

"Larry Grant," said Clavering. "I guess he was too busy at the depot bringing a fat Dutchman and a crowd of hard-faced Dakota ploughboys in."

There was a little murmur of astonishment which, had the men been different, would not have been quite free from

consternation, for it was significant news.

“You’re quite sure?” asked Torrance, and his face was stern.

“Well,” said Clavering languidly, “I saw him, and bantered him a little on his prepossessing friends. Asked him why, when he was at it, he didn’t go to Manitoba for Canadians. Larry didn’t take it nicely.”

“I’m sorry,” said one of the older men. “Larry is one of us, and the last man I’d figure on committing that kind of meanness would be the son of Fremont Grant. Quite sure it’s not a fit of temper? You have not been worrying him, Torrance?”

Torrance closed one hand. “Grant of Fremont was my best friend, and when he died I ’most brought the lad up as a son. When he got hold of his foolish notions it hurt me considerably, and I did what I could to talk him out of them.”

There was a little smile in the faces of some of the men, for Torrance’s draconic fashion of arguing was known to them.

“You put it a little too straight, and he told you something that riled you,” said one.

“He did,” said Torrance grimly. “Still, for ’most two years I kept a curb on my temper. Then one evening I told him he had to choose right then between his fancies and me. I could have no dealings with any man who talked as he did.”

“Do you remember any of it?” asked another man.

“Yes,” said Torrance. “His father’s friends were standing in the way of progress. Land that would feed a thousand families was keeping us in luxury no American was entitled to. This was going to be the poor man’s country, and the plough was bound to come!”

Clavering laughed softly, and there were traces of ironical amusement in the faces of the rest. Very similar predictions had more than once been flung at them, and their possessions were still, they fancied, secure to them. They, however, became grave again, and it was evident that Larry Grant had hitherto been esteemed by them.

“If it had been any one else, we could have put our thumb on him right now,” said one. “Still, I don’t quite figure it would work with Larry. There are too many folks who would stand in with him.”

There was a little murmur of approbation, and Clavering laughed. “Buy him off,” he said tentatively. “We have laid out a few thousand dollars in that way before.”

Some of the men made gestures of decided negation, and Torrance looked at the speaker a trifle sternly.

“No, sir,” he said. “Larry may be foolish, but he’s one of us.”

“Then,” said somebody, “we’ve got to give him time. Let it pass. You have something to tell us, Torrance?”

Torrance signed to one of them. “You had better tell them, Allonby.”

A grey-haired man stood up, and his fingers shook a little on the table. “My lease has fallen in, and the Bureau will not renew it,” he said. “I’m not going to moan about my wrongs, but some of you know what it cost me to break in that place of mine. You have lived on the bitter water and the saleratus bread, but none of you has seen his wife die for the want of the few things he couldn’t give her, as I did. I gave the nation my two boys when the good times came, and they’re dead —buried in their uniform both of them—and now, when I’d laid out my last dollar on the ranch, that the one girl I’ve left me might have something when I’d gone, the Government will take it away from me. Gentlemen, is it my duty to sit down quietly?”

There was a murmur, and the men looked at one another with an ominous question in their eyes, until Torrance raised his hand.

“The land’s not open to location. I guess they’re afraid of us, and Allonby’s there on toleration yet,” he said. “Gentlemen, we mean to keep him just where he is, because when he pulls out we will have to go too. But this thing has to be done quietly. When the official machinery moves down here it’s because we pull the strings, and we have got to have the law upon our side as far as we can. Well, that’s going to cost us money, and we want a campaign fund. I’ll give Allonby a cheque for five hundred dollars in the meanwhile, if he’ll be treasurer; but as we may all be fixed as he is presently, we’ll want a good deal more before we’re through. Who will follow me?”

Each of them promised five hundred, and then looked at Clavering, who had not spoken. One of them also fancied that there was for a moment a trace of embarrassment in his face; but he smiled carelessly.

“The fact is, dollars are rather tight with me just now,” he said. “You’ll have to wait a little if I’m to do as much as the rest of you. I am, however, quite willing.”

“I’ll lend you them,” said Torrance. “Allonby, I’ll make that cheque a thousand. You have got it down?”

Allonby accepted office, and one of the other men rose up. “Now it seems to me that Torrance is right, and with our leases expired or running out, we’re all in the same tight place,” he said. “The first move is to get every man holding cattle land from here to the barren country to stand in, and then, one way or another, we’ll freeze out the homesteaders. Well, then, we’ll constitute ourselves a committee, with Torrance as head executive, and as we want to know just what the others are doing, my notion is that he should start off to-morrow and ride round the country. If there are any organizations ready, it might suit us to affiliate with them.”

It was agreed to, and Clavering said, “It seems to me, sir, that the first question is, ‘Could we depend upon the boys if we wanted them?’”

Torrance strode to an open window and blew a silver whistle. Its shrill note had scarcely died away when a mounted man came up at a gallop, and a band of others in haste on foot. They stopped in front of the window, picturesque in blue shirts and long boots, sinewy, generously fed, and irresponsibly daring.

“Boys,” he said, “you’ve been told there’s a change coming, and by and by this country will have no more use for you. Now, if any folks came here and pulled our boundaries up to let the mean whites from back east in, what are you going to do?”

There was a burst of hoarse laughter. “Ride them down,” said one retainer, with the soft blue eyes of a girl and a figure of almost matchless symmetry.

“Grow feathers on them,” said another. “Ride them back to the railroad on a rail.”

“I scarcely think that would be necessary,” said Torrance quietly. “Still, you’d stand behind the men who pay you?”

There was a murmur that expressed a good deal, though it was inarticulate, and a man stood forward.

“You’ve heard them, sir,” he said. “Well, we’ll do just what you want us to. This is the cattle-baron’s country, and we’re here. It’s good enough for us, and if it means lots of trouble we’re going to stay here.”

Torrance raised his hand, and when the men moved away turned with a little grim smile to his guests. “They’ll be quite as good as their word,” he said.

Then he led them back to the table, and when the decanter had gone round, one of the younger men stood up.

“We want a constitution, gentlemen, and I’ll give you one,” he said. “The Cedar District Stockraisers’ Committee incorporated to-day with for sole object the defence of our rights as American citizens!”

Clavering rose with the others, but there was a little ironical smile in his eyes as he said, “If necessary against any unlawful encroachments made by the legislature!”

Torrance turned upon him sternly. “No, sir!” he said. “By whatever means may appear expedient!”

The glasses were lifted high, and when they had laid them down the men rode away, though only one or two of them realized the momentous issues which they and others had raised at about much the same time. They had not, however, met in conclave too soon, for any step that man makes forward towards a wider life is usually marked by strife, and the shadow of coming trouble was already upon the land. It had deepened little by little, and the cattle-barons had closed their eyes, as other men who have held the reins have done since the beginning, until the lean hands of the toilers fastened upon them, and fresh horrors added to an ancient wrong were the price of liberty that was lost again. They had done good service to their nation, with profit to themselves, and would not see that the times were changing and that the nation had no longer need of them.

Other men, however, at least suspected it, and there was an expectant gathering one hot afternoon in the railroad depot of a little wooden town where Grant stood waiting for the west-bound train. There was little to please the eye about the station, and still less about the town. Straight out of the great white levels ran the glistening track, and an unsightly building of wood and iron rose from the side of it, flanked by a towering water-tank. A pump rattled under it, and the smell of creosote was everywhere. Cattle corrals ran back from the track, and beyond them sun-rent frame houses roofed with cedar shingles straggled away on the one hand, paintless, crude, and square. On the other, a smear of trail led the dazzled vision back across the parched levels to the glancing refraction on the horizon, and the figure of a single

horseman showing dimly through a dust cloud emphasized their loneliness. The town was hot and dusty, its one green fringe of willows defiled by the garbage the citizens deposited there, and the most lenient stranger could have seen no grace or beauty in it. Yet, like many another place of the kind, it was destined to rise to prosperity and fame.

The depot was thronged that afternoon. Store and hotel keeper, citizens in white shirts and broadcloth, jostled blue-shirted cattle men, while here and there a petty politician consulted with the representative of a Western paper. The smoke of cigars drifted everywhere, and the listless heat was stirred by the hum of voices eager and strident. It was evident that the assembly was in an expectant mood, and there was a murmur of approbation when one newspaper man laid hold of Grant.

“I couldn’t light on you earlier, but ten minutes will see us through,” he said. “We’ll make a half-page of it if you’ll let me have your views. New epoch in the country’s history! The small farmer the coming king! A wood-cut of the man who brought the first plough in.”

Larry Grant laughed a little. “There are quite a few ahead of me, and if you spread my views the barons would put their thumb on you and squeeze you flat,” he said. “On the other hand, it wouldn’t suit me if you sent them anything I told you to publish.”

The man appeared a trifle embarrassed. “The rights of the Press are sacred in a free country, sir,” he said.

“Well,” said Grant drily, “although I hope it will be, this country isn’t quite free yet. I surmise that you don’t know that the office of your contemporary farther east was broken into a few hours ago, and an article written by a friend of mine pulled out of the press. The proprietor was quietly held down upon the floor when he objected. You will hear whether I am right or wrong to-morrow.”

What the man would have answered did not appear, for just then somebody shouted, and a trail of smoke swept up above the rim of the prairie. It rose higher and whiter, something that flashed dazzlingly grew into shape beneath it, and there was a curious silence when the dusty cars rolled into the little station. It was followed by a murmur as an elderly man in broad white hat and plain store clothing, and a plump, blue-eyed young woman, came out upon the platform of a car. He wore a pair of spectacles and gazed about him in placid inquiry, until Grant stepped forward. Then he helped the young woman down, and held out a big, hard hand.

“Mr. Grant?” he said.

Grant nodded, and raised his hat to the girl. “Yes,” he said. “Mr. Muller?”

“Ja,” said the other man. “Also der fräulein Muller.”

There was a little ironical laughter from the crowd. “A Dutchman,” said somebody, “from Chicago. They raise them there in the sausage machine. The hogs go in at one end, and they rake the Dutchmen out of the other.”

Muller looked round inquiringly, but apparently failed to discover the speaker.

“Dot,” he said, “is der chestnut. I him have heard before.”

There was good-humoured laughter—for even when it has an animus an American crowd is usually fair; and in the meanwhile five or six other men got down from a car. They were lean and brown, with somewhat grim faces, and were dressed in blue shirts and jean.

“Well,” said one of them, “we’re Americans. Got any objections to us getting off here, boys?”

Some of the men in store clothing nodded a greeting, but there were others in wide hats, and long boots with spurs, who jeered.

“Brought your plough-cows along?” said one, and the taunt had its meaning, for it is usually only the indigent and incapable who plough with oxen.

“No,” said one of the newcomers. “We have horses back yonder. When we want mules or cowsteerers, I guess we’ll find them here. You seem to have quite a few of them around.”

A man stepped forward, jingling his spurs, with his jacket of embroidered deerskin flung open to show, though this was as yet unusual, that he wore a bandolier. Rolling back one loose sleeve he displayed a brown arm with the letters “C. R.” tattooed within a garter upon it. “See this. You’ve heard of that mark before?” he said.

“Cash required!” said the newcomer, with a grin. “Well, I guess that’s not astonishing. It would be a blame foolish man

who gave you credit."

"No, sir," said the stockrider. "It's Cedar Range, and there's twenty boys and more cattle than you could count in a long day carrying that brand. It will be a cold day when you and the rest of the Dakotas start kicking against that outfit."

There was laughter and acclamation, in the midst of which the cars rolled on; but in the meanwhile Grant had seized the opportunity to get a gang-plough previously unloaded from a freight-car into a wagon. The sight of it raised a demonstration, and there were hoots, and cries of approbation, while a man with a flushed face was hoisted to the top of a kerosene-barrel.

"Boys," he said, "there's no use howling. We're Americans. Nobody can stop us, and we're going on. You might as well kick against a railroad; and because the plough and the small farmer will do more for you than even the locomotive did, they have got to come. Well, now, some of you are keeping stores, and one or two I see here baking bread and making clothes. Which is going to do the most for your trade and you, a handful of rich men, who wouldn't eat or wear the things you have to sell, owning the whole country, or a family farming on every quarter section? A town ten times this size wouldn't be much use to them. Well, you've had your cattle-barons, gentlemen most of them; but even a man of that kind has to step out of the track and make room when the nation's moving on."

He probably said more, but Grant did not hear him, for he had as unostentatiously as possible conveyed Muller and the fräulein into a wagon, and had horses led up for the Dakota men. They had some difficulty in mounting, and the crowd laughed good-humouredly, though here and there a man flung jibes at them; while one, jolting in his saddle as his broncho reared, turned to Grant with a little deprecatory gesture.

"In our country we mostly drive in wagons, but I'll ride by the stirrup and get down when nobody sees me," he said. "The beast wouldn't try to climb out this way if there wasn't something kind of prickly under his saddle."

Grant's face was a trifle grim when he saw that more of the horses were inclined to behave similarly, but he flicked his team with the whip, and there was cheering and derision when, with a drumming of hoofs and rattle of wheels, wagons and horsemen swept away into the dust-cloud that rolled about the trail.

"This," he said, "is only a little joke of theirs, and they'll go a good deal further when they get their blood up. Still, I tried to warn you what you might expect."

"So!" said Muller, with a placid grin. "It is noding to der *franc tireurs*. I was in der chase of Menotti among der Vosges. Also at Paris."

"Well," said Grant drily, "I'm 'most afraid that by and by you'll go through very much the same kind of thing again. What you saw at the depot is going on wherever the railroad is bringing the farmers in, and we've got men in this country who'd make first-grade *franc tireurs*."

IV

MULLER STANDS FAST

The windows of Fremont homestead were open wide, and Larry Grant sat by one of them in a state of quiet contentment after a long day's ride. Outside, the prairie, fading from grey to purple, ran back to the dusky east, and the little cool breeze that came up out of the silence and flowed into the room had in it the qualities of snow-chilled wine. A star hung low to the westward in a field of palest green, and a shaded lamp burned dimly at one end of the great bare room.

By it the Fräulein Muller, flaxen-haired, plump, and blue-eyed, sat knitting, and Larry's eyes grew a trifle wistful when he glanced at her. It was a very long while since any woman had crossed his threshold, and the red-cheeked fräulein gave the comfortless bachelor dwelling a curiously homelike appearance. Nevertheless, it was not the recollection of its usual dreariness that called up the sigh, for Larry Grant had had his dreams like other men, and Miss Muller was not the woman he had now and then daringly pictured sitting there. Her father, perhaps from force of habit, sat with a big meerschaum in hand, by the empty stove, and if his face expressed anything at all it was phlegmatic content. Opposite him sat Breckenridge, a young Englishman, lately arrived from Minnesota.

"What do you think of the land, now you've seen it?" asked Grant.

Muller nodded reflectively. "Der land is good. It is der first-grade hard wheat she will grow. I three hundred and twenty acres buy."

"Well," said Grant, "I'm willing to let you have it; but I usually try to do the square thing, and you may have trouble before you get your first crop in."

"Und," said Muller, "so you want to sell?"

Grant laughed. "Not quite; and I can't sell that land outright. I'll let it to you while my lease runs, and when that falls in you'll have the same right to homestead a quarter or half section for nothing as any other man. In the meanwhile, I and one or two others are going to start wheat-growing on land that is ours outright, and take our share of the trouble."

"Ja," said Muller, "but dere is much dot is not clear to me. Why you der trouble like?"

"Well," said Grant, "as I've tried to tell you, it works out very much like this. It was known that this land was specially adapted to mixed farming quite a few years ago, but the men who ran their cattle over it never drove a plough. You want to know why? Well, I guess it was for much the same reason that an association of our big manufacturers bought up the patents of an improved process, and for a long while never made an ounce of material under them, or let any one else try. We had to pay more than it was worth for an inferior article that hampered some of the most important industries in the country, and they piled up the dollars in the old-time way."

"Und," said Muller, "dot is democratic America!"

"Yes," said Grant. "That is the America we mean to alter. Well, where one man feeds his cattle, fifty could plough and make a living raising stock on a smaller scale, and the time's quite close upon us when they will; but the cattle-men have got the country, and it will hurt them to let go. It's not their land, and was only lent them. Now I'm no fonder of trouble than any other man, but this country fed and taught me, and kept me two years in Europe looking round, and I'd feel mean if I took everything and gave it nothing back. Muller will understand me. Do you, Breckenridge?"

The English lad laughed. "Oh, yes; though I don't know that any similar obligation was laid on myself. The country I came from had apparently no use for a younger son at all, and it was kicks and snubs it usually bestowed on me; but if there's a row on hand I'm quite willing to stand by you and see it through. My folks will, however, be mildly astonished when they hear I've turned reformer."

Grant nodded good-humouredly, for he was not a fanatic, but an American with a firm belief in the greatness of his country's destiny, who, however, realized that faith alone was scarcely sufficient.

"Well," he said, "if it's trouble you're anxious for, it's quite likely you'll find it here. Nobody ever got anything worth having unless he fought for it, and we've taken on a tolerably big contract. We're going to open up this state for any man who will work for it to make a living in, and substitute its constitution for the law of the cattle-barons."

“Der progress,” said Muller, “she is irresistible.”

Breckenridge laughed. “From what I was taught, it seems to me that she moves round in rings. You start with the luxury of the few, oppression, and brutality, then comes revolution, and worse things than you had before, progress growing out of it that lasts for a few generations until the few fittest get more than their fair share of wealth and control, and you come back to the same point again.”

Muller shook his head. “No,” he said, “it is nod der ring, but der elastic spiral. Der progress she march, it is true, round und round, but she is arrive always der one turn higher, und der pressure on der volute is nod constant.”

“On the top?” said Breckenridge. “Principalities and powers, traditional and aristocratic, or monetary. Well, it seems to me they squeeze progress down tolerably flat between them occasionally. Take our old cathedral cities and some of your German ones, and, if you demand it, I’ll throw their ghettos in. Then put the New York tenements or most of the smaller western towns beside them, and see what you’ve arrived at.”

“No,” said Muller tranquilly. “Weight above she is necessary while der civilization is incomblete, but der force is from der bottom. It is all time positive and primitive, for it was make when man was make at der beginning.”

Grant nodded. “Well,” he said, “our work’s waiting right here. What other men have done in the Dakotas and Minnesota we are going to do. Nature has been storing us food for the wheat plant for thousands of years, and there’s more gold in our black soil than was ever dug out of Mexico or California. Still, you have to get it out by ploughing, and not by making theories. Breckenridge, you will stay with me; but you’ll want a house to live in, Muller.”

Muller drew a roll of papers out of his pocket, and Grant, who took them from him, stared in wonder. They were drawings and calculations relating to building with undressed lumber, made with Teutonic precision and accuracy.

“I have,” said Muller, “der observation make how you build der homestead in this country.”

“Then we’ll start you in to-morrow,” said Grant. “You’ll get all the lumber you want in the birch bluff, and I’ll lend you one or two of the boys I brought in from Michigan. There’s nobody on this continent handier with the axe.”

Muller nodded and refilled his pipe, and save for the click of the fräulein’s needles there was once more silence in the bare room. She had not spoken, for the knitting and the baking were her share, and the men whose part was the conflict must be clothed and fed. They knew it could not be evaded, and, springing from the same colonizing stock, placid Teuton with his visions and precision in everyday details, eager American, and adventurous Englishman, each made ready for it in his own fashion. Free as yet from passion, or desire for fame, they were willing to take up the burden that was to be laid upon them; but only the one who knew the least awaited it joyously. Others had also the same thoughts up and down that lonely land, and the dusty cars were already bringing the vanguard of the homeless host in. They were for the most part quiet and resolute men, who asked no more than leave to till a few acres of the wilderness, and to eat what they had sown; but there were among them others of a different kind—fanatics, outcasts, men with wrongs—and behind them the human vultures who fatten on rapine. As yet, the latter found no occupation waiting them, but their sight was keen, and they knew their time would come.

It was a week later, and a hot afternoon, when Muller laid the big crosscut saw down on the log he was severing and slowly straightened his back. Then he stood up, red and very damp in face, a burly, square-shouldered man, and, having mislaid his spectacles, blinked about him. On three sides of him the prairie, swelling in billowy rises, ran back to the horizon; but on the fourth a dusky wall of foliage followed the crest of a ravine, and the murmur of water came up faintly from the creek in the hollow. Between himself and its slender birches lay piled amidst the parched and dusty grass, and the first courses of a wooden building, rank with the smell of sappy timber, already stood in front of him. There was no notch in the framing that had not been made and pinned with an exact precision. In its scanty shadow his daughter sat knitting beside a smouldering fire over which somebody had suspended a big blackened kettle. The crash of the last falling trunk had died away, and there was silence in the bluff; but a drumming of hoofs rose in a sharp staccato from the prairie.

“Now,” said Muller quietly, “I think the *chasseurs* come.”

The girl looked up a moment, noticed the four mounted figures that swung over the crest of a rise, and then went on with her knitting again. Still, there was for a second a little flash in her pale blue eyes.

The horsemen came on, the dust floating in long wisps behind them, until, with a jingle of bridle and stirrup, they pulled up before the building. Three of them were bronzed and dusty, in weather-stained blue shirts, wide hats, and knee-boots

that fitted them like gloves; and there was ironical amusement in their faces. Each sat his horse as if he had never known any other seat than the saddle; but the fourth was different from the rest. He wore a jacket of richly embroidered deerskin, and the shirt under it was white; while he sat with one hand in a big leather glove resting on his hip. His face was sallow and his eyes were dark.

“Hallo, Hamburg!” he said, and his voice had a little commanding ring. “You seem kind of busy.”

Muller blinked at him. He had apparently not yet found his spectacles, but he had in the meanwhile come upon his axe, and now stood very straight, with the long haft reaching to his waist.

“Ja,” he said. “Mine house I build.”

“Well,” said the man in the embroidered jacket, “I fancy you’re wasting time. Asked anybody’s leave to cut that lumber, or put it up?”

“Mine friend,” said Muller, smiling, “when it is nod necessary I ask nodings of any man.”

“Then,” said the horseman drily, as he turned to his companions, “I fancy that’s where you’re wrong. Boys, we’ll take him along in case Torrance would like to see him. I guess you’ll have to walk home, Jim.”

A man dismounted and led forward his horse with a wrench upon the bridle that sent it plunging. “Get your foot in the stirrup, Hamburg, and I’ll hoist you up,” he said.

Muller stood motionless, and the horseman in deerskin glancing round in his direction saw his daughter for the first time. He laughed; but there was something in his black eyes that caused the Teuton’s fingers to close a trifle upon the haft of the axe.

“You’ll have to get down, Charlie, as well as Jim,” he said. “Torrance has his notions, or Coyote might have carried Miss Hamburg that far as well. Sorry to hurry you, Hamburg, but I don’t like waiting.”

Muller stepped back a pace, and the axe-head flashed as he moved his hand; while, dazzled by the beam it cast, the half-tamed broncho rose with hoofs in the air. Its owner smote it on the nostrils with his fist, and the pair sidled round each other—the man with his arm drawn back, the beast with laid-back ears—for almost a minute before they came to a standstill.

“Mine friend,” said Muller, “other day I der pleasure have. I mine house have to build.”

“Get up,” said the stockrider. “Ever seen anybody fire off a gun?”

Muller laughed softly, and glanced at the leader. “Der rifle,” he said drily. “I was at Sedan. To-day it is not convenient that I come.”

“Hoist him up!” said the leader, and once more, while the other man moved forward, Muller stepped back; but this time there was an answering flash in his blue eyes as the big axe-head flashed in the sun.

“I guess we’d better hold on,” said another man. “Look there, Mr. Clavering.”

He pointed to the bluff, and the leader’s face darkened as he gazed, for four men with axes were running down the slope, and they were lean and wiry, with very grim faces. They were also apparently small farmers or lumbermen from the bush of Michigan, and Clavering knew such men usually possessed a terrible proficiency with the keen-edged weapon, and stubbornness was native in them. Two others, one of whom he knew, came behind them. The foremost stopped, and stood silent when the man Clavering recognized signed to them, but not before each had posted himself strategically within reach of a horseman’s bridle.

“You might explain, Clavering, what you and your cow-boys are doing here,” he said.

Clavering laughed. “We are going to take your Teutonic friend up to the Range. He is cutting our fuel timber with nobody’s permission.”

“No,” said Grant drily; “he has mine. The bluff is on my run.”

“Did you take out timber rights with your lease?” asked Clavering.

“No, I hadn’t much use for them. None of my neighbours hold any either. But the bluff is big enough, and I’ve no objection to their cutting what billets they want. Still, I can’t have them driving out any other friends of mine.”

Clavering smiled ironically. “You have been picking up some curious acquaintances, Larry; but don’t you think you had

better leave this thing to Torrance? The fact is, the cattle-men are not disposed to encourage strangers building houses in their country just now."

"I had a notion it belonged to this State. It's not an unusual one," said Grant.

Clavering shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, it sounds better that way. Have it so. Still, it will scarcely pay you to make yourself unpopular with us, Larry."

"Well," said Grant drily, "it seems to me I'm tolerably unpopular already. But that's not quite the point. Take your boys away."

Clavering flung his hand up in half-ironical salutation, but as he was about to wheel his horse a young Englishman whose nationality was plainly stamped upon him seized his bridle.

"Not quite so fast!" he said. "It would be more fitting if you got down and expressed your regrets to the fräulein. You haven't heard Muller's story yet, Larry."

"Let go," said Clavering, raising the switch he held. "Drop my bridle or take care of yourself!"

"Come down," said Breckenridge.

The switch went up and descended hissing upon part of an averted face; but the lad sprang as it fell, and the next moment the horse rose almost upright with two men clinging to it; one of them, whose sallow cheeks were livid now, swaying in the saddle. Then Grant grasped the bridle that fell from the rider's hands, and hurled his comrade backwards, while some of the stockriders pushed their horses nearer, and the axe-men closed in about them.

Hoarse cries went up. "Horses back! Pull him off! Give the Britisher a show! Leave them to it!"

It was evident that a blunder would have unpleasant results, for Clavering, with switch raised, had tightened his left hand on the bridle Grant had loosed again, while a wicked smile crept into his eyes, and the lad stood tense and still, with hands clenched in front of him, and a weal on his young face. Grant, however, stepped in between them.

"We've had sufficient fooling, Breckenridge," he said. "Clavering, I'll give you a minute to get your men away, and if you can't do it in that time you'll take the consequences."

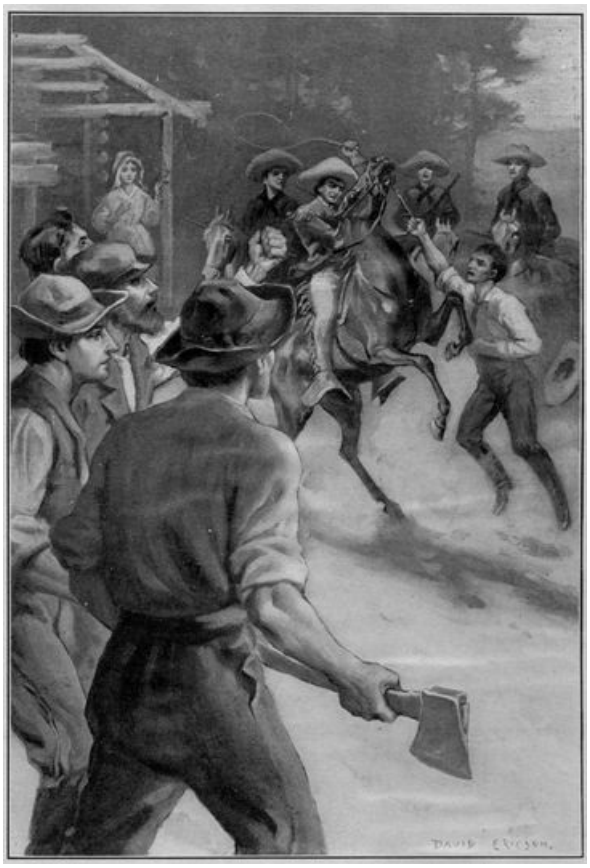
Clavering wheeled his horse. "The odds are with you, Larry," he said. "You have made a big blunder, but I guess you know your own business best."

He nodded, including the fräulein, with an easy insolence that yet became him, touched the horse with his heel, and in another moment he and his cow-boys were swinging at a gallop across the prairie. Then, as they dipped behind a rise, those who were left glanced at one another. Breckenridge was very pale, and one of his hands was bleeding where Clavering's spur had torn it.

"It seems that we have made a beginning," he said hoarsely. "It's first blood to them, but this will take a lot of forgetting, and the rest may be different."

Grant made no answer, but turned and looked at Muller, who stood very straight and square, with a curious brightness in his eyes.

"Are you going on with the contract? There is the girl to consider," said Grant.



"COME DOWN!"—*Page 47.*

"Ja," said the Teuton. "I was in der Vosges, and der girl is also Fräulein Muller."

"Boys," said Grant to the men from Michigan, "you have seen what's in front of you, and you'll probably have to use more than axes before you're through. Still, you have the chance of clearing out right now. I only want willing men behind me."

One of the big axe-men laughed scornfully, and there was a little sardonic grin in the faces of the rest.

"There's more room for us here than there was in Michigan, and now we've got our foot down here we're not going back again," he said. "That's about all there is to it. But when our time comes, the other men aren't going to find us slacker than the Dutchman."

Grant nodded gravely. "Well," he said very simply, "I guess the Lord who made this country will know who's in the right and help them. They'll need it. There's a big fight coming."

Then they went back to their hewing in the bluff, and the Fräulein Muller went on with her knitting.

V

HETTY COMES HOME

It was an afternoon of the Indian summer, sunny and cool, and the maples about the Schuyler villa flamed gold and crimson against a sky of softest blue, when Hetty Torrance sat reflectively silent on the lawn. Flora Schuyler sat near her, with a book upside down upon her knee.

"You have been worrying about something the last few weeks," she said.

"Is that quite unusual?" asked Hetty. "Haven't a good many folks to worry all the time?"

Flora Schuyler smiled. "Just finding it out, Hetty? Well, I have noticed a change, and it began the day you waited for us at the depot. And it wasn't because of Jake Cheyne."

"No," said Hetty reflectively. "I suppose it should have been. Have you heard from him since he went away?"

"Lily Cheyne had a letter with some photographs, and she showed it to me. It's a desolate place in the sage bush he's living in, and there's not a white man, except the boys he can't talk to, within miles of him, while from the picture I saw of his adobe room I scarcely think folks would have it down here to keep hogs in. Jake Cheyne was fastidious, too, and there was a forced cheerfulness about his letter which had its meaning, though, of course, he never mentioned you."

Hetty flushed a trifle. "Flo, I'm sorry. Still, you can't blame me."

"No," said Miss Schuyler, "though there was a time when I wished I could. You can't help being pretty, but it ought to make you careful when you see another of them going that way again."

Hetty made a little impatient gesture. "If there ever is another, he'll be pulled up quite sharp. You don't think their foolishness, which spoils everything, is any pleasure to me. It's too humiliating. Can't one be friends with a nice man without falling in love with him?"

"Well," said Miss Schuyler drily, "it depends a good deal on how you're made; but it's generally risky for one or the other. Still, perhaps you might, for I have a fancy there's something short in you. Now, I'm going to ask you a question. Is it thinking of the other man that has made you restless? I mean the one we saw at the depot?"

Hetty laughed outright. "Larry? Why, as I tried to tell you, he has always been just like a cousin or a brother to me, and doesn't want anything but his horses and cattle and his books on political economy. Larry's quite happy with his ranching, and his dreams of the new America. Of course, they'll never come to anything; but when you can start him talking they're quite nice to listen to."

Flora Schuyler shook her head. "I wouldn't be too sure. That man is in earnest, and the dreams of an earnest American have a way of coming true. You have known him a long while, and I've only seen him once, but that man will do more than talk if he ever has the opportunity. He has the quiet grit one finds in the best of us—not the kind that make the speeches—and some Englishmen, in him. You can see it in his eyes."

"Then," said Hetty, with a little laugh, "come back with me to Cedar, and if you're good you shall have him. It isn't everybody I'd give Larry to."

There was a trace of indignation in Flora Schuyler's face. "I fancy he would not appreciate your generosity, and there's a good deal you have got to find out, Hetty," she said drily. "It may hurt you when you do. But you haven't told me yet what has been worrying you."

"No," said Hetty, with a little wistful smile. "Well, I'm going to. It's hard to own to, but I'm a failure. I fancied I could make everybody listen to my singing, and I would come here. Well, I came, and found out that my voice would never bring me fame, and for a time it hurt me horribly. Still, I couldn't go back just then, and when you and your mother pressed me I stayed. I knew what you expected, and I disappointed you. Perhaps I was too fastidious, but there were none of them that really pleased me. Then I began to see that I was only spoiling nicer girls' chances and trying the patience of everybody."

"Hetty!" said Flora Schuyler, but Miss Torrance checked her.

“Wait until I’m through. Then it became plain to me that while I’d been wasting my time here the work I was meant for was waiting at Cedar. The old man who gave me everything is very lonely there, and he and Larry have been toiling on while I flung ’most what a ranch would cost away on lessons and dresses and fripperies, which will never be any good to me. Still, I’m an American, too, and now, when there’s trouble coming, I’m going back to the place I belong to.”

“You are doing the right thing now,” said Flora Schuyler.

Hetty smiled somewhat mirthlessly. “Well,” she said, “because it’s hard, I guess I am; but there’s one thing would make it easier. You will come and stay with me. You don’t know how much I want you; and New York in winter doesn’t suit you. You’re pale already. Come and try our clear, dry cold.”

Eventually Miss Schuyler promised, and Hetty rose. “Then it’s fixed,” she said. “I’ll write the old man a dutiful letter now, while I feel like doing it well.”

The letter was duly written, and, as it happened, reached Torrance as he sat alone one evening in his great bare room at Cedar Range. Among the papers on the table in front of him were letters from the cattle-men’s committees, which had sprung into existence every here and there, and Torrance apparently did not find them reassuring, for there was care in his face. It had become evident that the big ranchers’ rights were mostly traditional, and already, in scattered detachments, the vanguard of the homesteaders’ host was filing in. Here and there they had made their footing good; more often, by means not wholly constitutional, their outposts had been driven in; but it was noticeable that Torrance and his neighbours still believed them no more than detachments, and had not heard the footsteps of the rest. Three years’ residence in that land had changed the aliens into American citizens, but a lifetime of prosperity could scarcely efface the bitterness they had brought with them from the east, while some, in spite of their crude socialistic aspirations, were drilled men who had herded the imperial legions like driven cattle into Sedan. More of native birth, helots of the cities, and hired hands of the plains, were also turning desiring eyes upon the wide spaces of the cattle country, where there was room for all.

Torrance opened his letter and smiled somewhat drily. It was affectionate and not without its faint pathos, for Hetty had been stirred when she wrote; but the grim old widower felt no great desire for the gentle attentions of a dutiful daughter just then.

“We shall be at Cedar soon after you get this,” he read among the rest. “I know if I had told you earlier you would have protested you didn’t want me, just because you foolishly fancied I should be lonely at the Range; but I have been very selfish, and you must have been horribly lonely too; and one of the nicest girls you ever saw is coming to amuse you. You can’t help liking Flo. Of course I had to bring a maid; but you will have to make the best of us, because you couldn’t stop us now if you wanted to.”

It was noticeable that Torrance took the pains to confirm this fact by reference to a railroad schedule, and, finding it incontrovertible, shook his head.

“Three of them,” he said.

Then he sat still with the letter in his hand, while a trace of tenderness crept into his face, which, however, grew grave again, until there was a tapping at the door, and Clavering came in.

“You seem a trifle worried, sir, and if you’re busy I needn’t keep you long,” he said. “I just wanted to hand you a cheque for the subscription you paid for me.”

“Sit down,” said Torrance. “Where did you get the dollars from?”

Clavering appeared almost uneasy for a moment, but he laughed. “I’ve been thinning out my cattle.”

“That’s not a policy I approve of just now. We’ll have the rabble down upon us as soon as we show any sign of weakening.”

Clavering made a little deprecatory gesture. “It wasn’t a question of policy. I had to have the dollars. Still, you haven’t told me if you have heard anything unpleasant from the other committees.”

Torrance appeared thoughtful. He suspected that Clavering’s ranch was embarrassed, and the explanation was plausible.

“No,” he said. “It was something else. Hetty is on her way home, and she is bringing another young woman and a maid with her. They will be here before I can stop them. Still, I could, if it was necessary, send them back.”

Clavering did not answer for a moment, though Torrance saw the faint gleam in his dark eyes, and watched him

narrowly. Then he said, “You will find a change in Miss Torrance, sir. She has grown into a beautiful young woman, and has, I fancy, been taught to think for herself in the city; you could not expect her to come back as she left the prairie. And if anything has induced her to decide that her place is here, she will probably stay.”

“You’re not quite plain. What could induce her?”

Clavering smiled, though he saw that the shot had told. “It was astonishing that Miss Torrance did not honour me with her confidence. A sense of duty, perhaps, although one notices that the motives of young women are usually a trifle involved. It, however, appears to me that if Miss Torrance makes up her mind to stay, we are still quite capable of guarding our women from anxiety or molestation.”

“Yes,” said Torrance grimly. “Of course. Still, we may have to do things we would sooner they didn’t hear about or see. Well, you have some news?”

Clavering nodded. “I was in at the railroad, and fifty Dakota men came in on the cars. I went round to the hotel with the committee, and, though it cost some dollars to fix the thing, they wouldn’t take them in. The boys, who got kind of savage, found a pole and drove the door in, but we turned the Sheriff, who had already sworn some of us in, loose on them. Four or five men were nastily clubbed, and one of James’s boys was shot through the arm, while I have a fancy that the citizens would have stood in with the other crowd; but seeing they were not going to get anything to eat there, they held up a store, and as we told the man who kept it how their friends had sacked Regent, he fired at them. The consequence is that the Sheriff has some of them in jail, and the rest are camped down on the prairie. We hold the town.”

“Through the Sheriff?”

Clavering laughed. “He’ll earn his pay. Has it struck you that this campaign is going to cost us a good deal? Allonby hasn’t much left in hand already.”

“Oh, yes,” said the older man, with a little grim smile. “If it’s wanted I’ll throw my last dollar in. Beaten now and we’re beaten for ever. We have got to win.”

Clavering said nothing further, though he realized, perhaps more clearly than his leader, that it was only by the downfall of the cattle-men the small farmer could establish himself, and, when he had handed a cheque to Torrance, went out.

It was three days later when Hetty Torrance rose from her seat in a big vestibule car as the long train slackened speed outside a little Western station. She laughed as she swept her glance round the car.

“Look at it, Flo,” she said; “gilding and velvet and nickel, all quite in keeping with the luxury of the East. You are environed by civilization still; but once you step off the platform there will be a difference.”

Flora Schuyler, who noticed the little flush in her companion’s face, glanced out of the dusty window, for the interior of the gently-rocking car, with its lavish decoration and upholstery, was not new to her, and the first thing that caught her eye was the miscellaneous deposit of rubbish, old boots, and discarded clothing, amidst the willows that slowly flitted by. Then she saw a towering water-tank, wooden houses that rose through a haze of blowing dust, hideous in their unadornment, against a crystalline sky, and a row of close-packed stock-cars which announced that they were in the station.

It seemed to be thronged with the populace, and there was a murmur, apparently of disappointed expectancy, when, as the cars stopped, the three women alone appeared on the platform. Then there was a shout for the conductor, and somebody said, “You’ve no rustlers aboard for us?”

“No,” said the grinning official who leaned out from the door of the baggage-car. “The next crowd are waiting until they can buy rifles to whip you with.”

Hoarse laughter followed, and somebody said, “Boys, your friends aren’t coming. You can take your band home again.”

Then out of the clamour came the roll of a drum, and, clear and musical, the ringing of bugles blown by men who had marched with Grant and Sherman when they were young. The effect was stirring, and a cheer went up, for there were other men present in whom the spirit which, underlying immediate issues, had roused the North to arms was living yet; but it broke off into laughter when, one by one, discordant instruments and beaten pans joined in. The din, however, ceased suddenly, when somebody said, “Hadn’t you better let up, boys, or Torrance will figure you sent the band for him?”

Miss Schuyler appeared a trifle bewildered, the maid frightened; but Hetty’s cheeks were glowing.

“Flo,” she said, “aren’t you glad you came? The boys are taking the trail. We’ll show you how we stir the prairie up by and by!”

Miss Schuyler was very doubtful as to whether the prospect afforded her any pleasure; but just then a grey-haired man, dressed immaculately in white shirt and city clothes, kissed her companion, and then, taking off his hat, handed her down from the platform with ceremonious courtesy. He had a grim, forceful face, with pride and command in it, and Miss Schuyler, who felt half afraid of him then, never quite overcame the feeling. She noticed, however, that he paid equal attention to the terrified maid.

“It would be a duty to do our best for any of Hetty’s friends who have been so kind to her in the city, but in this case it’s going to be a privilege, too,” he said. “Well, you will be tired, and they have a meal waiting you at the hotel. This place is a little noisy to-day, but we’ll start on the first stage of your journey when you’re ready.”

He gave Miss Schuyler his arm, and moved towards the thickest of the crowd, which, though apparently slightly hostile, made way for him. Here and there a man drove his fellows back, and one, catching up a loose plank, laid it down for the party to cross the rail switches on. Torrance turned to thank him, but the man swept his hat off with a laugh.

“I wouldn’t worry; it wasn’t for you,” he said. “It’s a long while since we’ve seen anything so pretty as Miss Torrance and the other one.”

Flora Schuyler flushed a little, but Hetty turned to the speaker with a sparkle in her eyes.

“Now,” she said, “that was ’most worth a dollar, and if I didn’t know what kind of man you were, I’d give it you. But what about Clarkson’s Lou?”

There was a laugh from the assembly, and the man appeared embarrassed.

“Well,” he said slowly, “she went off with Jo.”

Miss Torrance nodded sympathetically. “Still, if she knew no better than that, I wouldn’t worry. Jo had a cast in his eye.”

The crowd laughed again, and Flora Schuyler glanced at her companion with some astonishment as she asked, “Do you always talk to them that way?”

“Of course,” said Hetty. “They’re our boys—grown right here. Aren’t they splendid?”

Miss Schuyler once more appeared dubious, and made no answer; but she noticed that the man now preceded them, and raised his hand when they came up with the band, which had apparently halted to indulge in retort or badinage with some of those who followed them.

“Hold on a few minutes, boys, and down with that flag,” he said.

Then a tawdry banner was lowered suddenly between two poles, but not before Miss Torrance had seen part of the blazoned legend. Its unvarnished forcefulness brought a flush to her companion’s cheek.

“Dad,” she asked more gravely, “what is it all about?”

Torrance laughed a little. “That,” he said, “is a tolerably big question. It would take quite a long while to answer it.”

They had a street to traverse, and Hetty saw that it was filled with little knots of men, some of whom stared at her father, though as she passed their hats came off. Miss Schuyler, on her part, noticed that most of the stores were shut, and felt that she had left New York a long way behind as she glanced at the bare wooden houses cracked by frost and sun, rickety plank walks, whirling wisps of dust, and groups of men, splendid in their lean, muscular symmetry and picturesque apparel. There was a boldness in their carriage, and a grace that approached the statuesque in every poise. Still, she started when they passed one wooden building where blue-shirted figures with rifles stood motionless in the verandah.

“The jail,” said Torrance, quietly. “The Sheriff has one or two rioters safe inside there.”

They found an indifferent meal ready at the wooden hotel, and when they descended in riding dress a wagon with their baggage was waiting outside the door, while a few mounted men with wide hats and bandoliers came up with three saddle-horses. Torrance bestowed the maid in the light wagon, and, when the two girls were mounted, swung himself into the saddle. Then, as they trotted down the unpaved street, Hetty glanced at him and pointed to the dusty horsemen.

“What are the boys for?” she asked.

Torrance smiled grimly. “I told you we had our troubles. It seemed better to bring them, in case we had any difficulty with Larry’s friends.”

“Larry’s friends?” asked Hetty, almost indignantly.

Torrance nodded. “Yes,” he said. “You have seen a few of them. They were carrying the flag with the inscription at the depot.”

Hetty asked nothing further, but Flora Schuyler noticed the little flash in her eyes, and as they crossed the railroad track the clear notes of the bugles rose again and were followed by a tramp of feet. Glancing over their shoulders the girls could see men moving in a body, with the flag they carried tossing amidst the dust. They were coming on in open fours, and when the bugles ceased deep voices sent a marching song ringing across the wooden town.

Hetty’s eyes sparkled; the stockriders seemed to swing more lightly in their saddles, and Flora Schuyler felt a little quiver run through her. Something that jingling rhythm and the simple words expressed but inarticulately stirred her blood, as she remembered that in her nation’s last great struggle the long battalions had limped on, ragged and footsore, singing that song.

“Listen,” said Hetty, while the colour crept into her face. “Oh, I know it’s scarcely music, and the crudest verse; but it served its purpose, and is there any nation on earth could put more swing and spirit into the grandest theme?”

Torrance smiled somewhat drily, but there was a curious expression in his face. “Some of those men are drawing their pension, but they’re not with us,” he said. “It’s only because we have sent in all the boys we can spare that the Sheriff, who has their partners in his jail, can hold the town.”

A somewhat impressive silence followed this, and Flora Schuyler glanced at Hetty when they rode out into the white prairie with two dusty men with bandoliers on either flank.

VI

THE INCENDIARY

Events of no apparent moment have extensive issues now and then, and while cattle-man and homesteader braced themselves for the conflict which they felt would come, the truce might have lasted longer but for the fact that one night Muller slept indifferently in the new house he had built. He was never quite sure what made him restless, or prompted him to open and lean out of his window; and, when he had done this, he saw and heard nothing unusual for a while.

On one hand the birch bluff rose, a dusky wall, against the indigo of the sky, and in front of him the prairie rolled away, silent and shadowy. There was scarcely a sound but the low ripple of the creek, until, somewhere far off in the distance, a coyote howled. The drawn-out wail had in it something unearthly, and Muller, who was by no means an imaginative man, shivered a little. The deep silence of the great empty land emphasized by the sound reacted upon him and increased his restlessness.

Scarcely knowing why he did so, except that he felt he could not sleep, he slipped on a few garments, and moved softly to the door, that he might not disturb his daughter. There was no moon when he went out, but the stars shone clearly in the great vault of blue, and the barns and stables he had built rose black against the sky. Though Grant had lent him assistance and he had hewn the lumber on the spot, one cannot build a homestead and equip it for nothing, and when he had provided himself with working horses, Muller had sunk the last of his scanty capital in the venture. It was perhaps this fact which induced him to approach the stable, moving noiselessly in his slippers, and glance within.

The interior was black and shadowy, but there was no doubting the fact that the beasts were moving restlessly. Muller went in, holding his breath as he peered about him, and one broncho backed away as he approached its stall. Muller patted it on the flank, and the horse stood still, as though reassured, when it recognized him, which was not without its meaning. He listened, but hearing nothing groped round the stable, and taking a hayfork went out as softly as he had entered, and took up his post in the deepest shadow, where he commanded outbuildings and house. There was, he knew, nobody but Grant dwelling within several leagues of him, and as yet property was at least as safe in that country as it was in Chicago or New York; but as he leaned, impassively watchful, against the wall, he remembered an episode which had happened a few weeks earlier.

He had been overtaken by a band of stockriders when fording the creek with his daughter, and one who loitered behind them reined his horse in and spoke to the girl. Muller never knew what his words had been; but he saw the sudden colour in the fräulein's face, and seized the man's bridle. An altercation ensued, and when the man rejoined his comrades, who apparently did not sympathize with him, his bridle hand hung limp and the farmer was smiling as he swung a stick. Muller attached no especial importance to the affair; but Grant, who did not tell him so, differed in this when he heard of it. He knew that the cattle-rider is usually rather chivalrous than addicted to distasteful gallantries.

In any case, Muller heard nothing for a while, and felt tempted to return to his bed when he grew chilly. He had, however, spent bitter nights stalking the *franc tireurs* in the snow, and the vigilance taught and demanded by an inflexible discipline had not quite deserted him, though he was considerably older and less nimble now. At last, however, a dim, moving shadow appeared round a corner of the building, stopped a moment, and then slid on again towards the door. So noiseless was it that Muller could almost have believed his eyes had deceived him until he heard the hasp rattle. Still, he waited until the figure passed into the stable, and then very cautiously crept along the wall. Muller was not so vigorous as he had been when proficiency in the use of the bayonet had been drilled into him; but while his fingers tightened on the haft of the fork he fancied that he had still strength enough to serve his purpose. He had also been taught to use it to the best advantage.

He straightened himself a little when he stood in the entrance and looked about him. There was a gleam of light in the stable now, for a lantern stood upon a manger and revealed by its uncertain glimmer a pile of prairie hay, with a kerosene-can upon it, laid against the logs. Muller was not wholly astonished, but he was looking for more than that, and the next moment he saw a shadowy object apparently loosing the nearest horse's halter. It was doubtless a merciful deed, but it was to cost the incendiary dear; for when, perhaps warned by some faint sound, he looked up suddenly, he saw a black figure between him and the door.

On the instant he dropped the halter, and the hand that had held it towards his belt; but, as it happened, the horse pinned

him against the stall, and his opportunity had passed when it moved again. Muller had drawn his right leg back with his knee bent a trifle, and there was a rattle as he brought the long fork down to the charge. Thus, when the man was free the deadly points twinkled in a ray from the lantern within a foot of his breast. It was also unpleasantly evident that a heave of the farmer's shoulder would bury them in the quivering flesh.

"Hands oop!" a stern voice said.

The man delayed a second. The butt of the pistol that would equalize the affair was almost within his grasp, and Muller stood in the light, but he saw an ominous glint in the pale blue eyes and the farmer's fingers tighten on the haft. There was also a suggestive raising of one shoulder; and his hands went up above his head. Muller advanced the points an inch or two, stiffening his right leg, and smiled grimly. The other man stared straight in front of him with dilated eyes, and a little grey patch growing larger in either cheek.

"Are you going to murder me, you condemned Dutchman?" he said.

"Yes," said Muller tranquilly, "if you der movement make. So! It is done without der trouble when you have der bayonet exercise make."

The points gleamed as they swung forward, and the man gasped; but they stopped at the right second, and Muller, who had hove his burly form a trifle more upright, sank back again, bringing his foot down with a stamp. The little demonstration was more convincing than an hour of argument.

"Well," said the man hoarsely, "I'm corralled. Throw that thing away, and I'll give you my pistol."

Muller laughed, and then raised his great voice in what was to the other an unknown tongue. "Lotta," he said, "Come quick, and bring the American rifle."

There was silence for perhaps five minutes, and the men watched each other, one white in the face and quivering a little, his adversary impassive as a statue, but quietly observant. Then there was a patter of hasty footsteps, and the fräulein stood in the lantern light with a flushed, plump face and somewhat scanty dress. She apparently recognized the man, and her colour deepened, but that was the only sign of confusion she showed; and it was evident that the discipline of the fatherland had not been neglected in Muller's household.

"Lotta," he said in English, "open der little slide. You feel der cartridge? Now, der butt to der shoulder, und der eye on der sight, as I have teach you. Der middle of him is der best place. I shout, und you press quite steady."

He spoke with a quiet precision that had its effect; and, whatever the girl felt, she obeyed each command in rotation. There was, however, one danger which the stranger realized, and that was that with an involuntary contraction of the forefinger she might anticipate the last one.

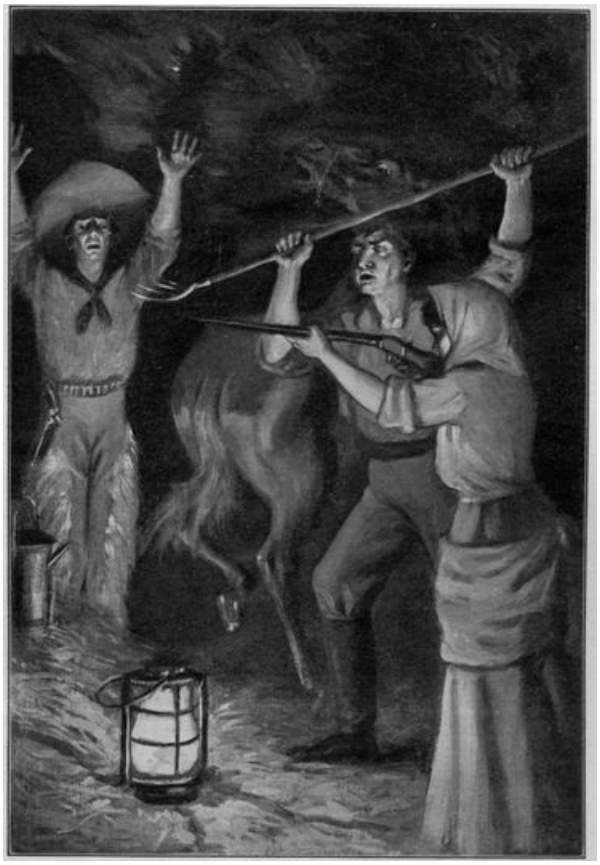
"She'll shoot me before she means to," he said, with a little gasp. "Come and take the condemned pistol."

"Der middle of him!" said Muller tranquilly. "No movement make, you!"

Dropping the fork he moved forward, not in front of the man, but to his side, and whipped the pistol from his belt.

"One turn make," he said. "So! Your hand behind you. Lotta, you will now a halter get."

The girl's loose bodice rose and fell as she laid down the rifle, but she was swift, and in less than another minute Muller had bound his captive's hands securely behind his back and cross-lashed them from wrist to elbow. He inspected the work critically and then nodded, as if contented.



"SHE'LL SHOOT ME BEFORE SHE MEANS TO."—*Page 66.*

"Lotta," he said, "put der saddle on der broncho horse. Then in der house you der cordial find, und of it one large spoonful mit der water take. My pipe you bring me also, und then you ride for Mr. Grant."

The girl obeyed him; and when the drumming of horse-hoofs died away Muller sat down in front of his prisoner, who now lay upon a pile of prairie hay, and with his usual slow precision lighted his big meerschaum. The American watched him for a minute or two, and then grew red in the face as a fit of passion shook him.

"You condemned Dutchman!" he said.

Muller laughed. "Der combliment," he said, "is nod of much use to-night."

It was an hour later when Grant and several horsemen arrived, and he nodded as he glanced at the prisoner.

"I figured it was you. There's not another man on the prairie mean enough for this kind of work," he said, pointing to the kerosene-can. "You didn't even know enough to do it decently, and you're about the only American who'd have let an old man tie his hands."

The prisoner winced perceptibly. "Well," he said hoarsely, glancing towards the hayfork, rifle, and pistol, which still lay at Muller's feet, "if you're astonished, look at the blamed Dutchman's armoury."

"I've one thing to ask you," Grant said sternly. "It's going to pay you to be quite straight with me. Who hired you?"

There was defiance in the incendiary's eyes, but Grant was right in his surmise that he was resolute only because that of the two fears which oppressed him he preferred to bear the least.

"You can ask till you get sick of it, but you'll get nothing out of me," he said.

"Take him out," said Grant. "Put him on to the led horse. If you'll come round to my place for breakfast, I'll be glad to see you, Muller."

"I come," said Muller. "Mit der *franc tireur* it is finish quicker, but here in der Republic we reverence have for der law."

Grant laughed a little. "Well," he said drily, "I'm not quite sure."

He swung himself to the saddle, swept off his hat to the girl, who stood with the lantern light upon her in the doorway, smiling but flushed, and shook his bridle. Then there was a jingle that was lost in the thud of hoofs, and the men vanished into the shadowy prairie. Half an hour later the homestead was once more dark and silent; but three men sent out by Grant were riding at a reckless gallop across the great dusky levels, and breakfast was not finished when those whom they had summoned reached Fremont ranch.

They were young men for the most part, and Americans, though there were a few who had only just become so among them, and two or three whose grim faces and grey hair told of a long struggle with adversity. They were clad in blue shirts and jean, and the hard brown hands of most betokened a close acquaintance with plough stilt, axe, and bridle, though here and there one had from his appearance evidently lived delicately. All appeared quietly resolute, for they knew that the law which had given them the right to build their homes upon that prairie as yet left them to bear the risks attached to the doing of it. Hitherto, the fact that the great ranchers had made their own laws and enforced them had been ignored or tacitly accepted by the State.

When they were seated, one of the men deputed to question the prisoner, stood up. “You can take it that there’s nothing to be got out of him,” he said.

“Still,” said another, “we know he is one of Clavering’s boys.”

There was a little murmur, for of all the cattle-barons Clavering was the only man who had as yet earned his adversaries’ individual dislike. They were prepared to pull down the others because their interests, which they had little difficulty in fancying coincided with those of their country, demanded it; but Clavering, with his graceful insolence, ironical contempt of them, and thinly-veiled pride, was a type of all their democracy anathematized. More than one of them had winced under his soft laugh and lightly spoken jibes, which rankled more than a downright injury.

“The question is what we’re going to do with him,” said a third speaker.

Again the low voices murmured, until a man stood up. “There’s one cure for his complaint, and that’s a sure one, but I’m not going to urge it now,” he said. “Boys, we don’t want to be the first to take up the rifle, and it would make our intentions quite as plain if we dressed him in a coat of tar and rode him round the town. Nobody would have any use for him after that, and it would be a bigger slap in Clavering’s face than anything else we could do to him.”

Some of the men appeared relieved, for it was evident they had no great liking for the sterner alternative; and there was acclamation until Grant rose quietly at the head of the table.

“I’ve got to move a negative,” he said. “It would be better if you handed him to the Sheriff.”

There was astonishment in most of the faces, and somebody said, “The Sheriff! He’d let him go right off. The cattle-men have got the screw on him.”

“Well,” said Larry quietly, “he has done his duty so far, and may do it again. I figure we ought to give him the chance.”

Exclamations of dissent followed, and a man with a grim, lean face stood up. He spoke tolerable English, but his accent differed from that of the rest.

“The first man put it straight when he told you there was only one cure—the one they found out in France a hundred years ago,” he said. “You don’t quite realize it yet. You haven’t lived as we did back there across the sea, and seen your women thrust off the pavement into the gutter to make room for an officer, or been struck with the sword-hilt if you resented an insult before your fellow citizens. Will you take off your hats to the rich men who are trampling on you, you republicans, and, while they leave you the right of speech, beg them to respect your rights and liberties? Do that, and sit still a little, and they’ll fasten the yoke we’ve groaned under on your necks.”

“I don’t know that it isn’t eloquent, but it isn’t business,” said somebody.

The man laughed sardonically. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “I’m trying to show you that if you want your liberties you’ve got to fight for them, and your leader doesn’t seem to know when, by hanging one man, he can save a hundred from misery. It’s not the man who laid the kindling you’re striking at, but, through him, those who employed him. Let them see you’ll take your rights without leave of them. They’ve sent you warning that if you stay here they’ll burn your homesteads down, and they’re waiting your answer. Hang their firebug where everyone can see him, in the middle of the town.”

It was evident that the men were wavering. They had come there with the law behind them, but, from their youth up, some following visions that could never be realized, had hated the bureaucrat, and the rest, crippled by the want of dollars,

had fought with frost and drought and hail. It was also plain that they felt the capture of the incendiary had given them an opportunity. Then, when a word would have turned the scale, Grant stood up at the head of the table, very resolute in face.

“I still move a negative and an amendment, boys,” he said. “First, though that’s not the most important, because I’ve a natural shrinking from butchering an unarmed man. Secondly, it was not the cattle-men who sent him, but one of them, and just because he meant to draw you on it would be the blamedest bad policy to humour him. Would Torrance, or Allonby, or the others, have done this thing? They’re hard men, but they believe they’re right, as we do, and they’re Americans. Now for the third reason: when Clavering meant to burn Muller’s homestead, he struck at me, guessing that some of you would stand behind me. He knew your temper, and he’d have laughed at us as hot-blooded rabble—you know how he can do it—when he’d put us in the wrong. Well, this time we’ll give the law a show.”

There was discussion, but Larry sat still, saying nothing further, with a curious gravity in his face, until a man stood up again.

“We think you’re right,” he said. “Still, there’s a question. What are you going to do if they try again?”

“Strike,” said Larry quietly. “I’ll go with you to the hanging of the next one.”

Nothing more was said, and the men rode away with relief in their faces, though three of them, girt with rifle and bandolier, trotted behind the wagon in which the prisoner sat.

VII

LARRY PROVES INTRACTABLE

It was some little time after her arrival at Cedar Range when Miss Torrance, who took Flora Schuyler with her, rode out across the prairie. There were a good many things she desired to investigate personally, and, though a somewhat independent young woman, she was glad that the opportunity of informing Torrance of her intention was not afforded her, since he had ridden off somewhere earlier in the day. It also happened that although the days were growing colder she arrayed herself fastidiously in a long, light skirt, which she had not worn since she left Cedar, and which with the white hat that matched it became her better than the conventional riding attire. Miss Schuyler naturally noticed this.

“Is it a garden party we are going to?” she asked.

Hetty laughed. “We may meet some of our neighbours, and after staying with you all that while in New York I don’t want to go back on you. I had the thing specially made in Chicago for riding in.”

Miss Schuyler was not quite satisfied, but she made no further comment, and there was much to occupy her attention. The bleached plain was bright with sunshine and rolled back into the distance under an arch of cloudless blue, while the crisp, clear air stirred her blood like an elixir. They swept up a rise and down it, the colour mantling in their faces, over the long hollow, and up a slope again, until, as the white grass rolled behind her, Flora Schuyler yielded to the exhilaration of swift motion, and, flinging off the constraint of the city, rejoiced in the springy rush of the mettlesome beast beneath her. Streaming white levels, the blue of the sliding sky, the kiss of the wind on her hot cheek, and the roar of hoofs, all reacted upon her until she laughed aloud when she hurled her half-wild broncho down a slope.

“This is surely the finest country in the world,” she said.

The words were blown behind her, but Hetty caught some of them, and, when at last she drew bridle where a rise ran steep and seamed with badger-holes against the sky, nodded with a little air of pride.

“Oh, yes, and it’s ours. All of it,” she said. “Worth fighting for, isn’t it?”

Flora Schuyler laughed a little, but she shook her head. “It’s a pity one couldn’t leave that out. You would stay here with your men folk if there was trouble?”

Hetty looked at her with a little flash in her eyes. “Why, of course! It’s our country. We made it, and I’d go around in rags and groom the boys’ horses if it would help them to whip out the men who want to take it from us.”

Flora Schuyler smiled a trifle drily. “The trouble is that when we fall out, one is apt to find as good Americans as we are, and sometimes the men we like the most, standing in with the opposition. It has happened quite often since the war.”

Hetty shook her bridle impatiently. “Then, of course, one would not like them any longer,” she said.

Nothing more was said until they crossed the ridge above them, when Hetty pulled her horse up. Across the wide levels before her advanced a line of dusty teams, the sunlight twinkling on the great breaker ploughs they hauled, while the black loam rolled in softly gleaming waves behind them. They came on with slow precision, and in the forefront rolled a great machine that seamed and rent the prairie into triple furrows.

“What are they doing there? Do they belong to you?” asked Miss Schuyler.

The flush the wind had brought there turned to a deeper crimson in Hetty’s usually colourless face. “To us!” she said, and her voice had a thrill of scorn. “They’re homesteaders. Ride down. I want to see who’s leading them.”

She led the way with one little gloved hand clenched on the dainty switch she held; but before she reached the foremost team the man who pulled it up sprang down from the driving-seat of the big machine. A tall wire fence, with a notice attached to it, barred his way. The other ploughs stopped behind him, somebody brought an axe, and Hetty set her lips when the glistening blade whirled high and fell. Thrice it flashed in the sunlight, swung by sinewy arms, and then, as the fence went down, a low, half-articulate cry rose from the waiting men. It was not exultant, but there was in it the suggestion of a steadfast purpose.

Hetty sat still and looked at them, a little sparkle in her dark eyes, and a crimson spot in either cheek, while the laces that hung from her neck across the bodice of the white dress rose and fell. It occurred to Flora Schuyler that she had never

seen her companion look half so well, and she waited with strained expectancy for what should follow, realizing, with the dramatic instinct most women have, who the man with the axe must be. He turned slowly, straightening his back and stood for a moment erect and statuesque, with the blue shirt open at his bronzed neck and the great axe gleaming in his hand; and Hetty gasped. Miss Schuyler's surmise was verified, for it was Larry Grant.

"Larry," said her companion, and her voice had a curious ring, "what are you doing here?"

The man, who appeared to ignore the question, swung off his wide hat. "Aren't you and Miss Schuyler rather far from home?" he asked.

Flora Schuyler understood him when, glancing round, she noticed the figure of a mounted man forced up against the skyline here and there. Hetty, however, had evidently not seen them.

"I want an answer, please," she said.

"Well," said Larry gravely, "I was cutting down that fence."

"Why were you cutting it down?" persisted Miss Torrance.

"It was in the way."

"Of what?"

Grant turned and pointed to the men, sturdy toilers starved out of bleak Dakota and axe-men farmers from the forests of Michigan. "Of these, and the rest who are coming by and by," he said. "Still, I don't want to go into that; and you seem angry. You haven't offered to shake hands with me, Hetty."

Miss Torrance sat very still, one hand on the switch, and another on the bridle, looking at him with a little scornful smile on her lips. Then she glanced at the prairie beyond the severed fence.

"That land belongs to my friends," she said.

Grant's face grew a trifle wistful, but his voice was grave. "They have had the use of it, but it belongs to the United States, and other people have the right to farm there now. Still, that needn't make any trouble between you and me."

"No?" said the girl, with a curious hardness in her inflection; but her face softened suddenly. "Larry, while you only talked we didn't mind; but no one fancied you would have done this. Yes, I'm angry with you. I have been home 'most a month, and you never rode over to see me; while now you want to talk politics."

Grant smiled a trifle wearily. "I would sooner talk about anything else; and if you ask him, your father will tell you why I have not been to the range. I don't want to make you angry, Hetty."

"Then you will give up this foolishness and make friends with us again," said the girl, very graciously. "It can't come to anything, Larry, and you are one of us. You couldn't want to take away our land and give it to this rabble?"

Hetty was wholly bewitching, as even Flora Schuyler, who fancied she understood the grimness in the man's face, felt just then. He, however, looked away across the prairie, and the movement had its significance to one of the company, who, having less at stake, was the more observant. When he turned again, however, he seemed to stand very straight.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said.

"No?" said Hetty, still graciously. "Not even when I ask you?"

Grant shook his head. "They have my word, and you wouldn't like me to go back upon what I feel is right," he said.

Hetty laughed. "If you will think a little, you can't help seeing that you are very wrong."

Again the little weary smile crept into Grant's face. "One naturally thinks a good deal before starting in with this kind of thing, and I have to go through. I can't stop now, even to please you. But can't we still be friends?"

For a moment there was astonishment in the girl's face, then it flushed, and as her lips hardened and every line in her slight figure seemed to grow rigid, she reminded Miss Schuyler of the autocrat of Cedar Range.

"You ask me that?" she said. "You, an American, turning Dutchmen and these bush-choppers loose upon the people you belong to. Can't you see what the answer must be?"

Grant did apparently, for he mutely bent his head; but there was a shout just then, and when one of the vedettes on the skyline suddenly moved forward he seized Miss Torrance's bridle and wheeled her horse.

“Ride back to the Range,” he said sharply, “as straight as you can. Tell your father that you met me. Let your horse go, Miss Schuyler.”

As he spoke he brought his hand down upon the beast’s flank and it went forward with a bound. The one Flora Schuyler rode flung up its head, and in another moment they were sweeping at a gallop across the prairie. A mile had been left behind before Hetty could pull her half-broken horse up; but the struggle that taxed every sinew had been beneficial, and she laughed a trifle breathlessly.

“I’m afraid I lost my temper; and I’m angry yet,” she said. “It’s the first time Larry wouldn’t do what I asked him, and it was mean of him to send us off like that, just when one wanted to put on all one’s dignity.”

Miss Schuyler appeared thoughtful. “I fancy he did it because it was necessary. Didn’t it strike you that you were hurting him? That is a good man and an honest one, though, of course, he may be mistaken.”

“He must be,” said Hetty. “Now I used to think ever so much of Larry, and that is why I got angry with him. It isn’t nice to feel one has been fooled. How can he be good when he wants to take our land from us?”

Flora Schuyler laughed. “You are quite delightful, Hetty, now and then. You have read a little, and been taught history. Can’t you remember any?”

“Oh yes,” said Hetty, with a little thoughtful nod. “Still, the men who made the trouble in those old days were usually buried before anyone was quite sure whether they were right or not. Try to put yourself in my place. What would you do?”

There was a somewhat curious look in Miss Schuyler’s blue eyes. “I think if I had known a man like that one as long as you have done, I should believe in him—whatever he did.”

“Well,” said Hetty gravely, “if you had, just as long as you could remember, seen your father and his friends taking no pleasure, but working every day, and putting most of every dollar they made back into the ranch, you would find it quite difficult to believe that the man who meant to take it from them now they were getting old and wanted to rest and enjoy what they had worked for was doing good.”

Flora Schuyler nodded. “Yes,” she said, “I would. It’s quite an old trouble. There are two ways of looking at everything, and other folks have had to worry over them right back to the beginning.”

Then she suddenly tightened her grasp on the bridle, for the ringing of a rifle rose, sharp and portentous, from beyond the rise. The colour faded in her cheek, and Hetty leaned forward a trifle in her saddle, with lips slightly parted, as though in strained expectancy. No sound now reached them from beyond the low, white ridge that hemmed in their vision but a faint drumming of hoofs. Then Flora Schuyler answered the question in her companion’s eyes.

“I think it was only a warning,” she said.

She wheeled her horse and they rode on slowly, hearing nothing further, until the Range rose from behind the big birch bluff. Torrance had returned when they reached it, and Hetty found him in his office room.

“I met Larry on the prairie, and of course I talked to him,” she said. “I asked him why he had not been to the Range, and he seemed to think it would be better if he did not come.”

Torrance smiled drily. “Then I guess he showed quite commendable taste as well as good sense. You are still decided not to go back to New York, Hetty?”

“Yes,” said the girl, with a little resolute nod. “You see, I can’t help being young and just a little good-looking, but I’m Miss Torrance of Cedar all the time.”

Torrance’s face was usually grim, but it grew a trifle softer then. “Hetty,” he said, “they taught you a good many things I never heard of at that Boston school, but I’m not sure you know that all trade and industry is built upon just this fact: what a man has made and worked hard for is his own. Would anyone put up houses or raise cattle if he thought his neighbours could take them from him? Now there’s going to be trouble over that question here, and, though it isn’t likely, your father may be beaten down. He may have to do things that wouldn’t seem quite nice to a dainty young woman, and folks may denounce him; but it’s quite plain that if you stay here you will have to stand in with somebody.”

The girl, who was touched by the unusual tenderness in his eyes, sat down upon the table, and slipped an arm about his neck.

“Who would I stand in with but you?” she said. “We’ll whip the rustlers out of the country, and, whether it sounds nice at the time or not, you couldn’t do anything but the square thing.”

Torrance kissed her gravely, but he sighed and his face grew stern again when she slipped out of the room.

“There will not be many who will come through this trouble with hands quite clean,” he said.

It was during the afternoon, and Torrance had driven off again, when, as the two girls were sitting in the little room which was set apart for them, a horseman rode up to the Range, and Flora Schuyler, who was nearest the window, drew back the curtain.

“That man should sit on horseback always,” she said; “he’s quite a picture.”

Hetty nodded. “Yes,” she said. “Still, you told me you didn’t like him. It’s Clavering. Now, I wonder what he put those things on for—he doesn’t wear them very often—and whether he knew my father wasn’t here.”

Clavering would probably have attracted the attention of most young women just then, for he had dressed himself in the fashion the prairie stockriders were addicted to, as he did occasionally, perhaps because he knew it suited him. He had artistic perceptions, and could adapt himself harmoniously to his surroundings, and he knew Hetty’s appreciation of the picturesque. His sallow face showed clean cut almost to feminine refinement under the wide hat, and the blue shirt which clung about him displayed his slender symmetry. It was, however, not made of flannel, but apparently of silk, and the embroidered deerskin jacket which showed the squareness of his shoulders, was not only daintily wrought, but had evidently cost a good many dollars. His loose trousers and silver spurs were made in Mexican fashion: but the boldness of the dark eyes, and the pride that revealed itself in the very pose of the man, redeemed him from any taint of vanity.

He sat still until a hired man came up, then swung himself from the saddle, and in another few moments had entered the room with his wide hat in his hand.

“You find us alone,” said Hetty. “Are you astonished?”

“I am content,” said Clavering. “Why do you ask me?”

“Well,” said Hetty naïvely, “I fancied you must have seen my father on the prairie, and could have stopped him if you had wanted to.”

There was a little flash in Clavering’s dark eyes that was very eloquent. “The fact is, I did. Still, I was afraid he would want to take me along with him.”

Hetty laughed. “I am growing up,” she said. “Three years ago you wouldn’t have wasted those speeches on me. Well, you can sit down and talk to Flora.”

Clavering did as he was bidden. “It’s a time-honoured question,” he said. “How do you like this country?”

“There’s something in its bigness that gets hold of one,” said Miss Schuyler. “One feels free out here on these wide levels in the wind and sun.”

Clavering nodded, and Flora Schuyler fancied from his alertness that he had been waiting for an opportunity. “It would be wise to enjoy it while you can,” he said. “In another year or two the freedom may be gone, and the prairie shut off in little squares by wire fences. Then one will be permitted to ride along a trail between rows of squalid homesteads flanked by piles of old boots and provision-cans. We will have exchanged the stockrider for the slouching farmer with a swarm of unkempt children and a slatternly, scolding wife then.”

“You believe that will come about?” asked Miss Schuyler, giving him the lead she felt he was waiting for.

Clavering looked thoughtful. “It would never come if we stood loyally together, but—and it is painful to admit it—one or two of our people seem quite willing to destroy their friends to gain cheap popularity by truckling to the rabble. Of course, we could spare those men quite well, but they know our weak points, and can do a good deal of harm by betraying them.”

“Now,” said Hetty, with a sparkle in her eyes, “you know quite well that if some of them are mistaken they will do nothing mean. Can’t they have their notions and be straight men?”

“It is quite difficult to believe it,” said Clavering. “I will tell you what one or two of them did. There was trouble down at Gordon’s place fifty miles west, and his cow-boys whipped off a band of Dutchmen who wanted to pull his fences down. Well, they came back a night or two later with a mob of Americans, and laid hands on the homestead. We are

proud of the respect we pay women in this country, Miss Schuyler, but that night Mrs. Gordon's and her daughters' rooms were broken into, and the girls turned out on the prairie. It was raining, and I believe they were not even allowed to provide themselves with suitable clothing. Of course, nothing of that kind could happen here, or I would not have told you."

Hetty's voice was curiously quiet as she asked, "Was nothing done to provoke them?"

"Yes," said Clavering, with a dry smile, "Gordon shot one of them; but is it astonishing? What would you expect of an American if a horde of rabble who held nothing sacred poured into his house at night? Oh, yes, he shot one of them, and would have given them the magazine, only that somebody felled him with an axe. The Dutchman was only grazed, but Gordon is lying senseless still."

There was an impressive silence, and the man sat still with the veins on his forehead a trifle swollen and a glow in his eyes. His story was also accurate, so far as it went; but he had, with a purpose, not told the whole of it.

"You are sure there were Americans among them?" asked Hetty, very quietly.

"They were led by Americans. You know one or two of them."

"No," said Hetty, almost fiercely. "I don't know. But Larry wasn't there?"

Clavering shook his head, but there was a curious incisiveness in his tone. "Still, we found out that his committee was consulted and countenanced the affair."

"Then Larry wasn't at the meeting," said Miss Torrance. "He couldn't have been."

Clavering made her a little and very graceful inclination. "One would respect such faith as yours."

Miss Schuyler, who was a young woman of some penetration, deftly changed the topic, and Clavering came near to pleasing her, but he did not quite succeed, before he took his departure. Then Hetty glanced inquiringly at her companion.

Flora Schuyler nodded. "I know just what you mean, and I was mistaken."

"Yes?" said Hetty. "Then you like him?"

Miss Schuyler shook her head. "No. I fancied he was clever, and he didn't come up to my expectations. You see, he was too obvious."

"About Larry?"

"Yes. Are you not just a little inconsistent, Hetty?"

Miss Torrance laughed. "I don't know," she said. "I am, of course, quite angry with Larry, but nobody else has a right to abuse him."

Flora Schuyler said nothing further, and while she sat in thoughtful silence Clavering walked down the hall with Hetty's maid. He was a well-favoured man, and the girl was vain. She blushed when he looked down on her with a trace of admiration in his smile.

"You like the prairie?" he said.

She admitted that she was pleased with what she had seen of it, and Clavering's assumed admiration became bolder.

"Well, it's a good country, and different from the East," he said. "There are a good many more dollars to be picked up here, and pretty women are quite scarce. They usually get married right off to a rancher. Now I guess you came out to better yourself. It takes quite a long time to get rich down East."

The girl blushed again, and when she informed him that she had a crippled sister who was a charge on the family, Clavering smiled as he drew on a leather glove.

"You'll find you have struck the right place," he said. "Now I wonder if you could fix a pin or something in this button shank. It's coming off, you see."

The girl did it, and when he went out found a bill lying on the table where he had been standing. The value of it somewhat astonished her, but after a little deliberation she put it in her pocket.

"If he doesn't ask for it when he comes back I'll know he meant me to keep it," she said.

VIII

THE SHERIFF

Miss Schuyler had conjectured correctly respecting the rifle-shot which announced the arrival of a messenger; a few minutes after the puff of white smoke on the crest of the rise had drifted away, a mounted man rode up to Grant at a gallop. His horse was white with dust and spume, but his spurs were red.

“Railroad district executive sent me on to let you know the Sheriff had lost your man,” he said.

“Lost him,” said Grant.

“Well,” said the horseman, “put it as it pleases you, but, as he had him in the jail, it seems quite likely he let him go.”

There was a growl from the teamsters who had clustered round, and Grant’s face grew stern. “He was able to hold the two homesteaders Clavering’s boys brought him.”

“Oh, yes,” said the other, “he has them tight enough. You’ll remember one of the cattle-boys and a storekeeper got hurt during the trouble, and our men are not going to have much show at the trial Torrance and the Sheriff are fixing up!”

“Then,” said Grant wearily, “we’ll stop that trial. You will get a fresh horse in my stable and tell your executive I’m going to take our men out of jail, and if it suits them to stand in they can meet us at the trail forks, Thursday, ten at night.”

The man nodded. “I’m tolerably played out, but I’ll start back right now,” he said.

He rode off towards the homestead, and Grant turned to the rest. “Jake, you’ll take the eastern round; Charley, you’ll ride west. Give them the handful of oats at every shanty to show it’s urgent. They’re to be at Fremont in riding order at nine to-morrow night.”

In another ten minutes the men were riding hard across the prairie, and Grant, with a sigh, went on with his ploughing. It would be next year before he could sow, and whether he would ever reap the crop was more than any man in that region would have ventured to predict. He worked however, until the stars were out that night and commenced again when the red sun crept up above the prairie rim the next day; but soon after dusk mounted men rode up one by one to Fremont ranch. They rode good horses, and each carried a Winchester rifle slung behind him when they assembled, silent and grim, in the big living-room.

“Boys,” said Grant quietly, “we have borne a good deal, and tried to keep the law, but it is plain that the cattle-men, who bought it up, have left none for us. Now, the Sheriff, who has the two homesteaders safe, has let the man we sent him go.”

There was an ominous murmur and Grant went on. “The homesteaders, who only wanted to buy food and raised no trouble until they were fired on, will be tried by the cattle-men, and I needn’t tell you what kind of chance they’ll get. We pledged ourselves to see they had fair play when they came in, and there’s only one means of getting it. We are going to take them from the Sheriff, but there will be no fighting. We’ll ride in strong enough to leave no use for that. Now, before we start, are you all willing to ride with me?”

Again a hoarse murmur answered him, and Grant, glancing down the row of set faces under the big lamps, was satisfied.

“Then we’ll have supper,” he said quietly. “It may be a long while before any of us gets a meal again.”

It was a silent repast. As yet the homesteaders, at least in that district, had met contumely with patience and resisted passively each attempt to dislodge them, though it had cost their leader a strenuous effort to restrain the more ardent from the excesses some of their comrades farther east had already committed; but at last the most peaceful of them felt that the time to strike in turn had come. They mounted when supper was over and rode in silence past willow bluff and dusky rise across the desolate waste. The badger heard the jingle of their bridles, and now and then a lonely coyote, startled by the soft drumming of the hoofs, rose with bristling fur and howled; but no cow-boy heard their passage, or saw them wind in and out through devious hollows when daylight came. Still, here and there an anxious woman stood, with hazy eyes, in the door of a lonely shanty, wondering whether the man she had sent out to strike for the home he had built her would ever ride back again. For they, too, had their part in the struggle, and it was perhaps the hardest one.

It was late at night when they rode into the wooden town. Here and there a window was flung open; but the night was thick and dark, and there was little to see but the dust that whirled about the dimly flitting forms. That, however, was

nothing unusual, for of late squadrons of stockriders and droves of weary cattle had passed into the town; and a long row of shadowy frame houses had been left behind before the fears of any citizen were aroused. It was, perhaps, their silent haste that betrayed the horsemen, for they rode in ordered ranks without a word, as men who have grim business in hand, until a hoarse shout went up. Then a pistol flashed in the darkness in front of them, doors were flung open, lights began to blink, and a half-seen horseman came on at a gallop down the shadowy street. He pulled his horse up within a pistol-shot from the homesteaders, and sat still in his saddle staring at them.

"You'll have to get down, boys, or tell me what you want," he said. "You can't ride through here at night without a permit."

There was a little ironical laughter, and somebody asked, "Who's going to stop us?"

"The Sheriff's guard," said the horseman. "Stop right where you are until I bring them."

"Keep clear," said Grant sternly, "or we'll ride over you. Forward, boys!"

There was a jingle of bridles, and the other man wheeled his horse as the heels went home. Quick as he was, the foremost riders were almost upon him, and as he went down the street at a gallop the wooden houses flung back a roar of hoofs. Every door was open now and the citizens peering out. Lights flashed in the windows, and somebody cried, "The rustler boys are coming!"

Other voices took up the cry; hoots of derision mingled with shouts of greeting, but still, without an answer, the men from the prairie rode on, Grant peering into the darkness as he swung in his saddle at the head of them. He saw one or two mounted men wheel their horses, and more on foot spring clear of the hoofs, and then the flash of a rifle beneath the black front of a building. A flagstaff ran up into the night above it, and there were shadowy objects upon the verandah. Grant threw up a hand.

"We're here, boys," he said.

Then it became evident that every man's part had been allotted him, for while the hindmost wheeled their horses, and then sat still, with rifles across their saddles, barring the road by which they had come, the foremost pressed on, until, pulling up, they left a space behind them and commanded the street in front. The rest dismounted, and while one man stood at the heads of every pair of horses, the rest clustered round Grant in the middle of the open space. The jail rose dark and silent before them, and for the space of a moment or two there was an impressive stillness. It was broken by a shout from one of the rearguard.

"There's quite a crowd rolling up. Get through as quick as you can!"

Grant stood forward. "We'll give you half a minute to send somebody out to talk to us, and then we're coming in," he said.

The time was almost up before a voice rose from the building: "Who are you, any way, and what do you want?"

"Homesteaders," was the answer. "We want the Sheriff."

"Well," said somebody, "I'll tell him."

Except for a growing clamour in the street behind there was silence until Breckenridge, who stood near Grant touched him,

"I don't want to meddle, but aren't we giving them an opportunity of securing their prisoners or making their defences good?" he said.

"That's sense, any way," said another man. "It would be 'way better to go right in now, while we can."

Grant shook his head. "You have left this thing to me, and I want to put it through without losing a man. Men don't usually back down when the shooting begins."

Then a voice rose from the building: "You wanted the Sheriff. Here he is."

A shadowy figure appeared at a window, and there was a murmur from Grant's men.

"He needn't be bashful," said one of them. "Nobody's going to hurt him. Can't you bring a light, so we can see him?"

A burst of laughter followed, and Grant held up his hand. "It would be better, Sheriff; and you have my word that we'll give you notice before we do anything if we can't come to terms."

It seemed from the delay that the Sheriff was undecided, but at last a light was brought, and the men below saw him standing at the window with an anxious face, and behind him two men with rifles, whose dress proclaimed them stockriders. He could also see the horsemen below, as Grant, who waited until the sight had made its due impression, had intended that he should. There were a good many of them, and the effect of their silence and the twinkling of light on their rifles was greater than that of any uproar would have been.

“Now you can see me, you needn’t keep me waiting,” said the Sheriff, with an attempt at jauntiness which betrayed his anxiety. “What do you want?”

“Two of your prisoners,” said Grant.

“I’m sorry you can’t have them,” said the Sheriff. “Hadn’t you better ride home again before I turn the boys loose on you?”

But his voice was not quite in keeping with his words, and it would have been wiser if he had turned his face aside.

“It’s a little too far to ride back without getting what we came for,” said Grant quietly. “Now, we have no great use for talking. We want two homesteaders, and we mean to get them; but that will satisfy us.”

“You want nobody else?”

“No. You can keep your criminals, or let them go, just as it suits you.”

There was a laugh from some of the horsemen, which was taken up by the crowd and swelled into a storm of cries. Some expressed approval, others anger, and the Sheriff stepped backwards.

“Then,” he said hoarsely, “if you want your friends, you must take them.”

The next moment the window shut with a bang, and the light died out, leaving the building once more in darkness.

“Get to work,” said Grant. “Forward, those who are going to cover the axe-men!”

There was a flash from the verandah, apparently in protest and without intent to hurt, for the next moment a few half-seen objects flung themselves over the balustrade as the men with the axes came up, and others with rifles took their places a few paces behind them. Then one of the horsemen shouted a question.

“Let them pass,” said Grant.

The door was solid and braced with iron, but those who assailed it had swung the axe since they had the strength to lift it, and in the hands of such men it is a very effective implement. The door shook and rattled as the great blades whirled and fell, each one dropping into the notch the other had made; the men panted as they smote; the splinters flew in showers.

“Holding out still!” gasped one of them. “There’s iron here. Get some of the boys to chop that redwood pillar, and we’ll drive it down.”

There was an approving murmur, but Grant grasped the man by the shoulder. “No,” he said. “We haven’t come to wreck the town. I’ve another plan if you’re more than two minutes getting in.”

The axes whirled faster, and at last a man turned breathlessly. “Get ready, boys,” he said. “One more on the bolt head, Jake, and we’re in!”

A brawny man twice whirled the hissing blade about his head, and as he swung forward with both hands on the haft with a dull crash the wedge of tempered steel clove the softer metal. The great door tilted and went down, and Breckenridge sprang past the axe-men through the opening. His voice came back exultantly out of the shadowy building. “It was the old country sent you the first man in!”

The men’s answer was a shout as they followed him, with a great trampling down the corridor, but the rest of the building was very silent, and nobody disputed their passage until at last a man with grey hair appeared with a lantern behind an iron grille.

“Open that thing,” said somebody.

The man smiled drily. “I couldn’t do it if I wanted to. I’ve given my keys away.”

One or two of the homesteaders glanced a trifle anxiously behind them. The corridor was filling up, and it dawned upon them that if anything barred their egress they would be helpless.

“Then what are you stopping for?” asked somebody.

“It’s in my contract,” said the jailer quietly. “I was raised in Kentucky. You don’t figure I’m scared of you?”

“No use for talking,” said a man. “You can’t argue with him. Go ahead with your axes and beat the blamed thing in.”

It cost them twenty minutes’ strenuous toil; but the grille went down, and two of the foremost seized the jailer.

“Let him go,” said Grant quietly. “Now, we can’t fool time away with you. Where’s the Sheriff?”

“I don’t quite know,” said the jailer, and the contempt in his voice answered the question.

Grant laughed a little. “Well,” he said, “I guess he’s sensible. Now, what you have got to do is to bring out the two homesteaders as quick as you can.”

“I told you I couldn’t do it,” said the other man.

“You listen to me. We are going to take those men out, if we have to pull this place to pieces until we find them. That, it’s quite plain, would let the others go, and you would lose the whole of your prisoners instead of two of them. Tell us where you put them, and you can keep the rest.”

“That’s square?”

“Oh, yes,” said Grant. “There are quite enough men of their kind loose in this country already.”

“Straight on,” said the jailer. “First door.”

They went on in silence, but there was a shout when somebody answered their questions from behind a door, which a few minutes later tottered and fell beneath the axes. Then, amidst acclamation, they led two men out, and showed them to the jailer.

“You know them?” said Grant. “Well, you can tell your Sheriff there wasn’t a cartridge in the rifles of the men who opened his jail. He’ll come back when the trouble’s over, but it seems to me the cattle-men have wasted a pile of dollars over him.”

He laughed when a question met them as they once more trampled into the verandah.

“Yes,” he said. “The boys are bringing them!”

Two horses were led forward, and the released men swung themselves into the saddle. There was a hasty mounting, and when the men swung into open fours a shout went up from the surging crowd.

“They have taken the homesteaders out. The Sheriff has backed down.”

A roar followed that expressed approbation and disgust; it was evident that the sympathies of the citizens were divided. In the momentary silence Grant’s voice rang out:

“Sling rifles! Keep your order and distance! Forward, boys!”

Again a hoarse cry went up, but there was only applause in it now, for the crowd recognized the boldness of the command and opened out, pressing back against the houses as the little band rode forward. Their silence was impressive, but the leader knew his countrymen, for, while taunts and display would have courted an onset, nobody seemed anxious to obstruct the men who sat unconcernedly in their saddles, with the rifles which alone warranted their daring disdainfully slung behind them.

On they went past clusters of wondering citizens, shouting sympathizers, and silent cattle-men, until there was a hoot of derision, and, perhaps in the hope of provoking a conflict in which the rest would join, a knot of men pushed out into the street from the verandah of the wooden hotel. Grant realized that a rash blow might unloose a storm of passion and rouse to fury men who were already regretting their supineness.

“Keep your pace and distance!” he commanded.

Looking straight in front of them, shadowy and silent, the leading four rode on, and once more the crowd melted from in front of them. As the last of the band passed through the opening that was made for them a man laughed as he turned in his saddle.

“We can’t stay any longer, boys, but it wasn’t your fault. It’s a man you want for Sheriff,” he said.

“No talking there! Gallop!” said Grant, and the horsemen flitted across the railroad track, and with a sinking thud of hoofs melted into the prairie. They had accomplished their purpose, and the cattle-men, going back disgustedly to remonstrate with the Sheriff, for a while failed to find him.

IX

THE PRISONER

The prairie was shining white in the moonlight with the first frost when Torrance, Hetty, and Miss Schuyler drove up to Allonby's ranch. They were late in arriving and found a company of neighbours already assembled in the big general room. It was panelled with cedar from the Pacific slope, and about the doors and windows were rich hangings of tapestry, but the dust was thick upon them and their beauty had been wasted by the moth. Tarnished silver candlesticks and lamps which might have come from England a century ago, and a scarred piano littered with tattered music, were in keeping with the tapestry; for signs of taste were balanced by those of neglect, while here and there a roughly patched piece of furniture conveyed a plainer hint that dollars were scanty with Allonby. He was from the South, a spare, grey-haired man, with a stamp of old-fashioned dignity, and in his face a sadness not far removed from apathy and which, perhaps, accounted for the condition of his property.

His guests, among whom were a number of young men and women, were, however, apparently light-hearted, and had whiled away an hour or two with song and badinage. A little removed from them, in a corner with the great dusty curtain of a window behind her, sat Hetty Torrance with Allonby's nephew and daughter. Miss Allonby was pale and slight and silent; but her cousin united the vivacity of the Northerner with the distinction that is still common in the South, and—for he was very young—Hetty found a mischievous pleasure in noticing his almost too open admiration for Flora Schuyler, who sat close beside them. A girl was singing indifferently, and when she stopped, Miss Allonby raised her head as a rhythmical sound became audible through the closing chords of the piano.

"Somebody riding here in a hurry!" she said.

It was significant that the hum of voices which followed the music ceased as the drumming of hoofs grew louder; the women looked anxious and the men glanced at one another. Tidings brought in haste were usually of moment then. Torrance, however, stood up and smiled at the assembly.

"I guess some of those rascally rustlers have been driving off a steer again," he said. "Can't you sing us something, Clavering?"

Clavering understood him, and it was a rollicking ballad he trolled out with verve and spirit; but still, though none of the guests now showed it openly, the anxious suspense did not abate, and by and by Miss Allonby smiled at the lad beside her somewhat drily.

"Never mind the story, Chris. I guess we know the rest. That man is riding hard, and you are as anxious as any of us," she said.

A minute or two later there was a murmur of voices below, and Allonby went out. Nobody appeared to notice this, but the hum of somewhat meaningless talk which followed and the strained look in one or two of the women's faces had its meaning. Every eye was turned towards the doorway until Allonby came back and spoke with Torrance apart. Then he smiled reassuringly upon his guests.

"You will be pleased to hear that some of our comrades have laid hands upon one of the leaders in the attack upon the jail," he said. "They want to lodge him here until they can send for the Sheriff's *posse*, and of course I could only agree. Though the State seems bent on treating us somewhat meanly, we are, I believe, still loyal citizens, and I feel quite sure you will overlook any trifling inconvenience the arrival of the prisoner may cause you."

"Doesn't he put it just a little curiously?" suggested Flora Schuyler.

"Well," said Christopher Allonby, "it really isn't nice to have one of our few pleasant evenings spoiled by this kind of thing."

"You don't understand. I am quite pleased with your uncle, but there's something that amuses me in the idea of jailing one's adversary from patriotic duty."

Christopher Allonby smiled. "There's a good deal of human nature in most of us, and it's about time we got even with one or two of them."

"Find out about it, Chris," said Miss Allonby; "then come straight back and tell us."

The young man approached a group of his elders who were talking together, and returned by and by.

“It was done quite smartly,” he said. “One of the homestead boys who had fallen out with Larry came over to us, and I fancy it was Clavering fixed the thing up with him. The boys didn’t know he had deserted them, and the man he took the oats to believed in him.”

“I can’t remember you telling a tale so one could understand it, Chris,” said Miss Allonby. “Why did he take the oats to him?”

The lad laughed. “They have their committees and executives, and when a man has to do anything they send a few grains of oats to him. One can’t see much use in it, and we know ’most everything about them; but it makes the thing kind of impressive, and the rustler fancied our boy was square when he got them. He was to ride over alone and meet somebody from one of the other executives at night in a bluff. He went, and found a band of cattle-boys waiting for him. I believe he hadn’t a show at all, for the man who went up to talk to him grabbed his rifle, but it seems he managed to damage one or two of them.”

“You don’t know who he is?” asked Miss Allonby; and Flora Schuyler noticed a sudden intentness in Hetty’s eyes.

“No,” said the lad, “but the boys will be here with him by and by, and I’m glad they made quite sure of him, any way.”

Hetty’s eyes sparkled. “You can’t be proud of them! It wasn’t very American.”

“Well, we can’t afford to be too particular, considering what we have at stake; though it might have sounded nicer if they had managed it differently. You don’t sympathize with the homestead boys, Miss Torrance?”

“Of course not!” said Hetty, with a little impatient gesture. “Still, that kind of meanness does not appeal to me. Even the men we don’t like would despise it. They rode into the town without a cartridge in their rifles, and took out their friends in spite of the Sheriff, while the crowd looked on.”

“It was Larry Grant fixed that, and ’tisn’t every day you can find a man like him. It ’most made me sick when I heard he had gone over to the rabble.”

“You were a friend of his?” asked Flora Schuyler.

“Oh, yes;” and a little shadow crept into Allonby’s face. “But, that’s over now. When a man goes back on his own folks there’s only one way of treating him, and it’s not going to be nice for Larry if we can catch him. We’re in too tight a place to show the man who can hurt us most much consideration.”

Hetty turned her head a moment, and then changed the subject, but not before Flora Schuyler noticed the little flush in her cheek. The music, laughter, and gay talk began again, and if anyone remembered that while they chased their cares away grim men who desired their downfall toiled and planned, no sign of the fact was visible.

Twenty minutes passed, and then the thud of hoofs once more rose from the prairie. It swelled into a drumming that jarred harsh and portentous through the music, and Hetty’s attention to the observations of her companions became visibly less marked. One by one the voices also seemed to sink, and it was evidently a relief to the listeners when a girl rose and closed the piano. Somebody made an effort to secure attention to a witty story, and there was general laughter, but it also ceased, and an impressive silence followed. Out of it came the jingle of bridles and trampling of hoofs, as the men outside pulled up, followed by voices in the hall, and once more Allonby went out.

“They’re right under this window,” said his nephew. “Slip quietly behind the curtains, and I think you can see them.”

Flora Schuyler drew the tapestry back, the rest followed her and Christopher Allonby flung it behind them, so that it shut out the light. In a moment or two their eyes had become accustomed to the change, and they saw a little group of mounted men close beneath. Two of them dismounted, and appeared to be speaking to some one at the door, but the rest sat with their rifles across their saddles and a prisoner in front of them. His hat was crushed and battered, his jacket rent, and Flora Schuyler fancied there was a red trickle down his cheek; but his face was turned partly away from the window, and he sat very still, apparently with his arms bound loosely at the wrists.

“All these to make sure of one man, and they have tied his hands!” she said.

Hetty noticed the ring in her companion’s voice, and Allonby made a little deprecatory gesture.

“It’s quite evident they had too much trouble getting him to take any chances of losing him,” he said. “I wish the fellow would turn his head. I fancy I should know him.”

A tremor ran through Hetty for she also felt she recognized that tattered figure. Then one of the horsemen seized the captive's bridle, and the man made a slight indignant gesture as the jerk flung off his hands. Flora Schuyler closed her fingers tight.

"If I were a man I should go down and talk quite straight to them," she said.

The prisoner was sitting stiffly now, but he swayed in the saddle when one of the cattle-men struck his horse and it plunged. He turned his head as he did so, and the moonlight shone into his face. It was very white, and there was a red smear on his forehead. Hetty gasped, and Flora Schuyler felt her fingers close almost cruelly upon her arm.

"It's Larry!" she said.

Christopher Allonby nodded. "Yes, we have him at last," he said. "Of course, one feels sorry; but he brought it on himself. They're going to put him into the stable."

The men rode forward, and when they passed out of sight Hetty slipped back from behind the curtain, and, sat down, shivering as she looked up at Miss Schuyler.

"I can't help it, Flo. If one could only make them let him go!"

"You need not let any of them see it," said Miss Schuyler, sharply. "Sit quite still here and talk to me. Now, what right had those men to arrest him?"

The warning was sufficient. Hetty shook out her dress and laughed, though her voice was not steady.

"It's quite simple," she said. "The Sheriff can call out any citizen to help him or send any man off after a criminal in an emergency. Of course, being a responsible man he stands in with us, and in times like these the arrangement suits everybody. We do what seems the right thing, and the Sheriff is quite pleased when we tell him."

Flora Schuyler smiled drily. "Yes. It's delightfully simple. Still, wouldn't it make the thing more square if the other men had a good-natured Sheriff, too?"

"Now you are laughing at me. The difference is that we are in the right."

"And Larry, of course, must be quite wrong!"

"No," said Hetty, "he is mistaken. Flo, you have got to help me—I'm going to do something for him. Try to be nice to Chris Allonby. They'll send him to take care of Larry."

Miss Schuyler looked steadily at her companion. "You tried to make me believe you didn't care for the man."

A flush stole into Hetty's cheek, and a sparkle to her eyes. "Can't you do a nice thing without asking questions? Larry was very good to me for years, and—I'm sorry for him. Any way, it's so easy. Chris is young, and you could fool any man with those big blue eyes if he let you look at him."

Flora Schuyler made a half-impatient gesture, and then, sweeping her dress aside, made room for Christopher Allonby. She also succeeded so well with him that when the guests had departed and the girls came out into the corral where he was pacing up and down, he flung his cigar away and forsook his duty to join them. It was a long ride to Cedar Range, and Torrance had decided to stay with Allonby until morning.

"It was very hot inside—they would put so much wood in the stove," said Hetty. "Besides, Flo's fond of the moonlight."

"Well," said Allonby, "it's quite nice out here, and I guess Miss Schuyler ought to like the moonlight. It's kind to her."

Flora Schuyler laughed as they walked past the end of the great wooden stable together. "If you look at it in one sense, that wasn't pretty. You are guarding the prisoner?"

"Yes," said the lad, with evident diffidence. "The boys who brought him here had 'bout enough of him, and they're resting, while ours are out on the range. I'm here for two hours any way. It's not quite pleasant to remember I'm watching Larry."

"Of course!" and Miss Schuyler nodded sympathetically. "Now, couldn't you just let us talk to him? The boys have cut his forehead, and Hetty wanted to bring him some balsam. I believe he used to be kind to her."

Allonby looked doubtful, but Miss Schuyler glanced at him appealingly—and she knew how to use her eyes—while Hetty said:

“Now, don’t be foolish, Chris. Of course, we had just to ask your uncle, but he would have wanted to come with us and would have asked so many questions, while we knew you would tell nobody anything. You know I can’t help being sorry for Larry, and he has done quite a few nice things for you, too.”

“Miss Schuyler is going with you?”

“Of course,” and Hetty smiled mischievously as she glanced at her companion. “Still, you needn’t be jealous, Chris. I’ll take the best care she doesn’t make love to him.”

Flora Schuyler looked away across the prairie, which was not quite what one would have expected from a young woman of her capacities; but the laughing answer served to banish the lad’s suspicions, and he walked with them towards the door. Then he stopped, and when he drew a key from an inner pocket Hetty saw something twinkle in the moonlight at his belt.

“Chris,” she said, “stand still for a minute and shut your eyes quite tight.”

The lad did as he was bidden, for a few years ago he had been the complaisant victim of Hetty’s pleasantries, and felt a light touch on his lips. Then, there was a pluck at his belt, and Hetty was several yards away when he made a step forward with his eyes wide open. She was laughing at him, but there was a pistol in her hand.

“It was only my fingers, Chris, and Flo wasn’t the least nearer than she is now,” she said. “If you dared to think anything else, you would make me too angry. We’ll bring this thing back to you in five minutes, but you wouldn’t have us go in there quite defenceless. Now you walk across the corral, and wait until we tell you.”

Allonby was very young, and somewhat susceptible. Hetty was also very pretty, and, he fancied, Miss Schuyler even prettier still; but he had a few misgivings, and when they went in closed the lower half of the door and set his back to it.

“No,” he said decisively, “I’m staying right here.”

The girls made no demur, but when they had crossed a portion of the long building Miss Schuyler touched her companion. “I’ll wait where I am,” she said drily, “you will not want me.”

Hetty went on until she came to where the light of a lantern shone faintly in a stall. A man sat there with his hands still bound and a wide red smear upon his forehead. His face flushed suddenly as he glanced at her, but he said nothing.

“I’m ever so sorry, Larry,” said the girl.

The man smiled, though it was evident to Hetty, whose heart beat fast, that it was only by an effort he retained his self-control.

“Well,” he said, “it can’t be helped, and it was my fault. Still, I never suspected that kind of thing.”

Hetty coloured. “Larry, you mustn’t be bitter—but it was horribly mean. I couldn’t help coming—I was afraid you would fancy I was proud of them.”

“No,” he said, sternly. “I couldn’t have fancied that. There was nothing else?”

“Your head. It is horribly cut. We saw you from the window, and I fancied I could tie it up for you. You wouldn’t mind if I tried, Larry? I have some balsam here, and I only want a little water.”

For a moment Grant’s face was very expressive, but once more he seemed to put a check upon himself, and his voice was almost too even as he pointed to the pitcher beside him. “There is some ready. Your friends don’t treat their prisoners very well.”

The girl winced a little, but dipping her handkerchief in the pitcher she laved his forehead, and then would have laid the dressing on it; but he caught her hand.

“No,” he said, “take mine instead.”

“You needn’t be quite too horrid, Larry,” and there was a quiver in her voice. “It wouldn’t hurt you very much to take a little thing like that from me.”

Grant smiled very gravely. “I think you had better take mine. If they found a lady’s handkerchief round my head, Allonby’s folks would wonder how it got there.”

Hetty did as he suggested, and felt a curious chagrin when he failed to look at her. “I used to wonder, Larry, how you were able to think of everything,” she said. “Now I have brought you something else; but you must promise not to hurt

anybody belonging to Allonby with it."

Grant laughed softly, partly to hide his astonishment, when he saw a pistol laid beside him.

"I haven't grown bloodthirsty, Hetty," he said. "Where did you get it?"

"It was Chris Allonby's. Flo and I fooled him and took it away. It was so delightfully easy. But you will keep it?"

He shook his head. "Just try to think, Hetty."

Hetty's cheeks flushed. "You are horribly unkind. Can't you take anything from me? Still—you—have got to think now. If I let you go, you will promise not to make any more trouble for my father and Allonby, or anybody?"

Grant only looked at her with an odd little smile, but the crimson grew deeper in Hetty's cheek. "Oh, of course you couldn't. I was sorry the last time I asked you," she said. "Larry, you make me feel horribly mean; but you would not do anything that would hurt them, unless it was quite necessary?"

"No," said the man drily, "I don't think I'm going to have an opportunity."

"You are. I came to let you go. It will be quite easy. Chris is quite foolish about Flo."

Grant shook his head. "Doesn't it strike you that it would be very rough on Chris?"

Hetty would not look at him, and her voice was very low. "If anyone must be hurt, I would sooner it was Chris than you."

He did not answer for a moment, and the girl, watching him in sidelong fashion, saw the grim restraint in his face, which grew almost grey in patches.

"It is no use, Hetty," he said very quietly. "Chris would tell them nothing. There is no meanness in his father or him; but that wouldn't stop him thinking. Now, you will know I was right to-morrow. Take him back his pistol."

"Larry," said the girl, with a little quiver in her voice, "you are right again—I don't quite know why you were friends with me."

Grant smiled at her. "I haven't yet seen the man who was fit to brush the dust off your little shoes; but you don't look at these things quite as we do. Now Chris will be getting impatient. You must go."

Hetty turned away from him, and while the man felt his heart throbbing painfully and wondered whether his resolution would support him much longer, stood very still with one hand clenched. Then she moved back towards him swiftly, with a little smile.

"There is a window above the beams, where they pitch the grain-bags through," she said. "Chris will go away in an hour or so, and the other man will only watch the door. There are horses in the corral behind the barn, and I've seen you ride the wickedest broncho without a saddle."

She whisked away before the man, who felt a little, almost caressing, touch upon his arm; and heard something drop close beside him with a rattle, could answer, and in less than a minute later smiling at Chris Allonby gave him back his pistol.

"Do you know I was 'most afraid you were going to make trouble for me?" he said.

"But if I had you wouldn't have told."

The lad coloured. "You have known me quite a long time, Hetty."

Hetty laughed, but there was a thrill in her voice as she turned to Miss Schuyler. "Now," she said, "you know the kind of men we raise on the prairie."

As they moved away together, Flora Schuyler cast a steady, scrutinizing glance at her companion. "I could have told you, Hetty," she said.

"Yes," said Hetty, with a little nod. "He wouldn't go, and I feel so mean that I'm not fit to talk to you or anybody. But wait. You'll hear something before to-morrow."

It was not quite daylight when Miss Schuyler was awakened by a murmur of voices and a tramp of feet on the frozen sod. Almost at the same moment the door of her room opened, and a slim, white figure glided towards the window. Flora Schuyler stood beside it in another second or two, and felt that the girl whose arm she touched was trembling. The

voices below grew louder, and they could see two men come running from the stable, while one or two others were flinging saddles upon the horses brought out in haste.

“He must have got away an hour ago,” said somebody. “The best horse Allonby had in the corral isn’t there now.”

Then Hetty sat down laughing excitedly, and let her head fall back on Flora Schuyler’s shoulder when she felt the warm girdling of her arm. In another moment she was crying and gasping painfully.

“He has got away. The best horse in the corral! Ten times as many of them couldn’t bring him back,” she said.

“Hetty,” said Miss Schuyler decisively, “you are shivering all through. Go back at once. He is all right now.”

The girl gasped again, and clung closer to her companion. “Of course,” she said. “You don’t know Larry. If they had all the Cedar boys, too, he would ride straight through them.”

X

ON THE TRAIL

Grant and Breckenridge sat together over their evening meal. Outside the frost was almost arctic, but there was wood in plenty round Fremont ranch, and the great stove diffused a stuffy heat. The two men had made the round of the small homesteads that were springing up, with difficulty, for the snow was too loose and powdery to bear a sleigh, and now they were content to lounge in the tranquil enjoyment of the rest and warmth that followed exposure to the stinging frost.

At last Breckenridge pushed his plate aside, and took out his pipe.

"You must have put a good many dollars into your ploughing, Larry, and the few I had have gone in the same way," he said. "You see, it's a long while until harvest comes round, and a good many unexpected things seem to happen in this country. To be quite straight, is there much probability of our getting any of those dollars back?"

Grant smiled. "I think there is, though I can't be sure. The legislature must do something for us sooner or later, while the fact that the cattle-men and the Sheriff have left us alone of late shows that they don't feel too secure. Still, there may be trouble. A good many hard cases have been coming in."

"The cattle-men would get them. It's dollars they're wanting, and the other men have a good many more than we have. By the way, shouldn't the man with the money you are waiting for turn up to-night?"

Grant nodded. A number of almost indigent men—small farmers ruined by frost in Dakota, and axe-men from Michigan with growing families—had settled on the land in his neighbourhood, and as every hand and voice might be wanted, levies had been made on the richer homesteaders, and subscribed to here and there in the cities, for the purpose of enabling them to continue the struggle.

"We want the dollars badly," he said. "The cattle-men have cut off our credit at the railroad stores, and there are two or three of the Englishmen who have very little left to eat at the hollow. You have seen what we have sent out from Fremont, and Muller has been feeding quite a few of the Dutchmen."

He stopped abruptly, and Breckenridge drew back his chair. "Hallo!" he said. "You heard it, Larry?"

Grant had heard the windows jar, and a sound that resembled a faint tap. "Yes," he said quietly. "I may have been mistaken, but it was quite like a rifle shot."

They were at the door in another moment, shivering as the bitter cold met them in the face; but there was now no sound from the prairie, which rolled away before them white and silent under the moonlight. Then, Breckenridge flung the door to, and crossed over to the rack where a Marlin rifle and two Winchesters hung. He pressed back the magazine slide of one of them, and smiled somewhat grimly at Grant.

"Well," he said, "we can only hope you're wrong. Where did you put the book I was reading?"

Grant, who told him, took out some accounts, and they lounged in big hide chairs beside the stove for at least half an hour, though it was significant that every now and then one of them would turn his head as though listening, and become suddenly intent upon his task again when he fancied his companion noticed him. At last Breckenridge laughed.

"It's all right, Larry. There—is—somebody coming. It will be the man with dollars, and I don't mind admitting that I'll be glad to see him."

Five minutes later the door opened and Muller came in. He looked round him inquiringly.

"Quilter is not come? I his horse in der stable have not seen," he said.

"No," said Grant sharply. "He would pass your place."

Muller nodded. "He come in und der supper take. Why is he not here? I, who ride by der hollow, one hour after him start make."

Breckenridge glanced at Grant, and both sat silent for a second or two. Then the former said, "I'm half afraid we'll have to do without those dollars, Mr. Muller. Shall I go round and roll the boys up, Larry?"

Grant only nodded, and, while Breckenridge, dragging on his fur coat, made for the stable, took down two of the rifles and handed one to Muller.

“So!” said the Teuton quietly. “We der trail pick up?”

In less than five minutes the two were riding across the prairie towards Muller’s homestead at the fastest pace attainable in the loose, dusty snow, while Breckenridge rode from shanty to shanty to call out the men of the little community which had grown up not far away. It was some time later when he and those who followed him came up with his comrade and Muller. The moon still hung in the western sky and showed the blue-grey smear where horse-hoofs had scattered the snow. It led straight towards a birch bluff across the whitened prairie, and Breckenridge stooped in his saddle and looked at it.

“Larry,” he said sharply, “there were two of them.”

“Yes,” said Grant. “Only one left Muller’s.”

Breckenridge asked nothing further, but it was not the first time that night he felt a shiver run through him. He fell behind, but he heard one of the rest answer a question Grant put to him.

“Yes,” he said. “The last man was riding a good deal harder than the other fellow.”

Then there was silence, save for the soft trampling of hoofs, and Breckenridge fancied the others were gazing expectantly towards the shadowy blurr of the bluff, which rose a trifle clearer now against the skyline. He felt, with instinctive shrinking, that their search would be rewarded there in the blackness beneath the trees. The pace grew faster. Men glanced at their neighbours now and then as well as ahead, and Breckenridge felt the silence grow oppressive as the bluff rose higher. The snow dulled the beat of hoofs, and the flitting figures that rode with him passed on almost as noiselessly as the long black shadows that followed them. His heart beat faster than usual when, as they reached the birches, Grant raised his hand.

“Ride wide and behind me,” he said. “We’re going to find one of them inside of five minutes.”

There was an occasional crackle as a rotten twig or branch snapped beneath the hoofs. Slender trees slid athwart the moonlight, closed on one another, and opened out, and still, though the snow was scanty and in places swept away, Grant and a big Michigan bushman rode straight on. Breckenridge, who was young, felt the tension grow almost unendurable. At last, when even the horses seemed to feel their masters’ uneasiness, the leader pulled up, and with a floundering of hoofs and jingle of bridles the line of shadowy figures came to a standstill.

“Get down, boys, and light the lantern. Quilter’s here,” he said.

Breckenridge dismounting, looped his bridle round a bough, and by and by stood peering over the shoulders of the clustering men in front of him. The moonlight shone in between the birches, and something dusky and rigid lay athwart it in the snow. One man was lighting a lantern, and though his hands were mittened he seemed singularly clumsy. At last, however, a pale light blinked out, and under it Breckenridge saw a white face and shadowy head, from which the fur cap had fallen.

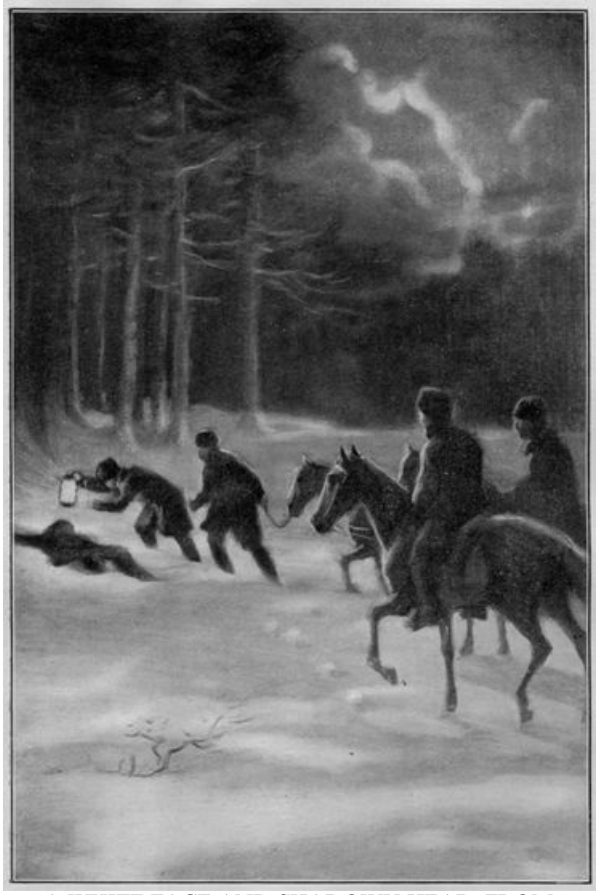
“Yes,” said somebody, with a suspicion of hoarseness, “that’s Quilter. It’s not going to be much use; but you had better go through his pockets, Larry!”

Grant knelt down, and his face also showed colourless in the lantern light as, with the help of another man, he gently moved the rigid form. Then, opening the big fur-coat he laid his hand on a brown smear on the deerskin jacket under it.

“One shot,” he said. “Couldn’t have been more than two or three yards off.”

“Get through,” said the bushman grimly. “The man who did it can’t have more than an hour’s start of us, any way, and from the trail he left his horse is played out.”

In a minute or two Grant stood up with a little shiver. “You have got to bring out a sledge for him somehow, Muller,” he said. “Boys, the man who shot him has left nothing, and the instructions from our other executives would be worth more to the cattle-men than a good many dollars.”



A WHITE FACE AND SHADOWY HEAD, FROM WHICH THE FUR CAP HAD FALLEN.—*Page 114.*

"Well," said the big bushman, "we're going to get that man if we have to pull down Cedar Range or Clavering's place before we do it. Here's his trail. That one was made by Quilter's horse."

It scarcely seemed appropriate, and the whole scene was singularly undramatic, and in a curious fashion almost unimpressive; but Breckenridge, who came of a reticent stock, understood. Unlike the Americans of the cities, these men were not addicted to improving the occasion, and only a slight hardening of their grim faces suggested what they felt. They were almost as immobile in the faint moonlight as that frozen one with the lantern flickering beside it in the snow. Yet Breckenridge long afterwards remembered them.

Two men went back with Muller and the rest swung themselves into the saddle, and reckless of the risk to beast and man brushed through the bluff. Dry twigs crackled beneath them, rotten bough and withered bush went down, and a murmur went up when they rode out into the snow again. It sounded more ominous to Breckenridge than any clamorous shout. Then, bridles were shaken and heels went home as somebody found the trail, and the line tailed out farther and farther as blood and weight began to tell. The men were riding so fiercely now, that a squadron of United States cavalry would scarcely have turned them from the trail. Breckenridge laughed harshly as he and Grant floundered down into a hollow, stirrup by stirrup and neck to neck.

"I should be very sorry for any of the cattle-boys we came upon to-night," he said.

Grant only nodded, and just then a shout went up from the head of the straggling line, and a man waved his hand.

"Heading for the river!" he said. "We'll find him in the timber. He can't cross the ice."

The line divided, and Grant and Breckenridge rode on with the smaller portion, while the rest swung wide to the right. In front of them the Cedar flowed through its birch-lined gully as yet but lightly bound with ice, and Breckenridge guessed that the men who had left them purposed cutting off the fugitive from the bridge. It was long before the first dim birches rose up against the sky, and the white wilderness was very still and the frost intense when they floundered into the gloom of the bluff at the hour that man's vitality sinks to its lowest. Every crackle of a brittle branch rang with horrible distinctness, and now and then a man turned in his saddle and glanced at his neighbour when from the shadowy hollow beneath them rose the sound of rending ice. The stream ran fast just there, and there had been but a few days' frost.

They rode at a venture, looking about them with strained intentness, for they had left the guiding trail behind them now. Suddenly a faint cry came out of the silence followed by a beat of hoofs that grew louder every second, until it seemed to swell into a roar. Either there was clearer ground in the bluff, or the rider took his chances blindly so long as he made haste.

The men spread out at a low command, and Breckenridge smiled mirthlessly as he remembered the restrained eagerness with which he had waited outside English covers when the quarry was a fox. He could feel his heart thumping furiously, and his mittened hands would tremble on the bridle. It seemed that the fugitive kept them waiting a horribly long while.

Then, there was a shout close by him, Grant's horse shot forward and he saw a shadowy object flash by amidst the trees. Hand and heel moved together, and the former grew steady again as he felt the spring of the beast under him and the bitter draught upon his cheek. His horse had rested, and the fugitive's was spent. Where he was going he scarcely noticed, save that it was down hill, for the birches seemed flying up to him, and the beast stumbled now and then. He was only sure that he was closing with the flying form in front of him.

The trees grew blurred together; he had to lean forward to evade the thrashing branches. His horse was blundering horribly, the slope grew steeper still, the ground beneath the dusty snow and fallen leaves was granite hard; but he was scarcely a length away, a few paces more would bring him level, and his right hand was stretched out for a grip of the stranger's bridle.

A hoarse shout came ringing after him, and Breckenridge fancied it was a warning. The river was close in front and only thinly frozen yet, but he drove his heels home again. If the fugitive could risk the passage of the ice, he could risk it, too. There was another sound that jarred across the hammering of the hoofs, a crash, and Breckenridge was alone, struggling with his horse. They reeled, smashing through withered bushes and striking slender trees, but at last he gained the mastery, and swung himself down from the saddle. Already several mounted men were clustered about something, while just before he joined them there was another crash, and a little thin smoke drifted among the trees. Then, he saw one of them snap a cartridge out of his rifle, and that a horse lay quivering at his feet. A man stood beside it, and Grant was speaking to him, but Breckenridge scarcely recognized his voice.

"We want everything you took from Quilter, the papers first," he said. "Light that lantern, Jake, and then the rest stand round. I want you to notice what he gives me."

The man, saying nothing, handed him a crumpled packet, and Grant, tearing it open, passed the cover to the rest.

"You know that writing?" he said.

There was a murmur of assent, and Grant took a paper from those in his hand, and gave it to a man who held it up in the blinking light of the lantern. "Now," he said, "we want to make sure the dollars he took from Quilter agree with it. Hand them over."

The prisoner took a wallet from his pocket and passed it across. "I guess there's no use in me objecting. You'll find them there," he said.

"Count them," said Grant to the other man. "Two of you look over his shoulder and tell me if he's right."

It took some little time, for the man passed the roll of bills to a comrade, who, after turning them over, replaced them in the wallet.

"Yes, that's right, boys; it's quite plain, even if we hadn't followed up his trail. Those dollars and documents were handed Quilter."

Grant touched Breckenridge. "Get up and ride," he said. "They'll send us six men from each of the two committees. We'll be waiting for them at Boston's when they get there. Now, there's just another thing. Look at the magazine of that fellow's rifle."

A man took up the rifle, and snapped out the cartridges into his hand. "Usual 44 Winchester. One of them gone," he said. "He wouldn't have started out after Quilter without his magazine full."

The man rubbed the fringe of his deerskin jacket upon the muzzle, and then held it up by the lantern where the rest could see the smear of the fouling upon it.

"I guess that's convincing, but we'll bring the rifle along," he said.

Grant nodded and turned to the prisoner as a man led up a horse. "Get up," he said. "You'll have a fair trial, but if you

have any defence to make you had better think it over. You'll walk back to Hanson's, Jake."

The prisoner mounted, and they slowly rode away into the darkness which, now the moon had sunk, preceded the coming day.

It was two days later when Breckenridge, who had ridden a long way in the meanwhile, rejoined them at a lonely ranch within a day's journey of the railroad. Twelve men, whose bronzed faces showed very intent and grave under the light of the big lamp, sat round the long bare room, and the prisoner at the foot of a table. Grant stood at the head of it, with a roll of dollar bills and a rifle in front of him.

"Now," he said, "you have heard the testimony. Have you anything to tell us?"

"Well," said the prisoner, "I guess it wouldn't be much use. Hadn't you better get through with it? I don't like a fuss."

Grant signed to the men, who silently filed out, and returned within a minute. "The thing's quite plain," said one of them. "He killed Quilter."

Grant turned to the prisoner. "There's nothing that would warrant our showing any mercy, but if you have anything to urge we'll listen now. It's your last opportunity. You were heading for one of the cattle-men's homesteads?"

The man smiled sardonically. "I'm not going to talk," he said. "I guess I can see your faces, and that's enough for me."

Grant stood up and signed to a man, who led the prisoner away. Then, he looked at the others questioningly, and a Michigan axe-man nodded.

"Only one thing," he said. "It has to be done."

There was an approving murmur, and Grant glanced along the row of stern faces. "Yes," he said, "the law will do nothing for us—the cattle-men have bought it up; but this work must be stopped. Well, I guess you like what lies before us as little as I do, but if it warns off the others—and there are more of his kind coming in—it's the most merciful thing."

Once more the low murmur ran through the silence of the room; Grant raised his hand and a man brought in the prisoner. He looked at the set faces, and made a little gesture of comprehension.

"I guess you needn't tell me," he said. "When is it to be?"

"To-morrow," said Grant, and it seemed to Breckenridge that his voice came from far away. "At the town—as soon as there is light enough to see by."

The prisoner turned without a word, and when he had gone the men, as if prompted by one impulse, hastened out of the room, leaving Grant and Breckenridge alone. The former sat very still at the head of the table, until Breckenridge laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Shake it off, Larry. You couldn't have done anything else," he said.

"No," said Grant, with a groan. "Still, I could have wished this duty had not been laid on me."

When they next stood side by side the early daylight was creeping across the little railroad town, and Breckenridge, whose young face was white, shivered with more than the bitter cold. He never wished to recall it, but the details of that scene would return to him—the square frame houses under the driving snow-cloud, the white waste they rose from, the grim, silent horsemen with the rifles across their saddles, and the intent faces beyond them in the close-packed street. He saw the prisoner standing rigidly erect in a wagon drawn up beside a towering telegraph-pole, and heard a voice reading hoarsely.

A man raised his hand, somebody lashed the horses, the wagon lurched away, a dusky object cut against the sky, and Breckenridge turned his eyes away. A sound that might have been a groan or murmur broke from the crowd and the momentary silence that followed it was rent by the crackle of riflery. After that, Breckenridge only recollected riding across the prairie amidst a group of silent men, and feeling very cold.

In the meanwhile the citizens were gazing at a board nailed to the telegraph-pole: "For murder and robbery. Take warning! Anyone offending in the same way will be treated similarly!"

XI

LARRY'S ACQUITTAL

A warm wind from the Pacific, which had swept down through the Rockies' passes, had mitigated the Arctic cold, and the snow lay no more than thinly sprinkled upon the prairie. Hetty Torrance and Miss Schuyler were riding up through the birch bluff from the bridge of the Cedar. It was dim among the trees, for dusk was closing in, the trail was rough and steep, and Hetty drew bridle at a turn of it.

"I quite fancied we would have been home before it was dark, and my father would be just savage if he knew we were out alone," she said. "Of course, he wouldn't have let us go if he had been at Cedar."

Flora Schuyler looked about her with a shiver. The wind that shook the birches had grown perceptibly colder: the gloom beneath them deepened rapidly, and there was a doleful wailing amidst the swinging boughs. Beyond the bluff the white wilderness, sinking into dimness now, ran back, waste and empty, to the horizon. Miss Schuyler was from the cities, and the loneliness of the prairie is most impressive when night is closing down.

"Then one could have wished he had been at home," she said.

Perhaps Hetty did not hear her plainly, for the branches thrashed above them just then. "Oh, that's quite right. Folks are not apt to worry much over the things they don't know about," she said.

"It was not your father I was sorry for," Flora Schuyler said sharply. "The sod is too hard for fast riding, and it will be 'most an hour yet before we get home. I wish we were not alone, Hetty."

Hetty sighed. "It was so convenient once!" she said. "Whenever I wanted to ride out I had only to send for Larry. It's quite different now."

"I have no doubt Mr. Clavering would have come," said Miss Schuyler.

"Oh, yes," Hetty agreed. "Still, I'm beginning to fancy you were right about that man. Like a good many more of them, he's quite nice at a distance; but there are men who should never let anyone get too close to them."

"You have had quite a few opportunities of observing him at a short distance lately."

Hetty laughed, but there was a trace of uneasiness in her voice. "I could wish my father didn't seem quite so fond of him. Oh—there's somebody coming!"

Instinctively she wheeled her horse into the deeper shadow of the birches and Miss Schuyler followed. There was no habitation within a league of them, and though the frost, which put a period to the homesteaders' activities, lessened the necessity for the cattle-barons' watchfulness, unpleasant results had once or twice attended a chance encounter between their partisans. It was also certain that somebody was coming, and Hetty felt her heart beat as she made out the tramp of three horses. The vultures the struggle had attracted had, she knew, much less consideration for women than the homesteaders or cattle-boys.

"Hadn't we better ride on?" asked Miss Schuyler.

"No," said Hetty; "they would most certainly see us out on the prairie. Back your horse quite close to mine. If we keep quiet they might pass us here."

Her voice betrayed what she was feeling, and Flora Schuyler felt unpleasantly apprehensive as she urged her horse farther into the gloom. The trampling came nearer, and by and by a man's voice reached her.

"Hadn't you better pull up and get down?" it said. "I'm not much use at tracking, but somebody has been along here a little while ago. You see, there are only three of us!"

"They're homesteaders, and they've found our trail," exclaimed Hetty, with a little gasp of dismay.

There was scarcely an opening one could ride through between the birches behind them, and it was evident that the horsemen could scarcely fail to see them the moment they left their shelter. One of them had already dismounted, and was apparently stooping beside the prints the horse-hoofs had left where a little snow had sifted down upon the trail. Hetty heard his laugh, and it brought her a great relief.

“I don’t think you need worry, Breckenridge. There were only two of them.”

Hetty wheeled her horse. “It’s Larry,” she said.

A minute later he saw them, and, pulling up, took off his hat; but Flora Schuyler noticed that he ventured on no more than this.

“It is late for you to be out alone. You are riding home?” he said.

“Of course!” said Hetty with, Miss Schuyler fancied, a chilliness which contrasted curiously with the relief she had shown a minute or two earlier.

“Well,” said Grant quietly, “I’m afraid you will have to put up with our company. There are one or two men I have no great opinion of somewhere about this prairie. This is Mr. Breckenridge, and as the trail is rough and narrow, he will follow with Miss Schuyler. I presume you don’t mind riding with him, although, like the rest of us, he is under the displeasure of your friends the cattle-barons?”

Miss Schuyler looked at him steadily. “I don’t know enough of this trouble to make sure who is right,” she said. “But I should never be prejudiced against any American who was trying to do what he felt was the work meant for him.”

“Well,” said Grant, with a little laugh, “Breckenridge will feel sorry that he’s an Englishman.”

Miss Schuyler turned to the young man graciously, and the dim light showed there was a twinkle in her eyes.

“That,” she said, “is the next best thing. Since you are with Mr. Grant you no doubt came out to this country because you thought we needed reforming, Mr. Breckenridge?”

The lad laughed as they rode on up the trail with Grant and Hetty in front of them, and Muller following.

“No,” he said. “To be frank, I came out because my friends in the old one seemed to fancy the same thing of me. When they have no great use for a young man yonder, they generally send him to America. In fact, they send some of them quite a nice cheque quarterly so long as they stay there. You see, we are like the hedgehogs, or your porcupines, if you grow them here, Miss Schuyler.”

Flora Schuyler smiled. “You are young, or you wouldn’t empty the magazine all at once in answer to a single shot.”

“Well,” said Breckenridge, “so are you. It is getting dark, but I have a notion that you are something else too. The fact I mentioned explains the liberty.”

Flora shook her head. “The dusk is kind. Any way, I know I am years older than you. There are no little girls in this country like the ones you have been accustomed to.”

“Now,” said Breckenridge, “my sisters and cousins are, I firmly believe, a good deal nicer than those belonging to most other men; but, you see, I have quite a lot of them, and any one so favoured loses a good many illusions.”

In the meantime Hetty, who, when she fancied he would not observe it, glanced at him now and then, rode silently beside Grant until he turned to her.

“I have a good deal to thank you for, Hetty, and—for you know I was never clever at saying the right thing—I don’t quite know how to begin. Still, in the old times we understood just what each other meant so well that talking wasn’t necessary. You know I’m grateful for my liberty and would sooner take it from you than anybody else, don’t you?”

Hetty laid a restraint upon herself, for there was a thrill in the man’s voice, which awakened a response within her. “Wouldn’t it be better to forget those days?” she said. “It is very different now.”

“It isn’t easy,” said Grant, checking a sigh. “I ’most fancied they had come back the night you told me how to get away.”

Hetty’s horse plunged as she tightened its bridle in a fashion there was no apparent necessity for. “That,” she said chillingly, “was quite foolish of you, and it isn’t kind to remind folks of the things they had better not have done. Now, you told us the prairie wasn’t safe because of some of your friends.”

“No,” said Grant drily, “I don’t think I did. I told you there were some men around I would sooner you didn’t fall in with.”

“Then they must be your partisans. There isn’t a cattle-boy in this country who would be uncivil to a woman.”

“I wish I was quite sure. Still, there are men coming in who don’t care who is right, and only want to stand in with the

men who will give them the most dollars or let them take what they can. We have none to give away."

"Larry," the girl said hotly, "do you mean that we would be glad to pay them?"

"No. But they will most of them quite naturally go over to you, which will make it harder for us to get rid of them. We have no use for men of that kind in this country."

"No?" said the girl scornfully. "Well, I fancied they would have come in quite handy—there was a thing you did."

"You heard of that?"

"Yes," very coldly. "It was a horrible thing."

Grant's voice changed to a curious low tone. "Did you ever see me hurt anything when I could help it in the old days, Hetty?"

"No. One has to be honest; I remember how you once hurt your hand taking a jack-rabbit out of a trap."

"And how you bound it up?"

"Well," said Hetty, "I don't know, after the work you have done with it, that I should care to do that now."

"There are affairs you should never hear of and I don't care to talk about with you," Grant said, very quietly, "but since you have mentioned this one you must listen to me. Just as it is one's duty to give no needless pain to anything, so there is an obligation on him to stop any other man who would do it. Is it wrong to kill a grizzly or a rattlesnake, or merciful to leave them with their meanness to destroy whatever they want? Now, if you had known a quiet American who did a tolerably dangerous thing because he fancied it was right, and found him shot in the back, and the trail of the man who crept up behind him and killed him for a few dollars, would you have let that man go?"

Hetty ignored the question. "The man was your friend."

"Well," said Grant slowly, "he had done a good deal for me, but that would not have counted for very much with any one when we made our decision."

"No?" And Hetty glanced at him with a little astonishment.

Grant shook his head. "No," he said. "We had to do the square thing—that and nothing more; but if we had let that man go, he would, when the chance was given him, have done what he did again. Well, it was—horrible; but there was no law that would do the work for us in this country then."

Hetty shivered, but had there been light enough Grant would have seen the relief in her face, and as it was his pulse responded to the little quiver in her voice. Why it was she did not know, but the belief in him which she had once cherished suddenly returned to her. In the old days the man she had never thought of as a lover could, at least, do no wrong.

"I understand." Her voice was very gentle. "There must be a good deal of meanness in me, or I should have known you only did it because you are a white man, and felt you had to. Oh, of course, I know—only it's so much easier to go round another way so you can't see what you don't want to. Larry, I'm sorry."

Grant's voice quivered. "The only thing you ever do wrong, Hetty, is to forget to think now and then; and by and by you will find somebody who is good enough to think for you."

The girl smiled. "He would have to be very patient, and the trouble is that if he was clever enough to do the thinking he wouldn't have the least belief in me. You are the only man, Larry, who could see people's meannesses and still have faith in them."

"I am a blunderer who has taken up a contract that's too big for him," Grant said gravely. "I have never told anyone else, Hetty, but there are times now and then when, knowing the kind of man I am, I get 'most sick with fear. All the poor men in this district are looking to me, and, though I lie awake at night, I can't see how I'm going to help them when one trace of passion would let loose anarchy. It's only right they're wanting, that is, most of the Dutchmen and the Americans—but there's the mad red rabble behind them, and the bitter rage of hard men who have been trampled on, to hold in. It's a crushing weight we who hold the reins have got to carry. Still, we were made only plain farmer men, and I guess we're not going to be saddled with more than we can bear."

He had spoken solemnly from the depths of his nature, and all that was good in the girl responded.

“Larry,” she said softly, “while you feel just that I think you can’t go wrong. It is what is right we are both wanting, and —though I don’t know how—I feel we will get it by and by, and then it will be the best thing for homestead-boys and cattle-barons. When that time comes we will be glad there were white men who took up their load and worried through, and when this trouble’s worked out and over there will be nothing to stop us being good friends again.”

“Is that quite out of the question now?”

“Yes,” said Hetty simply. “I am sorry, but, Larry, can’t you understand? You are leading the homestead-boys, and my father the cattle-barons. First of all I’ve got to be a dutiful daughter.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “Well, it can’t last for ever, and we can only do the best we can. Other folks had the same trouble when the boys in Sumter fired the starting gun—North and South at each other’s throats, and both Americans!”

Hetty decided that she had gone sufficiently far, and turned in her saddle. “What is the Englishman telling you, Flo?” she asked.

Miss Schuyler laughed. “He was almost admitting that the girls in this country are as pretty as those they raise in the one he came from.”

“Well,” said Breckenridge, “if it was daylight I’d be sure.”

Grant fancied that it was not without a purpose his companion checked her horse to let the others come up, and, though it cost him an effort, acquiesced. His laugh was almost as ready as that of the rest as they rode on four abreast, until at last the lights of Cedar Range blinked beside the bluff. Then, they grew suddenly silent again as Muller, who it seemed remembered that he had been taught by the *franc tireurs*, rode past them with his rifle across his saddle. They pulled up when his figure cut blackly against the sky on the crest of a rise, and Hetty’s laugh was scarcely light-hearted.

“You have been very good, and I am sorry I can’t ask you to come in,” she said. “Still, I don’t know that it’s all our fault; we are under martial law just now.”

Grant took off his hat and wheeled his horse, and when the girls rode forward sat rigid and motionless, watching them until he saw the ray from the open door of Cedar Range. Then, Muller trotted up, and with a little sigh he turned homewards across the prairie.

About the same time Richard Clavering lay smoking, in a big chair in the room where he kept his business books and papers. He wore, among other somewhat unusual things, a velvet jacket, very fine linen, and on one of his long, slim fingers a ring of curious Eastern workmanship. Clavering was a man of somewhat expensive tastes, and his occasional visits to the cities had cost him a good deal, which was partly why an accountant, famous for his knowledge of ranching property, now sat busy at a table. He was a shrewd, direct American, and had already spent several days endeavouring to ascertain the state of Clavering’s finances.

“Nearly through?” the rancher asked, with a languidness which the accountant fancied was assumed.

“I can give you a notion of how you stand, right now,” he answered. “You want me to be quite candid?”

“Oh, yes,” said Clavering, with a smile of indifference. “I’m in a tight place, Hopkins?”

“I guess you are—any way, if you go on as you’re doing. You see what I consider it prudent to write off the value of your property?”

Clavering examined the paper handed him with visible astonishment. “Why have you whittled so much off the face value?”

“Just because you’re going to have that much taken away from you by and by.”

Clavering’s laugh was quietly scornful. “By the homestead-boys?”

“By the legislature of this State. The law is against you holding what you’re doing now.”

“We make what law there is out here.”

“Well,” said Hopkins, coolly, “I guess you’re not going to do it long. You know the maxim about fooling the people. It can’t be done.”

“Aren’t you talking like one of those German socialists?”

“On the contrary. I quite fancy I’m talking like a business man. Now, you want to realize on those cattle before the winter

takes the flesh off them, and extinguish the bank loan with what you get for them."

Clavering's face darkened. "That would strip the place, and I'd have to borrow to stock again."

"You'd have to run a light stock for a year or two."

"It wouldn't suit me to do anything that would proclaim my poverty just now," said Clavering.

"Then you'll have to do it by and by. The interest on the bond is crippling you."

"Well." Clavering lighted another cigar. "I told you to be straight. Go right on. Tell me just what you would do if the place was in your hands."

"Sell out those cattle and take the big loan up. Clear off the imported horses and pedigree brood mares. You have been losing more dollars than many a small rancher makes over them the last few years."

"I like good horses round the place," Clavering said languidly.

"The trouble," said Hopkins, "is that you can't afford to have them. Then, I would cut down my personal expenses by at least two-thirds. The ranch can't stand them. Do you know what you have been spending in the cities?"

"No. I gave you a bundle of bills so you could find it out."

Hopkins' smile was almost contemptuous. "I guess you had better burn them when I am through. I'll mention one or two items. One hundred dollars for flowers; one thousand in several bills from Chicago jewellers! The articles would count as an asset. Have you got them?"

"I haven't," said Clavering. "They were for a lady."

"Well," said Hopkins, "you know best; but one would have fancied there was more than one of them from the bills. Here's another somewhat curious item: hats—I guess they came from Paris—and millinery, two hundred dollars' worth of them!"

A little angry light crept into Clavering's eyes. "If I hadn't been so abominably careless you wouldn't have seen those bills. I meant to put them down as miscellaneous and destroy the papers. Well, I've done with that extravagance, any way, and it's to hear the truth I'm paying you quite a big fee. If I go on just as I'm doing, how long would you give me?"

"Two years. Then the bank will put the screw on you. The legislature may pull you up earlier, but I can tell you more when I've squared up to-morrow."

There was a curious look in Clavering's dark eyes, but he laughed again.

"I guess that's about enough. But I'll leave you to it now," he said. "It's quite likely I'll have got out of the difficulty before one of those years is over."

He went out, and a few minutes later stopped as he passed the one big mirror in the ranch, and surveyed himself critically for a moment with a dispassionate interest that was removed from vanity. Then he nodded as if contented.

"With Torrance to back me it might be done," he said. "Liberty is sweet, but I don't know that it's worth at least fifty thousand dollars!"

XII

THE SPROUTING OF THE SEED

Late in the afternoon of a bitter day Grant drove into sight of the last of the homesteaders' dwellings that lay within his round. It rose, a shapeless mound of white, from the wilderness that rolled away in billowy rises, shining under the sunlight that had no warmth in it. The snow that lay deep about its sod walls and upon the birch-branch roof hid its squalidness, and covered the pile of refuse and empty cans, but Grant knew what he would find within it, and when he pulled up his team his face grew anxious. It was graver than it had been a year ago, for Larry Grant had lost a good deal of his hopefulness since he heard those footsteps at the depot.

The iron winter, that was but lightly felt in the homes of the cattle-barons, had borne hardly on the men huddled in sod-hovel, and birch-log shanty, swept by the winds of heaven at fifty degrees below. They had no thick furs to shelter them, and many had very little food, while on those who came from the cities the cold of the Northwest set its mark, numbing the half-fed body and unhinging the mind. The lean farmers from the Dakotas who had fought with adverse seasons, and the sinewy axe-men from Michigan clearings, bore it with grim patience, but there were here and there a few who failed to stand the strain, and, listening to the outcasts from the East, let passion drive out fortitude and dreamed of anarchy. They had come in with a pitiful handful of dollars to build new homes and farm, but the rich men, and in some cases their own supineness, had been too strong for them; and while they waited their scanty capital melted away. Now, with most of them it had almost gone, and they were left without the means to commence the fight in spring.

Breckenridge saw the shadow in Grant's face, and touched his arm. "I'll go in and give the man his dollars, Larry," he said. "You have had about as much worry as is good for you to-day."

Grant shook his head. "I've no use for shutting my eyes so I can't see a thing when I know it's there."

He stepped out of the sleigh and went into the shanty. The place had one room, and, though a stove stood in the midst of it and the snow that kept some of the frost out was piled to the windows, it was dank and chill. Only a little dim light crept in, and it was a moment or two before Grant saw the man who sat idle by the stove with a clotted bandage round his leg. He was gaunt, and clad in jean patched with flour-bags, and his face showed haggard under his bronze. Behind him on a rude birch-branch couch covered with prairie hay a woman lay apparently asleep beneath a tattered fur coat.

"What's the matter with her?" Grant asked.

"I don't quite know. She got sick 'most two weeks ago, and talks of a pain that only leaves her when she's sleeping. One of the boys drove in to the railroad for the doctor, but he's busy down there. Any way, it would have taken him 'most a week to get here and back, and I guess he knew I hadn't the dollars to pay him with."

Grant recognized the hopeless evenness of the tone, but Breckenridge, who was younger, did not.

"But you can't let her lie here without help of any kind," he said.

"Well," said the man slowly, "what else can I do?"

Breckenridge could not tell him, and appealed to his comrade. "We have got to take this up, Larry. She looks ill."

Grant nodded. "I have friends down yonder who will send that doctor out," he said. "Here are your dollars from the fund. Ten of them this time."

The man handed him one of the bills back. "If you want me to take more than five you'll have to show your book," he said. "I've been finding out how you work these affairs, Larry."

Grant only laughed, but Breckenridge turned to the speaker with an assumption of severity that was almost ludicrous in his young face.

"Now, don't you make yourself a consumed ass," he said. "You want those dollars considerably more than we do, and we've got quite a few of them doing nothing in the bank. That is, Larry has."

Grant's eyes twinkled. "It's no use, Breckenridge. I know the kind of man he is. I'm going to send Miss Muller here, and we'll come round and pound the foolishness out of you if you try to send back anything she brings with her. This place is as cold as an ice-store. What's the matter with your stove?"

“The stove’s all right,” and the man pointed to his leg. “The trouble is that I’ve very little wood. Axe slipped the last time I went chopping in the bluff, and the frost got into the cut. I couldn’t make three miles on one leg, and pack a load of billets on my back.”

“But you’d freeze when those ran out, and they couldn’t last you two days,” said Breckenridge, glancing at the little pile of fuel.

“Yes,” said the man grimly. “I guess I would, unless one of the boys came along.”

“Anything wrong with your oxen?” asked Grant.

“Well,” said the man drily, “we’ve been living for ’most two months on one of them. I salted a piece of him; the rest’s frozen. I had to sell the other to a Dutchman. Since the cattle-boys stopped me ploughing I hadn’t much use for them, any way.”

“Then,” said Breckenridge, “why the devil did you bring a woman out to this forsaken country?”

Perhaps the man understood what prompted the question, for he did not resent it. “Where was I to take her to? I’m a farmer without dollars, and I had to go somewhere when I’d lost three wheat crops in Dakota. Somebody told me you had room for small farmers, and when I heard the land was to be opened for homesteading, I sold out everything, and came on here to begin again. Never saw a richer soil, and there’s only one thing wrong with the country.”

“The men in it?” asked Breckenridge.

The farmer nodded, and a little glow crept into his eyes. “Yes,” he said fiercely. “The cattle-barons—and there’ll be no room for anyone until we’ve done away with them. We’ve no patience for more fooling. It has got to be done.”

“That’s the executive’s business,” said Grant.

The man rose, with a little quiver of his lean frame and a big hand clenched. “No,” he said, “it’s our business, and the business of every honest citizen. If you don’t tackle it right off, other men will put the contract through.”

“You’ll have to talk plainer,” said Grant.

“Well,” said the farmer, “that’s easy. It was you and some of the others brought us in, and now we’re here we’re starving. There’s land to feed a host of us, and every citizen is entitled to enough to make a living on. But while the cattle-men keep hold, how’s he going to get it? Oh, yes, we’ve cut their fences and broken a few acres here and there; but how are we going to put through our ploughing when every man who drives a furrow has to whip up six of his neighbours to keep the cow-boys off him? Well, there’s just one answer. We’re going to pull those men down.”

“You’re going to sit tight until your leaders tell you to move,” Grant informed him.

The man laughed harshly. “No,” he said. “Unless they keep ahead of us we’re going to trail them along. You’re a straight man, Larry, but you don’t see all you’ve done. You set this thing going, and now you can’t step out if it goes too far for you. No, sir, you’ve got to keep the pace and come along, and it’s going to be quite lively now some of the Chicago anarchy boys are chipping in.”

Grant’s face was very stern. “When they’re wanted, your leaders will be there,” he said. “They’ve got hold, and they’ll keep it, if they have to whip the sense into some of you. Now give me that axe of yours, and we’ll get some wood. I don’t want to hear any more wild talking.”

He went out, taking Breckenridge with him, and an hour later returned with a sleigh-load of birch branches, which he flung down before the shanty. Then, he turned the team towards Fremont ranch, and his face was grave as he stared over the horses’ heads at the smear of trail that wound away, a blue-grey riband, before the gliding sleigh.

“I wonder if that fellow meant to give us a hint,” said Breckenridge.

Grant nodded. “I think he did—and he was right about the rest. Two years ago I was a prosperous rancher, proud of the prairie I belonged to, and without a care; but I could see what this country was meant to be, and when the others started talking about the homestead movement I did my share. Folks seemed keen to listen; we got letters from everywhere, and we told the men who wrote them just what the land could do. It was sowing blindfold, and now the crop’s above the sod it ’most frightens me. No man can tell what it will grow to be before it’s ready for the binder, and while we’ve got the wheat we’ve got the weeds as well.”

“Wasn’t it always like that? At least, it seems so from reading a little history. I don’t know that I envy you, Larry. In the

tongue of this country, it's a hard row you have to hoe. Of course, there are folks who would consider they had done enough in planting it."

"Yes," Grant agreed, "we have quite a few of them over here; but, if more than we've planted has come up, I'm going right through."

Breckenridge said nothing further, and there was silence until the lights of Fremont rose out of the snowy wilderness. When they reached it they found a weary man lying in a big chair; he pointed to the litter of plates on the table as he handed Grant a letter.

"I haven't eaten since sun up, and drove most of sixty miles, so I didn't wait," he said. "Our executive boss, who told me to lose no time, seemed kind of worried about something."

Grant opened the letter, which was terse. "Look out," he read. "We had to put the screw on a crazy Pole who has been making wild speeches here, and as he lit out I have a notion he means to see what he can do with the discontented in your district. We couldn't have him raising trouble round this place, any way. It's taking us both hands to hold the boys in already."

"Bad news?" said Breckenridge sympathetically.

"Yes," Grant said wearily. "Get your supper and sleep when you can. You'll be driving from sun up until after it's dark to-morrow."

They ate almost in silence, but, though the messenger and Breckenridge retired shortly after the meal, Grant sat writing until late in the night. Then, he stretched his arms wearily above his head, and his face showed worn and almost haggard in the flickering lamplight.

"It has put Hetty further from me than ever, and cost me the goodwill of every friend I had; while the five thousand dollars I've lost as well don't count for very much after that," he said.

Early next morning Breckenridge and the messenger drove away, and rather more than a week later Fräulein Muller, whom the former had taken to attend on the homesteader's wife, arrived one night at Fremont ranch. She came in, red-cheeked, unconcerned, and shapeless, in Muller's fur coat, and quietly brushed the dusty snow from her dress before she sat down as far as possible from the stove.

"I a message from Mrs. Harper bring," she said. "Last night two men to Harper's house have come, and one now and then will to the other talk in our tongue. He is one, I think, who will destroy everything. Then they talk with Harper long in the stable, and to-day Harper with his rifle rides away. Mrs. Harper, who has fears for her husband, would have you know that to-night, or to-morrow he will go with other men to the Cedar Ranch."

Grant was on his feet in a moment, and nodded to Breckenridge, who rose almost as quickly and glanced at him as he moved towards the door.

"Yes," he said, "there's some tough hoeing to be done now. You'll drive Miss Muller back to Harper's, and then turn out the boys. They're to come on to Cedar as fast as they can."

"And you?" said Breckenridge quietly.

"I'm going there now."

"You know the cattle-men would do almost anything to get their hands on you."

"Oh, yes," Grant said wearily. "Aren't you wasting time?"

Breckenridge was outside the next moment, but before he had the sleigh ready Grant lead a saddled horse out of the stable, and vanished at a gallop down the beaten trail. It rang dully beneath the hoofs, but the frost that had turned its surface dusty lessened the chance of stumbling, and it was not until the first league had been left behind and he turned at the forking beneath a big birch bluff that he tightened his grip on the bridle. There it was different, for the trail no longer led wide and trampled hard across the level prairie, but wound, an almost invisible riband, through tortuous hollow and over swelling rise, so narrow that in places the hoofs broke with a sharp crackling through the frozen crust of snow. That, Larry knew, might, by crippling the beast he rode, stop him then and there, and he pushed on warily, dazzled at times by the light of the sinking moon which the glistening white plain flung back into his eyes.

It was bitter cold, and utterly still for the birds had gone south long ago, and there was no beast that ventured from his

lair to face the frost that night. Dulled as the trample of hoofs was, it rang about him stridently, and now and then he could hear it roll repeated along the slope of a rise. The hand upon the bridle had lost all sense of feeling, his moccasined feet tingled painfully, and a white fringe crackled under his hand when, warned by the nipping of his ears, he drew the big fur cap down further over them. It is not difficult to lose the use of one's members for life by incautiously exposing them to the cold of the prairie, while a frost that may be borne by the man covered to the chin with great sleigh robes, is not infrequently insupportable to the one on horseback.

Grant, however, took precautions, as it were mechanically, for his mind was too busy to feel in its full keenness the sting of the frost, and while his eyes were fixed on the blur of the trail his thoughts were far away, and it was by an almost unconscious effort he restrained the impatient horse. Because speed was essential, he dare risk no undue haste. He was not the only rider out on the waste that night, and the shiver that went through him was not due to the cold as he pictured the other horsemen pressing on towards Cedar Ranch. Of the native-born he had little fear, and he fancied but few of them would be there. There was even less to dread from any of English birth, but he feared the insensate alien, and still more the human vultures that had gathered about the scene of strife. They had neither race, nor creed, nor aspirations, but only an unhallowed lust for the fruits of rapine.

He could also picture Hetty, sitting slight and dark-eyed at the piano, as he had often seen her, and Torrance listening with a curious softening of his lean face to the voice that had long ago wiled Larry's heart away from him. That led him back to the days when, loose-tressed and flushed in face, Hetty had ridden beside him in the track of the flying coyote, and he had seen her eyes glisten at his praise. There were other times when, sitting far apart from any of their kind, with the horses tethered beside them in the shadow of a bluff, she had told him of her hopes and ambitions, but half-formed then, and to silence his doubts sung him some simple song. Larry had travelled through Europe, to look about him, as he naïvely said, but it was what reminded him of that voice he had found most pleasure in when he listened to famous sopranos and great cathedral choirs.

Still, he had expected little, realizing, as he had early done, that Hetty was not for him. It was enough to be with her when she had any need of him and to dream of her when absent, while it was only when he heard she had found her hopes were vain that he clutched at the very faint but alluring possibility that now her heart might turn to him. Then, had come the summons of duty, and when he had to choose which side he would take, Larry, knowing what it would cost him, had with the simple loyalty which had bound him as Hetty's servant without hope of reward, decided on what he felt was right. He was merely one of the many quiet, steadfast men whom the ostentatious sometimes mistake for fools, until the nation they form the backbone of rises to grapple with disaster or emergency. They are not confined to any one country; for his comrade, Muller, the placid, unemphatic Teuton, had been at Worth and Sedan.

Though none of these memories delayed him a second, he brushed them from him when the moon dipped. Darkness swooped down on the prairie, and it is the darkness that suits rapine best; now, that he could see the trail no longer, he shook the bridle, and the pace grew faster. The powdery snow whirled behind him, the long, dim levels flitted past, until at last, with heart thumping, he rode up a rise from whose crest he could see Cedar Range. A great weight lifted from him—the row of windows were blinking beside the dusky bluff! But even as he checked the horse the ringing of a rifle came portentously out of the stillness. With a gasp he drove in his heels and swept at a furious gallop down the slope.

XIII

UNDER FIRE

It was getting late and Torrance evidently becoming impatient, when Clavering, who had ignored the latter fact as long as he considered it advisable, glanced at Hetty with a smile. He stood by the piano in the big hall at Cedar Range, and she sat on the music-stool turning over one of the new songs he had brought her from Chicago.

"I am afraid I will have to go," he said. "Your father is not fond of waiting."

Though Hetty was not looking at him directly, she saw his face, which expressed reluctance still more plainly than his voice did; but just then Torrance turned to them.

"Aren't you through with those songs yet, Clavering?" he said.

"I'm afraid I have made Miss Torrance tired," said Clavering. "Still, we have music enough left us for another hour or two."

"Then why can't you stay on over to-morrow and get a whole night at it? I want you just now."

Clavering glanced at Hetty, and, though she made no sign, fancied that she was not quite pleased with her father.

"Am I to tell him I will?" he asked.

Hetty understood what prompted him, but she would not commit herself. "You will do what suits you," she said. "When my father asks any one to Cedar I really don't often make myself unpleasant to him."

Clavering's eyes twinkled as he walked towards the older man, while Hetty crossed the room to where Miss Schuyler sat. Both apparently became absorbed in the books Clavering had brought, but they could hear the conversation of the men, and it became evident later that one of them listened. Torrance had questions to ask, and Clavering answered them.

"Well," he said, "I had a talk with Purbeck which cost us fifty dollars. His notion was that the Bureau hadn't a great deal to go upon if they meant to do anything further about dispossessing us. In fact, he quite seemed to think that as the legislature had a good many other worries just now, it would suit them to let us slide. He couldn't recommend anything better than getting our friends in the lobbies to keep the screw on them until the election."

Torrance looked thoughtful. "That means holding out for another six months, any way. Did you hear anything at the settlement?"

"Yes. Fleming wouldn't sell the homestead-boys anything after they broke in his store. Steele's our man, and it was Carter they got their provisions from. Now, Carter had given Jackson a bond for two thousand dollars when he first came in, and as he hadn't made his payments lately, and we have our thumb on Jackson, the Sheriff has closed down on his store. He'll be glad to light out with the clothes he stands in when we're through with him."

Torrance nodded grim approval. "Larry wouldn't sit tight."

"No," said Clavering. "He wired right through to Chicago for most of a carload of flour and eatables, but that car got billed wrong somehow, and now they're looking for her up and down the side-tracks of the Pacific slope. Larry's men will be getting savage. It is not nice to be hungry when there's forty degrees of frost."

Torrance laughed softly. "You have fixed the thing just as I would."

Then his daughter stood up with a little flush in her face. "You could not have meant that, father?" she said.

"Well," said Torrance, drily, "I quite think I did, but there's a good deal you can't get the hang of, Hetty—and it's getting very late."

He looked at his daughter steadily, and Flora Schuyler looked at all of them, and remembered the picture—Torrance sitting lean and sardonic with the lamplight on his face, Clavering watching the girl with a curious little smile, and Hetty standing very slim and straight, with something in the poise of her shapely head that had its meaning to Miss Schuyler. Then with a "Good-night" to Torrance, and a half-ironical bend of the head to Clavering, she turned to her companion, and they went out together before he could open the door for them.

Five minutes later Hetty tapped at Miss Schuyler's door. The pink tinge still showed in her cheeks, and her eyes had a suspicious brightness in them.

"Flo," she said, "you'll go back to New York right off. I'm sorry I brought you here. This place isn't fit for you."

"I am quite willing, so long as you are coming too."

"I can't. Isn't that plain? This thing is getting horrible—but I have to see it through. It was Clavering fixed it, any way."

"Put it away until to-morrow," Flora Schuyler advised. "It will be easier to see whether you have any cause to be angry then."

Hetty turned towards her with a flash in her eyes. "I know just what you mean, and it would be nicer just to look as if I never felt anything, as some of those English folks you were fond of did; but I can't. I wasn't made that way. Still, I'm not going to apologize for my father. He is Torrance of Cedar, and I'm standing in with him—but if I were a man I'd go down and whip Clavering. I could almost have shaken him when he wanted to stay here and tried to make me ask him."

"Well," said Flora Schuyler, quietly, "I am going to stay with you; but I don't quite see what Clavering has done."

"No?" said Hetty. "Aren't you just a little stupid, Flo? Now, he has made me ashamed—horribly—and I was proud of the men we had in this country. He's starving the women and the little children; there are quite a few of them lying in freezing shanties and sod-huts out there in the snow. It's just awful to be hungry with the temperature at fifty below."

Miss Schuyler shivered. It was very warm and cosy sitting there, behind double casements, beside a glowing stove; but there had been times when, wrapped in costly furs and great sleigh-robes and generously fed, she had felt her flesh shrink from the cold of the prairie.

"But they have Mr. Grant to help them," she said.

Even in her agitation Hetty was struck by something which suggested unquestioning faith in her companion's tone.

"You believe he could do something," she said.

"Of course! You know him better than I do, Hetty."

"Well," said Hetty, "though he has made me vexed with him, I am proud of Larry; and there's just one thing he can't do. That is, to see women and children hungry while he has a dollar to buy them food with. Oh, I know who was going to pay for the provisions that came from Chicago that Clavering got the railroad men to send the wrong way, and if Larry had only been with us he would have been splendid. As it is, if he feeds them in spite of Clavering, I could 'most forgive him everything."

"Are you quite sure that you have a great deal to forgive?"

Hetty, instead of resenting the question, stretched out her hand appealingly. "Don't be clever, Flo. Come here quite close, and be nice to me. This thing is worrying me horribly; and I'm ashamed of myself and—of everybody. Oh, I know I'm a failure. I couldn't sing to please folks and I sent Jake Cheyne away, while now, when the trouble's come, I'm too mean even to stand behind my father as I meant to do. Flo, you'll stay with me. I want you."

Miss Schuyler, who had not seen Hetty in this mood before, petted her, though she said very little, for she felt that the somewhat unusual abasement might, on the whole, be beneficial to her companion. So there was silence in the room, broken only by the snapping of the stove and the faint moaning of the bitter wind about the lonely building, while Miss Schuyler sat somewhat uncomfortably on the arm of Hetty's chair with the little dusky head pressed against her shoulder. Hetty could not see her face or its gravity might have astonished her. Miss Schuyler had not spoken quite the truth when, though she had only met him three times, she admitted that Hetty knew Larry Grant better than she did. In various places and different guises Flora Schuyler had seen the type of manhood he stood for, but had never felt the same curious stirring of sympathy this grave, brown-faced man had aroused in her.

A hound bayed savagely, and Hetty lifted her head. "Strangers!" she said. "Bowie knows all the cattle-boys. Who can be coming at this hour?"

The question was not unwarranted, for it was close on midnight, but Flora Schuyler did not answer. She could hear nothing but the moan of the wind, the ranch was very still, until once more there came an angry growl. Then, out of the icy darkness followed the sound of running feet, a hoarse cry, and a loud pounding at the outer door.

Hetty stood up, trembling and white in the face, but very straight. "Don't be frightened, Flo," she said. "We'll whip them

back to the place they came from."

"Who is it?" asked Miss Schuyler.

Again the building rang to the blows upon the outer door; but Hetty's voice was even, and a little contemptuous.

"The rustlers!" she said.

There was a trampling below, and a corridor beneath the girls vibrated with the footsteps of hurrying men, while Torrance's voice rose faintly through the din; a very unpleasant silence, until somebody rapped upon the door. Flora Schuyler felt her heart throbbing painfully, and gasped when Torrance looked in. His lean face was very stern.

"Put the lamp out, and sit well away from the window," he said.

"No," said Hetty in a voice Miss Schuyler had not heard before; "we are coming down."

Torrance considered for a second, and then smiled significantly as he glanced at his daughter's face. "Well, you would be 'most as safe down there—and I guess it was born in you," he said.

The girls followed him down the cedar stairway and into the hall. A lamp burning very low stood on a table in one corner, but the big room was dim and shadowy, and the girls could scarcely see the five or six men standing near, not in front of, one open window. Framed by its log casing the white prairie faded into the dimness under a smear of indigo sky. Here and there a star shone in it with intense brilliancy, and though the great stove roared in the draught it seemed to Miss Schuyler that a destroying cold came in. Already she felt her hands grow numb.

"Where are the boys, Hetty?" she asked.

"In at the railroad, most of them. One or two at the back. Now, I'll show you how to load a rifle, Flo."

Miss Schuyler followed her to the table, where several rifles were lying beside a big box of cartridges, and Hetty took one of them up.

"You push this slide back, and drop the cartridge in," she said. "Now it has gone into this pipe here, and you drop in another. Get hold, and push them in until you can't get in any more. Why—it can't hurt you—your hands are shaking!"

There was a rattle, and the venomous, conical-headed cartridge slipped from Miss Schuyler's fingers. She had never handled one before, and it seemed to her that a horrible, evil potency was bound up in that insignificant roll of metal. Then, while the rifle click-clacked in Hetty's hands, Torrance stood by the window holding up a handkerchief. He called out sharply, and there was a murmur of derision in the darkness outside.

"Come out!" said a hoarse voice. "We'll give you a minute. Then you can have a sleigh to drive to perdition in."

The laughter that followed frightened Miss Schuyler more than any threats would have done. It seemed wholly horrible, and there was a hint in it of the fierce exultation of men driven to desperation.

"That wouldn't suit me," said Torrance. "What do you want here, any way?"

"Food," somebody answered. "You wanted to starve us, Torrance, and rode us out when we went chopping stove wood in the bluff. Well, you don't often miss your supper at the Range, and there's quite enough of it to make a decent blaze. You haven't much of that minute left. Are you coming out?"

"No," said Torrance briefly, and, dropping the handkerchief, moved from the window.

The next moment there was a flash in the darkness, and something came whirring into the room. The girls could not see it, but they heard the thud it struck with and saw a chip start from the cedar panelling. Then, there was a rush of feet, and twice a red streak blazed from the window. A man jerked a cartridge, which fell with a rattle from his rifle, and a little blue smoke blew across the room. Flora Schuyler shivered as the acrid fumes of it drifted about her, but Hetty stood very straight, with one hand on the rim of the table.

"Got nobody, and they're into the shadow now," said a man disgustedly, and Flora Schuyler, seeing his face, which showed a moment fierce and brutish as he turned, felt that she could not forget it, and most illogically hated him.

For almost a minute there was silence. Nobody moved in the big room, where the shadows wavered as the faint flickering lamplight rose and fell, and there was no sound but the doleful wail of the night wind from the prairie. It was broken by a dull crash that was repeated a moment later, and the men looked at one another.

"They've brought their axes along," said somebody. "If there's any of the Michigan boys around they'll drive that door

in.”

“Watch it, two of you,” said Torrance. “Jake, can’t you get a shot at them?”

A man crouched by the open window, which was some little height from the ground, his arms upon the sill, and his head showing against the darkness just above them. He was, it seemed to Miss Schuyler, horribly deliberate, and she held her breath while she watched, as if fascinated, the long barrel move a little. Then its muzzle tilted suddenly, a train of red sparks blew out, and something that hummed through the smoke struck the wall. The man dropped below the sill, and called hoarsely through the crash of the falling axes.

“Got the pillar instead of him. There’s a streak of light behind me. Well, I’ll try for him again.”

Hetty emptied the box of cartridges, and, with hands that did not seem to tremble, stood it up before the lamp. Once more the man crouched by the window, a blurred, huddled object with head down on the rifle stock, and there was another streak of flame. Then, the thud of the axes suddenly ceased, and he laughed a little discordant laugh.

“Got him this time. The other one’s lit out,” he said.

Miss Schuyler shuddered, and clutched at the table, while, though Hetty was very still, she fancied she heard a stifled gasp. The silence was even more disconcerting than the pounding of the axes or the crash of the firing. Flora Schuyler could see the shadowy figures about the window, and just distinguish some of them. The one standing close in front of it, as though disdainful of the risk he ran, was Torrance; the other, who now and then moved lithely, and once rested a rifle on the sill, was Clavering; another, the man who had fired the last shot; but the rest were blurred, formless objects, a little darker than the cedar panelling. Now and then the streak of radiance widened behind the box, and the cold grew numbing as the icy wind flowed in.

Suddenly a voice rose up outside. “You can’t keep us out, Torrance. We’re bound to get in; but I’ll try to hold the boys now if you’ll let us have our wounded man, and light out quietly.”

Torrance laughed. “You are not making much of a show, and I’m quite ready to do the best I can,” he said. “If there’s any life in him we want your man for the Sheriff.”

Then he turned to the others. “I was ’most forgetting the fellow outside there. We’ll hold them off from the window while you bring him in.”

It appeared horribly risky, but Torrance spoke with a curious unconcernedness, and Clavering laughed as, signing to two men, he prepared to do his bidding. There was a creaking and rattling, and the great door at one end of the hall swung open, and Flora Schuyler, staring at the darkness, expected to see a rush of shadowy figures out of it. But she saw only the blurred outline of two men who stooped and dragged something in, and then the door swung to again.

They lifted their burden higher. Torrance, approaching the table, took up the lamp, and Miss Schuyler had a passing glimpse of a hanging head and a drawn grey face as they tramped past her heavily. She opened her blue lips and closed them again, for she was dazed with cold, and the cry that would have been a relief to her never came. It was several minutes later when Torrance’s voice rose from by the stove.

“We’ll leave him here in the meanwhile, where he can’t freeze,” he said. “Shot right through the shoulder, but there’s no great bleeding. The cold would stop it.”

Hetty was at her father’s side the next moment. “Flo,” she said, “we have to do something now.”

Torrance waved them back. “The longer that man stops as he is, the better chances he’s going to have.” He glanced towards the window. “Boys, can you see what they’re doing now?”

“Hauling out prairie hay,” said Clavering. “They’ve broken into the store, and from what one fellow shouted they’ve found the kerosene.”

Torrance said nothing whatever, and his silence was significant. Listening with strained attention, Flora Schuyler could hear a faint hum of voices, and now and then vague sounds amidst a patter of hurrying steps. They told her very little, but the tension in the attitude of the half-seen men had its meaning. It was evident that their assailants purposed to burn them out.

Ten minutes passed, as it were interminably, and still nobody moved. The voices had grown a little louder, and there was a rattle as though men unseen behind the buildings were dragging up a wagon. Suddenly a rhythmic drumming came softly through it, and Clavering glanced at Torrance.

“Somebody riding this way at a gallop,” he said.

The beat of hoofs grew louder. The men without seemed to be running to and fro, and shouting to one another, while those in the hall clustered about the window, reckless of the risk they ran. Standing a little behind them Hetty saw a dim mounted figure sweep out of the waste of snow, and a hoarse shout went up. “Hold on! Throw down that rifle! It’s Larry Grant.”

XIV

TORRANCE'S WARNING

In another moment the horseman pulled up, and sat motionless in his saddle with his head turned towards the house. Hetty could see him silhouetted, shapeless and shadowy in his big fur-coat, against the whiteness of the snow, and the relief she felt betrayed itself in her voice as she turned to Miss Schuyler.

"Yes," she said, "it's Larry. There will be no more trouble now."

Flora Schuyler laughed a little breathless laugh, for though she also felt the confidence her companion evinced, the strain had told on her.

"Of course," she said, "he knew you wanted him. There are men like that."

It was a simple tribute, but Hetty thrilled with pride. Larry was at least consistent, and now, as it had been in the days both looked back upon, he had come when she needed him. She also recognized even then that the fact that he is generally to be found where he is wanted implies a good deal in the favour of any man.

And now half-seen objects moved out from behind barn and stable, and the horseman turned towards them. His voice rose sharply and commandingly.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

There was no answer for several moments, and then a man stepped forward gesticulating fiercely as he commenced a tirade that was less than half intelligible. Larry checked him with a lifted hand.

"There's a good deal of that I can't quite understand, and the rest doesn't seem to fit this case," he said, with a laugh that had more effect upon some of those who heard it than a flow of eloquence would have had. "Boys, we have no use for worrying about the meanness of European kings and folks of that kind. If you have brought any along I'd sooner listen to sensible Americans."

Another man stepped forward, and there was no doubt about his accent, though his tone was deprecatory.

"Well, it just comes to this," he said. "Torrance and the cattle-men have done their best to starve us and freeze us out, and, since he has made it plain that there's no room for both of us, somebody has got to go. Now, we have come a long way and we mean to stay. We're not looking for trouble, but we want our rights."

There was a murmur of encouragement from the rest, but again Larry's laugh had its effect. "Then you're taking a kind of curious way of getting them," he said. "I don't know that trying to burn folks' houses ever did anybody much good, and it's quite likely to bring a regiment of United States cavalry down on you. Mr. Torrance, I fancied I heard firing. Have you anybody hurt inside?"

"One of your men," said Torrance drily. "We hope to pull him round, and let the Sheriff have him."

It was not a conciliatory answer, and came near undoing what Grant had accomplished; but the grim old cattle-baron was not the man to propitiate an enemy. A murmur followed it, and somebody said, "Boys, you hear him! Bring along that wagon. We're going in."

The form of speech was Western, but the voice was guttural, and when there was a rattle of wheels Grant suddenly changed his tone.

"Stop right there," he said. "Throw every truss of hay down. The man who holds off when I tell him what to do is going to have trouble with the executive."

It was a bold venture, and any sign of effort or unevenness of inflection would have rendered it futile, but the voice was sharp and ringing, and the fashion in which the horseman flung up his arm commanding. It was, also, tactful, for some of those who heard it had been drilled into unreflecting obedience, and there is in the native American the respect for a duly accredited leader, which discipline has further impressed upon the Teuton. Still, those who watched from the window felt that this was the crisis, and tightened their numbed fingers on the rifles, knowing that if the horseman failed they would shortly need them again. None of them, however, made any other movement, and Miss Schuyler, who, grasping

Hetty's hand, saw the dim figures standing rigid and intent, could only hear the snapping of the stove.

"Hetty," she gasped, "I shall do something silly in another moment."

The tension only lasted a moment or two. A man sprang up on the pole of the wagon, and a truss of hay went down. Another followed, and then, men who had also felt the strain and now felt it a relief to do anything, clustered about the wagon. In a few minutes it was empty, and the men who had been a mob turned to the one who had changed them into an organized body.

"What do you want now?" asked one of them.

"Run that wagon back where you got it from," said Larry.

It was done, and when the clustering figures vanished amidst a rattle of wheels Torrance laid aside his rifle and sat down on the table.

"I guess there'll be no more trouble, boys. That's a thing there's not many men could have done," he added.

His daughter also sat down in the nearest chair, with Flora Schuyler's hand still within her own. She had been very still while the suspense lasted, but she was trembling now, and her voice had a little quiver in it as she said, "Wasn't he splendid, Flo?"

It was some minutes before Grant and the other men came back again, and fragments of what he said were audible. "Then, you can pick out four men, and we'll hear them at the committee. I have two or three questions to ask you by and by. Half a dozen of you keep a look-out. The rest can get into the stable out of the frost."

The men dispersed, and Grant turned towards the house. "I don't think you need have any further anxiety, and you can shut that window if you want to, Mr. Torrance."

Torrance laughed. "I don't know that I've shown any yet."

"I hope you haven't felt it," said Grant. "It is cold out here, and I'm willing to come in and talk to you."

Somebody had moved the box away from the lamp, and Clavering's face showed up against the wavering shadow as he turned towards his leader. Flora Schuyler saw a little unpleasant smile on his lips as he pointed suggestively to the men with rifles he had sent towards the door.

"That would suit us, sir," he said.

Torrance understood him, for he shook his head impatiently. "It wouldn't pay. There would be too many of his friends wondering what had become of him. Get the door open and tell him to come in. Light the big lamps, somebody."

The door was opened, and, as if in confirmation of Torrance's warning, a voice rose up outside. "We have let him go, but if you try any meanness, or he isn't ready when we want him, we'll pull the place down," it said.

Larry walked out of the darkness into the blaze of light, and only smiled a little when the great door swung to behind him and somebody brought the window banging down. Two men with rifles stepped between him and the former; but if Torrance had intended to impress him, he had apparently failed, for he moved forward with quiet confidence. The fur cap he held in his hand was white, and the great fur coat stood out from his body stiff with frost, while Hetty winced when she saw the pallor of his face. It was evident that it was not without a strenuous effort he had made the mob subservient to him.

But his eyes were grave and steady, in spite of the weariness in them, and as he passed the girls he made a little formal inclination with his head. He stopped in front of Torrance, who rose from his seat on the table, and for a moment the two men looked at one another. Both stood very straight, one lean, and dark, and commanding, with half-contemptuous anger in his black eyes; the other of heavier frame and brown of skin and hair save where what he had done had left its stamp of pallor. Yet, different as they were in complexion and feature, it seemed to Miss Schuyler, who watched them intently, that there was a curious, indefinite resemblance between them. They were of the same stock and equally resolute, each ready, it seemed, to stake all he had on what he held the right.

Flora Schuyler, who had trained her observation, also read what they felt in their faces, and saw in that of Torrance grudging approval tempered by scorn of the man who had trampled on the traditions of those he sprang from. She fancied that Larry recognized this and that it stung him, though he would not show that it did, and his attitude pleased her most. It was unyielding, but there was a deference that became him in it.

“I am sorry I did not arrive soon enough to save you this inconvenience, sir,” he said.

Torrance smiled grimly, and there was a hardness in his voice. “You have been here a good many times, Larry, and we did our best for you. None of us fancied that you would repay us by coming back with a mob of rabble to pull the place down.”

Grant winced perceptibly. “Nobody is more sorry than I am, sir.”

“Aren’t you a trifle late?”

“I came as soon as I got word.”

Torrance made a little gesture of impatience. “That’s not what I mean. There is very little use in being sorry now. Before the other fools you joined started there talking there was quietness and prosperity in this country. The men who had made it what it is got all, but nothing more than they were entitled to, and one could enjoy what he had worked for and sleep at night. This was not good enough for you—and this is what you have made of it.”

He stretched out his arm with a forceful gesture, pointing to the men with rifles, the two white-faced girls, and the splinters on the wall, then dropped his hand, and Larry’s eyes rested on the huddled figure lying by the stove. He moved towards it, and bent down without a word, and it was at least five minutes before he came back again, his face dark and stern.

“You have done nothing for him?” he said.

“AREN’T YOU A TRIFLE LATE?”—*Page 160.*

“No,” said Torrance, “we have not. I guess nature knows what’s best for him, and I didn’t see anything to be gained by rousing him with brandy to start the bleeding.”

“Well, first of all, I want that man.”

“You can have him. We had meant him for the Sheriff, but what you did just now lays me in your debt, and I would not like to feel I owed you anything.”

Grant made a little gesture. “I don’t think I have quite deserved that, sir. I owe you a good deal, and it makes what I have

to do harder still. Can't you remember that there was a time when you were kind to me?"

"No," said Torrance drily. "I don't want to be reminded when I have done foolish things. I tried to warn you, but you would not listen to me, that the trail you have started on will take you a good deal farther than you meant to go. If you have anything to tell me, I would sooner talk business. Are you going to bring your friends round here at night again?"

"They came without me, and, if I can help it, will not come back. This thing will be gone into, and the leaders punished by our committee. Now, are you willing to stop the intimidation of the storekeepers, which has brought about this trouble, and let us get provisions in the town? I can offer you something in exchange."

"No," said Torrance. "Do what suits you best. I can make no terms with you. If it hadn't been for my foolishness in sending the boys off with the cattle, very few of your friends would have got away from Cedar Range to-night."

"I'll take my man away. I can thank you for that at least," was Grant's answer.

He moved to the door and opened it, and three men came in. They did his bidding, and all made way for them when they tramped out unsteadily with their burden. Then, he turned once more to Torrance with his fur cap in his hand.

"I am going now, sir, and it is hard to tell what may happen before we meet again. We have each got a difficult row to hoe, and I want to leave you on the best terms I can."

Torrance looked at him steadily, and Grant returned it with a curious gravity, though there were fearless cattle-men at Cedar Range who did not care to meet its owner's gaze when he regarded them in that fashion. With a just perceptible gesture he directed the younger man's attention to the red splashes on the floor.

"That alone," he said quietly, "would stand between you and me. We made this land rich and peaceful, but that did not please you and the rest, who had not sense to see that while human nature's what it is, there's no use worrying about what you can't have when you have got enough. You went round sowing trouble, and by and by you'll have to reap it. You brought in the rabble, and were going to lead them, and make them farmers; but now they will lead you where you don't want to go, and when you have given them all you have, turn and trample on you. With the help of the men who are going back on their own kind, they may get us down, but when that time comes there will not be a head of cattle left, or a dollar in the treasury."

"I can only hope you are mistaken, sir," said Grant.

"I have lived quite a long while, but I have never seen the rabble keep faith with anyone longer than it suited them," the older man said. "Any way, that is not the question. You will be handed to the Sheriff if you come here again. I have nothing more to tell you, and this is, I hope, the last time I shall ever speak to you."

Miss Schuyler watched Grant closely, but though his face was drawn and set, she saw only a respect, which, if it was assumed, still became him in his bearing as he turned away. As he passed the girls he bent his head, and Hetty, whose cheeks were flushed, rose with a formal bow, though her eyes shone suspiciously, but Flora Schuyler stepped forward and held out her hand.

"Mr. Torrance can't object to two women thanking you for what you have done; and if he does, I don't greatly mind," she said.

Torrance only smiled, but the warm bronze seemed to have returned to Larry's face as he passed on. Flora Schuyler had thanked him, but he had seen what was worth far more to him in Hetty's eyes, and knew that it was only loyalty to one who had the stronger claim that held her still. After the door closed behind him there was once more a curious stillness in the hall until Torrance went out with his retainers. A little later Clavering found the girls in another room.

"You seem quite impressed, Miss Schuyler," he said.

"I am," said Flora Schuyler. "I have seen a man who commands one's approbation—and an American."

Clavering laughed. "Then, they're not always quite the same thing?"

"No," Flora Schuyler said coldly. "That was one of the pleasant fancies I had to give up a long time ago."

"I would like a definition of the perfected American," said Clavering.

Miss Schuyler yawned. "Can't you tell him, Hetty? I once heard you talk quite eloquently on that subject."

"I'll try," said Hetty. "It's the man who wants to give his country something, and not get the most he can out of it. The one

who goes round planting seeds that will grow and bear fruit, even if it is long after he is there to eat it. No country has much use for the man who only wants to reap.”

Clavering assented, but there was a sardonic gleam in his eyes. “Well,” he said reflectively, “there was once a man who planted dragon’s teeth, and you know what kind of crop they yielded him.”

“He knew what he was doing,” said Flora Schuyler. “The trouble is that now few men know a dragon’s tooth when they see it.”

Clavering laughed. “Then the ones who don’t should be stopped right off when they go round planting anything.”

XV

HETTY'S BOUNTY

It was a clear, cold afternoon, and Hetty, driving back from Allonby's ranch, sent the team at a gallop down the dip to the Cedar Bridge. The beaten trail rang beneath the steel shoes of the rocking sleigh, the birches streamed up blurred together out of the hollow, and Flora Schuyler felt the wind sting her cheeks like the lash of a whip. The coldness of it dimmed her eyes, and she had only a hazy and somewhat disconcerting vision of a streak of snow that rolled back to the horses' feet amidst the whirling trees. It was wonderfully exhilarating—the rush of the lurching sleigh, the hammering of the hoofs, and the scream of the wind—but Miss Schuyler realized that it was also unpleasantly risky as she remembered the difficult turn before one came to the bridge.

She decided, however, that there was nothing to be gained by pointing this out to her companion, for Hetty, who sat swaying a little in the driving seat, had been in a somewhat curious mood since the attack on Cedar Range, and unusually impatient of advice or remonstrance. Indeed, Flora Schuyler fancied that it was the restlessness she had manifested once or twice of late which impelled her to hurl the sleigh down into the hollow at that reckless pace. So she said nothing, until the streak of snow broke off close ahead, and there were only trees in front of them. Then, a wild lurch cut short the protest she made, and she gasped as they swung round the bend and flashed across the bridge. The trail, however, led steeply upwards now, and Hetty, laughing, dropped the reins upon the plodding horses' necks.

"Didn't that remind you of the Chicago Limited?" she said.

"I was wondering," said Miss Schuyler breathlessly, "if you had any reason for trying to break your neck."

"Well," said Hetty, with a twinkle in her eyes, "I felt I had to do something a little out of the usual, and it was really safe enough. Everybody feels that way now and then, and I couldn't well work it off by quarrelling with you, or going out and talking to the boys as my father does. I don't know a better cure than a gallop or a switchback in a sleigh."

"Some folks find it almost as soothing to tell their friends what is worrying them, and I scarcely think it's more risky," said Miss Schuyler.

Hetty's face became grave. "Well," she said, "one can talk to you, and I have been worried, Flo. I know that it is quite foolish, but I can't help it. I came back to see my father through the trouble, and I'm going to; but while I know that he's ever so much wiser than I am, some of the things he has to do hurt me. It's our land, and we're going to keep it; but it's not nice to think of the little children starving in the snow."

This, Miss Schuyler decided, was perfectly correct, so far as it went; but she also felt tolerably certain that, while it was commendable, Hetty's loyalty to her father would be strenuously tested, and did not alone account for her restlessness.

"And there was nothing else?" she said.

"No," said Hetty, a little too decisively. "Of course! Any way, now I have told you we are not going to worry about these things to-day, and I drove fast partly because the trail is narrow, and one generally meets somebody here. Did it ever strike you, Flo, that if there's anyone you know in a country that has a bridge in it, you will, if you cross it often enough, meet him there?"

"No," and Miss Schuyler smiled satirically, "it didn't, though one would fancy it was quite likely. I, however, remember that we met Larry here not very long ago. That Canadian blanket suit shows you off quite nicely, Hetty. It is especially adapted to your kind of figure."

Hetty flicked the horses, then pulled them up again, and Miss Schuyler laughed as a sleigh with two men in it swung out from beneath the trees in front of them.

"This is, of course, a coincidence," she said.

Hetty coloured. "Don't be foolish, Flo," she said. "How could I know he was coming?"

Flora Schuyler did not answer, and Hetty was edging her horses to the side of the trail, in which two sleighs could scarcely pass, when a shout came down.

"Wait. We'll pull up and lead our team round."

In another minute Grant stepped out of his sleigh, and would have passed if Hetty had not stopped him. She sat higher than her companion, and probably knew that the Canadian blanket costume, with its scarlet trimmings, became her slender figure. The crimson toque also went well with the clustering dark hair and dark eyes, and there was a brightness in the latter which was in keeping with the colour the cold wind had brought into the delicate oval face. The man glanced at her a moment, and then apparently found that a trace required his attention.

“I am glad we met you, Larry,” said the girl. “Flo thanked you the night you came to Cedar, and I wanted to, but, while you know why I couldn’t, I would not like you to think it was very unkind of me. Whatever my father does is right, you see.”

“Of course,” said Grant gravely. “You have to believe it, Hetty.”

Hetty’s eyes twinkled. “That was very nice of you. Then you must be wrong.”

“Well,” said Grant, with a merry laugh, “it is quite likely that I am now and then. One can only do the best he can, and to be right all the time is a little too much to expect from any man.”

Miss Schuyler, who was talking to Breckenridge, turned and smiled, and Hetty said, “Then, that makes it a little easier for me to admit that the folks I belong to go just a little too far occasionally. Larry, I hate to think of the little children going hungry. Are there many of them?”

Grant’s face darkened for a moment. “I’m afraid there are quite a few—and sick ones, too, lying with about half enough to cover them in sod-hovels.”

Hetty shuddered and her eyes grew pitiful, for since the grim early days hunger and want had been unknown in the cattle country. “If I want to do something for them it can’t be very wrong,” she said. “Larry, you will take a roll of bills from me, and buy them whatever will make it a little less hard for them?”

“No,” said Grant quietly, “I can’t, Hetty. Your father gives you that money, and we have our own relief machinery.”

The girl laid her hand upon his arm appealingly. “I have a little my mother left me, and it was hers before she married my father. Can’t you understand? I am with my father, and would not lift my finger to help you and the homestead-boys against him, but it couldn’t do anybody any harm if I sent a few things to hungry children. You have just got to take those dollars, Larry.”

“Then I dare not refuse,” said Grant, after thinking a moment. “They need more than we can give them. But you can’t send me the dollars.”

“No,” said Hetty, “and I have none with me now. But if a responsible man came to the bluff to-morrow night at eight o’clock, my maid could slip down with the wallet—you must not come. It would be too dangerous. My father, and one or two of the rest, are very bitter against you.”

“Well,” said Grant, smiling gravely, “a responsible man will be there. There are folks who will bless you, Hetty.”

“You must never tell them, or anybody,” the girl insisted.

Grant said nothing further, and led his team past; but Hetty noticed the shadow in his bronzed face and the wistfulness in his eyes. Then, she shook the reins, and as the horses plodded up the slope Miss Schuyler fancied that she sighed.

In the meanwhile Grant got into his sleigh, and Breckenridge, who had been vanquished by Miss Schuyler in an exchange of badinage, found him somewhat silent during the journey to Fremont ranch. He retired to rest soon after they reached it, and set out again before daylight the next morning, and it was late at night when he came back very weary, with his garments stiff with frost. The great bare room where Breckenridge awaited him was filled with a fusty heat, and as he came in, partly dazed by the change of temperature, Grant did not see the other man who sat amidst the tobacco-smoke beside the glowing stove. He sank into a hide chair limply, and when Breckenridge glanced at him inquiringly, with numbed fingers dragged a wallet out of his pocket.

“Yes,” he said, “I got the dollars. I don’t know that it was quite the square thing, but with Harper’s wife and the Dutchman’s children ’most starving in the hollow, I felt I had to take them.”

Breckenridge made a little warning gesture, and the man behind the stove, reaching forward, picked up a packet that had dropped unnoticed by the rest when Grant took out the wallet.

“You seem kind of played out, Larry, and I guess you didn’t know you dropped the thing,” he said.

Grant blinked at him; for a man who has driven for many hours in the cold of the Northwest is apt to suffer from unpleasant and somewhat bewildering sensations when his numbed brain and body first throw off the effect of the frost.

“No,” he said unevenly. “Let me alone a minute. I didn’t see you.”

The man, who was one of the homesteaders’ leaders in another vicinity, sat still with the packet in his hand until, perhaps without any intention of reading it, his eyes rested on the address. Then he sat upright suddenly and stared at Grant.

“Do you know what you have got here, Larry?” he asked.

Grant stretched out his hand and took the packet, then laid it upon the table with the address downwards.

“It’s something that dropped out of the wallet,” he said.

The other man laughed a little, but his face was intent. “Oh, yes, that’s quite plain; but if I know the writing it’s a letter with something in it from Torrance to the Sheriff. There’s no mistaking the way he makes the ‘g.’ Turn it over and I’ll show you.”

Grant laid a brown hand on the packet. “No. Do you generally look at letters that don’t belong to you, Chilton?”

Breckenridge saw that Grant was recovering, and that the contemptuous manner of his question was intentional, and guessed that his comrade had intended to sting the other man to resentment, and so lead him from the point at issue. Chilton coloured, but he persisted.

“Well,” he said, “I guess that one belongs to the committee. I didn’t mean to look at the thing, but, now I’m sure of it, I have to do what I can for the boys who made me their executive. I don’t ask you how you got it, Larry.”

“I got it by accident.”

Chilton looked astonished, and almost incredulous. “Well, we needn’t worry over that. The question is, what you’re going to do with it?”

“I’m going to send it back.”

Chilton made a gesture of impatience. “That’s what you can’t do. As we know, the cattle-men had a committee at Cedar a day or two ago, and now here’s a packet stuffed with something going to the Sheriff. Doesn’t it strike you yet that it’s quite likely there’s a roll of dollar bills and a letter telling him what he has to do inside it?”

“Well?” said Grant, seeing that he must face the issue sooner or later.

“We don’t want their dollars, but that letter’s worth a pile of them to us. We could get it printed by a paper farther east, with an article on it that would raise a howl from everybody. There are one or two of them quite ready for a chance of getting a slap at the legislature, while there’s more than one man who would be glad to hawk it round the lobbies. Then his friends would have no more use for the Sheriff, and we might even get a commission sent down to straighten things up for us.”

“The trouble is that we can’t make any use of it,” said Grant.

“No?” said Chilton, and the men looked at each other steadily.

“No,” repeated Grant. “It wasn’t meant that I should get it, and I’m going to send it back.”

“Then, while I don’t want to make trouble, I’ll have to mention the thing to my committee.”

“You’ll do just what you believe is right. Any way, we’ll have supper now. It will be ready.”

Chilton stood still a moment. “You are quite straight with us in this?”

“Yes,” said Grant, “but I’m not going to give you that letter. Are you coming in to supper? It really wouldn’t commit you to anything.”

“I am,” said Chilton simply. “I have known you quite a long while, and your assurance is good enough for me; but you would have found it difficult to make other folks believe you.”

They sat down at table, and Larry smiled as he said, “It’s the first time I have seen your scruples spoil your appetite, Chilton, but I had a notion that you were not quite sure about taking any supper from me.”

“Well,” laughed Chilton, “that just shows how foolish a man can be, because the supper’s already right here inside me. When I came in Breckenridge got it for me. Still, I have driven a long way, and I can worry through another.”

He made a very creditable attempt, and when he had been shown to his room Grant glanced at Breckenridge.

“You know how I got the letter?”

“Yes,” said Breckenridge. “Miss Torrance must have inadvertently slipped it into the wallet. You couldn’t have done anything else, Larry; but the affair is delicate and will want some handling. How are you going to get the packet back?”

“Take it myself,” Grant said quietly.

It was ten o’clock the next night, and Hetty Torrance and Miss Schuyler sat talking in their little sitting-room. Torrance was away, but his married foreman, who had seen service in New Mexico, and his wife, slept in the house, and Cedar Range was strongly guarded. Now and then, the bitter wind set the door rattling, and there was a snapping in the stove; but when the gusts passed the ranch seemed very still, and Miss Schuyler could hear the light tread of the armed cow-boy who, perhaps to keep himself warm, paced up and down the hall below. There was another at a window in the corridor, and one or two more on guard in the stores and stables.

“Wasn’t Chris Allonby to have come over to-day?” asked Miss Schuyler.

“Yes,” said Hetty. “I’m sorry he didn’t. I have a letter for the Sheriff to give him, and wanted to get rid of the thing. It is important, and I fancy, from what my father told me, if any of the homestead-boys got it they could make trouble for us. Chris is to ride in with it and hand it to the Sheriff.”

“I wouldn’t like a letter of that kind lying round,” said Miss Schuyler. “Where did you put it, Hetty?”

Hetty laughed. “Where nobody would ever find it—under some clothes of mine. Talking about it makes one uneasy. Pull out the second drawer in the bureau, Flo.”

Miss Schuyler did so, and Hetty turned over a bundle of daintily embroidered linen. Then, her face grew very grave, she laid each article back again separately.

“Nothing there!” said Miss Schuyler.

Hetty’s fingers quivered. “Pull the drawer out, Flo. No. Never mind anything. Shake them out on the floor.”

It was done, and a litter of garments lay scattered about them, but no packet appeared, and Hetty sat down limply, very white in the face.

“It was there,” she said, “by the wallet with the dollars. It must have got inside somehow, and I sent the wallet to Larry. This is horrible, Flo.”

“Think!” said Miss Schuyler. “You couldn’t have put it anywhere else?”

“No,” said Hetty faintly. “If the wrong people got it, it would turn out the Sheriff and make an outcry everywhere. That is what I was told, though I don’t know what it was about.”

“Still, you know it would be safe with Mr. Grant.”

“Yes,” said Hetty. “Larry never did anything mean in his life. But you don’t understand, Flo. He didn’t know it was there, and it might have dropped out on the prairie, while, even if he found it, how is he going to get it back to me? The boys would fire on him if he came here.”

Flora Schuyler looked frightened. “You will have to tell your father, Hetty.”

Hetty trembled a little. “It is going to be the hardest thing I ever did. He is just dreadful in his quietness when he is angry—and I would have to tell him I had been meeting Larry and sending him dollars. You know what he would fancy.”

It was evident that Hetty was very much afraid of her father, and as clear to Miss Schuyler that the latter would have some cause for unpleasant suspicions. Then, the girl turned to her companion appealingly.

“Flo,” she said, “tell me what to do. The thing frightens me.”

Miss Schuyler slipped an arm about her. “Wait,” she said. “Your father will not be here until noon to-morrow, and that letter is in the hands of a very honest man. I think you can trust him to get it back to you.”

“But he couldn’t send anybody without giving me away, and he knows it might cost him his liberty to come here,” said

Hetty.

“I scarcely fancy that would stop him.”

Hetty turned, and looked at her friend curiously. “Flo, I wonder how it would have suited if Larry had been fond of you.”

Miss Schuyler did not wince; but the smile that was on her lips was absent from her eyes. “You once told me I should have him. Are you quite sure you would like to hand him over now?”

Hetty did not answer the question; instead, she blushed furiously. “We are talking nonsense—and I don’t know how I can face my father to-morrow,” she said.

It was at least an hour later, and the cow-boy below had ceased his pacing, when Hetty, who felt no inclination for sleep, fancied she heard a tapping at the window. She sprang suddenly upright, and saw apprehension in Miss Schuyler’s face. The cow-boys were some distance away, and a little verandah ran round that side of the house just below the window. Flora Schuyler had sufficient courage; but it was not of the kind which appears to advantage in the face of bodily peril, and the colour faded in her cheeks. It was quite certain now that somebody was tapping at or trying to open the window.

“Shake yourself together, Flo,” said Hetty, in a hoarse whisper. “When I tell you, turn the lamp down and open the door. I am going to see who is there.”

The next moment she had opened a drawer of the bureau, while as she stepped forward with something glinting in her hand, Flora Schuyler, who heard a whispered word, turned the lamp right out in her confusion, and, because she dared not stand still, crept after her companion. With a swift motion, Hetty drew the window-curtains back, and Miss Schuyler gasped. The stars were shining outside, and the dark figure of a man was silhouetted against the blue clearness of the night.

“Come back,” she cried. “Oh, he’s coming in. Hetty, I must scream.”

Hetty’s fingers closed upon her arm with a cruel grip. “Stop,” she said. “If you do, they’ll shoot him. Don’t be a fool, Flo.”

It was too dark to see clearly, but Flora Schuyler realized with a painful fluttering of her heart and a great relief whose the white face outside the window must be.

XVI

LARRY SOLVES THE DIFFICULTY

For the space of several seconds the girls stood staring at the figure outside the window. Then, the man turned sharply, and Hetty gasped as she heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow below. There was a little of it on the verandah, and the stars shone brilliantly.

“Catch hold of the frame here, Flo,” she said breathlessly. “Now, push with all your might.”

Miss Schuyler did as she was bidden. The double sashes moved with a sharp creaking, and while she shivered as the arctic cold struck through her, Hetty stretched out an arm and drew the man in. Then with a tremendous effort she shut the window and pulled the curtains together. There was darkness in the room now, and one of the cow-boys called out below.

“Hear anything, Jake?”

“Somebody shutting a door in the house there,” said another man, and Hetty, passing between the curtains, could see two figures move across the snow, and the little scintillation from something that was carried by one of them, and she realized that they had very narrowly averted a tragedy.

“Flo,” she said, with a little quiver in her voice, “light the lamp quick. If they see the room dark they might come up.”

Miss Schuyler was unusually clumsy, but at last the light sprang up, and showed Larry standing just inside the curtain with the dust of snow on his fur coat and cap. His face looked a little less bronzed than usual, but he showed no other sign of discomposure. Hetty was very pale as she stood in front of him with the pistol still in her hand. She dropped it on a chair with a shiver, and broke into a little strained laugh.

“You are quite sure they didn’t see you, Larry? You took a terrible risk just now.”

Grant smiled, more with his lips than his eyes. “Yes,” he said, “I guess I did. I taught you to shoot as well as most men, Hetty.”

Hetty gasped again and sank limply into the nearest chair. “What brought you here?” she said. “Still, you can’t get away now. Sit down, Larry.”

Grant sat down with a bow to Miss Schuyler, and fumbled in the pocket of his big fur coat. “I came to give you something you sent me by mistake,” he said. “I would not have come this way if I could have helped it, but I saw there was a man with a rifle every here and there as I crept up through the bluff, and it was quite a while before I could swing myself up by a pillar on to the verandah. You have been anxious about this, Hetty?”

He laid a packet on the table, and Hetty’s eyes shone as she took it up.

“Couldn’t you have given it to somebody to bring me? It would have been ever so much safer,” she said.

“No,” said the man simply, “I don’t think I could.”

Hetty understood him, and so did Miss Schuyler, while the meaning of the glance her companion cast at her was equally plain. Miss Torrance’s face was still pallid, but there was pride in her eyes.

“I wonder if you guessed what was in that letter, Mr. Grant?” Flora Schuyler asked.

Larry smiled. “I think I have a notion.”

“Of course!” said Hetty impulsively. “We knew you had, and that was why we felt certain you would try to bring it back to me.”

“If it could have been managed in a different fashion it would have pleased me better,” Grant said, with a little impatient gesture. “I am sorry I frightened you, Hetty.”

The colour crept back into Hetty’s cheeks. “I was frightened, but only just a little at first,” she said. “It was when I saw who it was and heard the boys below, that I grew really anxious.”

She did not look at the man as she spoke; but it was evident to Miss Schuyler that he understood the significance of the

avowal.

“Then,” he said, “I must try to get away again more quietly.”

“You can’t,” said Hetty. “Not until the man by the store goes away. You have taken too many chances already. You have driven a long way in the cold. Take off that big coat, and Flo will make you some coffee.”

Grant, turning, drew the curtains aside a moment, and let them fall back again. Then, he took off the big coat and sat down with a little smile of contentment beside the glowing stove on which Miss Schuyler was placing a kettle.

“Well,” he said, “I am afraid you will have to put up with my company until that fellow goes away; and I need not tell you that this is very nice for me. One hasn’t much time to feel it, but it’s dreadfully lonely at Fremont now and then.”

Hetty nodded sympathetically, for she had seen the great desolate room at Fremont where Grant and Breckenridge passed the bitter nights alone. The man’s half-audible sigh was also very expressive, for after his grim life he found the brightness and daintiness of the little room very pleasant. It was sparely furnished; but there was taste in everything, and in contrast with Fremont its curtains, rugs, and pictures seemed luxurious. Without were bitter frost and darkness, peril, and self-denial; within, warmth and refinement, and the companionship of two cultured women who were very gracious to him. He also knew that he had shut himself out from the enjoyment of their society of his own will, that he had but to make terms with Torrance, and all that one side of his nature longed for might be restored to him.

Larry was as free from sensuality as he was from asceticism; but there were times when the bleak discomfort at Fremont palled upon him, as did the loneliness and half-cooked food. His overtaxed body revolted now and then from further exposure to Arctic cold and the deprivation of needed sleep, while his heart grew sick with anxiety and the distrust of those he was toiling for. He was not a fanatic, and had very slight sympathy with the iconoclast, for he had an innate respect for the law, and vague aspirations after an ampler life made harmonious by refinement, as well as a half-comprehending reverence for all that was best in art and music. There are many Americans like him, and when such a man turns reformer he has usually a hard row, indeed, to hoe.

“What do you do up there at nights?” asked Hetty.

Larry laughed. “Sometimes Breckenridge and I sit talking by the stove, and now and then we quarrel. Breckenridge has taste, and generally smooths one the right way; but there are times when I feel like throwing things at him. Then we sit quite still for hours together listening to the wind moaning, until one of the boys comes in to tell me we are wanted, and it is a relief to drive until morning with the frost at fifty below. It is very different from the old days when I was here and at Allonby’s two or three nights every week.”

“It must have been hard to give up what you did,” said Hetty, with a diffidence that was unusual in her. “Oh, I know you did it willingly, but you must have found it was very different from what you expected. I mean that the men you wanted to smooth the way for had their notions too, and meant to do a good deal that could never please you. Suppose you found they didn’t want to go along quietly, making this country better, but only to trample down whatever was there already?”

Flora Schuyler looked up. “I think you will have to face that question, Mr. Grant,” she said. “A good many men of your kind have had to do it before you. Isn’t a faulty ruler better than wild disorder?”

“Yes,” said Hetty eagerly. “That is just what I mean. If you saw they wanted anarchy, Larry, you would come back to us? We should be glad to have you!”

The man turned his eyes away, and Flora Schuyler saw his hands quiver.

“No,” he said. “I and the rest would have to teach them what was good for them, and if it was needful try to hold them in. Whatever they did, we who brought them here would have to stand in with them.”

Hetty accepted the decision in his tone, and sighed. “Well,” she said, “we will forget it; and Flo has the coffee ready. That is yours, Larry, and here’s a box of crackers. Now, we’ll try to think of pleasant things. It’s like our old-time picnics. Doesn’t it remind you of the big bluff—only we had a black kettle then, and you made the fire of sticks? There was the day you shot the willow grouse. It isn’t really so very long ago!”

“It seems years,” said the man, wistfully. “So much has happened since.”

“Well,” said Hetty, “I can remember all of it still—the pale blue sky behind the bluff, with the little curl of grey smoke floating up against it. You sat by the fire, Larry, roasting the grouse, and talking about what could be done with the prairie. It was all white in the sunshine, and empty as far as one could see, but you told me it would be a great red

wheat-field by and by. I laughed at you for dreaming things that couldn't be, but we were very happy that day."

Grant's face was very sad for a moment, but he turned to Miss Schuyler with a little smile. "Hetty is leaving you out," he said.

"I wasn't there, you see," Miss Schuyler said quickly. "Those days belong to you and Hetty."

Hetty glanced at her sharply, and fancied there was a slightly strained expression in the smiling face, but the next moment Miss Schuyler laughed.

"What are you thinking, Flo?" said Hetty.

"It was scarcely worth mentioning. I was wondering how it was that the only times we have crossed the bridge we met Mr. Grant."

"That's quite simple," said Larry. "Each time it was on Wednesday, and I generally drive round to see if I am wanted anywhere that day. They have had to do almost without provisions at the homesteads in the hollow lately. Your dollars will be very welcome, Hetty."

Hetty blushed for no especial reason, except that when Grant mentioned Wednesday she felt that Flora Schuyler's eyes were upon her. Then, a voice rose up below.

"Hello! All quiet, Jake?"

There were footsteps in the snow outside, and when the sentry answered, the words just reached those who listened in the room.

"I had a kind of notion I saw something moving in the bluff, but I couldn't be quite sure," he said. "There was a door or window banged up there on the verandah a while ago, but that must have been done by one of the women in the house."

Grant rose and drew back the curtain, when, after a patter of footsteps, the voices commenced again.

"Somebody has come in straight from the bluff," said one of the men. "You can see where he has been, but I'm blamed if I can figure where he went to unless it was up the post into the verandah, and he couldn't have done that without Miss Torrance hearing him. I'll stop right here, any way, and I wish my two hours were up."

"I'm that stiff I can scarcely move," said the man relieved, and there was silence in the room, until Hetty turned to the others in dismay.

"He is going to stay there two hours, and he would see us the moment we opened the window," she said.

Grant quickly put on his big fur coat, and unnoticed, he fancied, slipped one hand down on something that was girded on the belt beneath it.

"I must get away at once—through the house," he said.

Hetty had, however, seen the swift motion of his hand.

"There's a man with a rifle in the hall," she said, shudderingly. "Flo, can't you think of something?"

Flora Schuyler looked at them quietly. "I fancy it would not be very difficult for Mr. Grant to get away, but the trouble is that nobody must know he has been near the place. That is the one thing your father could not forgive, Hetty."

Hetty turned her head a little, but Grant nodded. "Had it been otherwise I should have gone an hour ago," he said.

"Well," said Flora Schuyler, with a curious look in her face, "while I fancy we can get you away unnoticed, if anybody did see you, it needn't appear quite certain that it was any affair with Hetty that brought you."

"No?" said Hetty, very sharply. "What do you mean, Flo?"

Miss Schuyler smiled a little and looked Grant in the eyes. "What would appear base treachery in Hetty's case would be less astonishing in me. Mr. Grant, you must not run risks again to talk to me, but since you have done it I must see you through. You are sure there is only one cow-boy in the hall, Hetty?"

Hetty turned and looked at them. Flora Schuyler was smiling bravely, the man standing still with grave astonishment in his eyes.

"No," she said, with quick incisiveness, "I can't let you, Flo."

“I don’t think I asked your permission,” said Miss Schuyler. “Could you explain this to your father, Hetty? I believe he would not be angry with me. Adventurous gallantry is, I understand, quite approved of on the prairie. Call your maid. Mr. Grant, will you come with me?”

For several seconds Hetty stood silent, recognizing that what Torrance might smile at in his guest would appear almost a crime in his daughter, but still horribly unwilling. Then, as Flora Schuyler, with a half-impatient gesture, signed to Grant, she touched a little gong, and a few moments later her maid met them in the corridor. The girl stopped suddenly, gasping a little as she stared at Grant, until Hetty grasped her arm, nipping it cruelly.

“If you scream or do anything silly you will be ever so sorry,” she said. “Go down into the hall and talk to Jo. Keep him where the stove is, with his back to the door.”

“But how am I to do it?” the girl asked.

“Take him something to eat,” Miss Schuyler said impatiently. “Any way, it should not be hard to fool him—I have seen him looking at you. Now, I wonder if that grey dress of mine would fit you—I have scarcely had it on, but it’s a little too tight for me.”

The girl’s eyes glistened, she moved swiftly down the corridor, Flora Schuyler laughed, and Grant looked away.

“Larry,” said Hetty, “it isn’t just what one would like—but I am afraid it is necessary.”

Five minutes later Hetty moved across the hall, making a little noise, so that the cow-boy, who stood near the other end of it, with the maid close by him, should notice her. She softly opened the outer door, and then came back and signed to Grant and Flora Schuyler, who stood waiting in the corridor.

“No,” he said, and the lamplight showed a darker hue than the bronze of frost and sun in his face. “Miss Schuyler, I have never felt quite so mean before, and you will leave the rest to me.”

“It seems to me,” she said coolly, “that what you feel does not count for much. Just now you have to do what is best for everybody. Stoop as low as you can.”

She stretched out her hand with a little imperious gesture, and laid it on his arm, drawing herself up to her full height as she stood between him and the light. They moved forward together, and Hetty closed her hand as she watched them pass into the hall. The end was dim and shadowy, for the one big lamp that was lighted stood some distance away by the stove, where the man on watch was talking to the maid. Hetty realized that the girl was playing her part well as she saw her make a swift step backwards, and heard the man’s low laugh.

Flora Schuyler and Grant were not far from the door now, the girl walking close to her companion. In another moment they would have passed out of sight into the shadow, but while Hetty felt her fingers trembling, the man on watch, perhaps hearing their footsteps, turned round.

“Hallo!” he said. “It seems kind of cold. What can Miss Schuyler want with opening the door? Is that Miss Torrance behind her?”

He moved forward a pace, apparently not looking where he was going, but towards the door, and might have moved further, but that the maid swiftly stretched out one foot, and a chair with the tray laid on it went over with a crash.

“Now there’s going to be trouble. See what you’ve done,” she said.

The man stopped, staring at the wreck upon the floor.

“Well,” he said, “I’m blamed if I touched the thing. What made it fall over, any way?”

“Pick them up,” the girl said sharply. “You don’t want to make trouble for me!”

He stooped, and Hetty gasped with relief as she saw him carefully scraping some dainty from the floor, for just then one of the two figures slipped away from the other, and there was a sound that might have been made by a softly closing door. The cow-boy looked up quickly, and saw Miss Torrance and Miss Schuyler standing close together, then stood up as they came towards him. Hetty paused and surveyed the overturned crockery, and then, though her heart was throbbing painfully, gave the man a glance of ironical inquiry. He looked at the maid as if for inspiration, but she stood meekly still, the picture of bashful confusion.

“I’m quite sorry, Miss Torrance,” he said. “The concerned thing went over.”

Hetty laughed. “Well,” she said, “it’s a very cold night, and Lou can get you some more supper. She is, however, not to stay here a minute after she has given it you.”

She went out with Miss Schuyler, and the two stood very silent by a window in the corridor. One of them fancied she saw a shadowy object slip round the corner of a barn, but could not be sure, and for five very long minutes they stared at the faintly shining snow. Nothing moved upon it, and save for the maid’s voice in the hall, the great building was very still. Hetty touched Miss Schuyler’s arm.

“He has got away,” she said. “Come back with me. I don’t feel like standing up any longer.”

They sat down limply when they returned to the little room, and though Miss Schuyler did not meet her companion’s gaze, there was something that did not seem to please the latter in her face.

“Flo,” she said, “one could almost fancy you felt it as much as I did. It was awfully nice of you.”

Miss Schuyler smiled, though there was a tension in her voice. “Of course I felt it,” she said. “Hetty, I’d watch that maid of yours. She’s too clever.”

Hetty said nothing for a moment, then, suddenly crossing the room, she stooped down and kissed Miss Schuyler.

“I have never met any one who would do as much for me as you would, Flo,” she said. “I don’t think there is anything that could come between us.”

There was silence for another moment, and during it Miss Schuyler looked steadily into Hetty’s eyes. “No,” she said, “although you do not seem quite sure, I don’t think there is.”

It was early the next morning when Christopher Allonby arrived at the Range. He smiled as he glanced at the packet Hetty handed him.

“I have never seen your father anything but precise,” he said.

“Has anything led you to fancy that he has changed?” asked Hetty.

Allonby laughed as he held out the packet. “The envelope is all creased and crumpled. It might have been carried round for ever so long in somebody’s pocket. Now, I know you don’t smoke, Hetty.”

“There is no reason why I should not, but, as it happens, I don’t,” said Miss Torrance.

“Then, the packet has a most curious, cigar-like smell,” said Allonby, smiling. “Now, I don’t think Mr. Torrance carries loose cigars and letters about with him together. I wonder what deduction one could make from this.”

Hetty glanced at Miss Schuyler. “You could never make the right one, Chris,” she said.

Allonby said nothing further and went out with the letter; a day or two later he handed it to the Sheriff.

“I guess you know what’s inside it?” said the latter.

“Yes,” said the lad. “I want to see you count them now.”

The Sheriff glanced at him sharply, took out a roll of bills and flicked them over.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s quite right; but one piece of what I have to do is going to be difficult.”

“Which?” said Allonby.

“Well,” said the Sheriff, “I guess you know. I mean the getting hold of Larry.”

XVII

LARRY'S PERIL

One afternoon several days later, Christopher Allonby drove over to Cedar Range, and, though he endeavoured to hide his feelings, was evidently disconcerted when he discovered that Miss Schuyler and Hetty were alone. Torrance had affairs of moment on hand just then, and was absent from Cedar Range frequently.

"One could almost have fancied you were not pleased to see us, and would sooner have talked to Mr. Torrance," said Miss Schuyler.

The lad glanced at her reproachfully.

"Hetty knows how diffident I am, but it seems to me a lady with your observation should have seen the gratification I did not venture to express."

"It was not remarkably evident," said Miss Schuyler. "In fact, when you heard Mr. Torrance was not here I fancied I saw something else."

"I was thinking," said Allonby, "wondering how I could be honest and, at the same time, complimentary to everybody. It was quite difficult. People like me generally think of the right thing afterwards, you see."

Hetty shook her head. "Sit down, and don't talk nonsense, Chris," she said. "You shouldn't think too much; when you're not accustomed to it, it isn't wise. What brought you?"

"I had a message for your father," said the lad, and Flora Schuyler fancied she saw once more the signs of embarrassment in his face.

"Then," said Hetty, "you can tell it me."

"There's a good deal of it, and it's just a little confusing," said Allonby.

Flora Schuyler glanced at Hetty, and then smiled at the lad. "That is certainly not complimentary," she said. "Don't you think Hetty and I could remember anything that you can?"

Allonby laughed. "Of course you could. But, I had my instructions. I was told to give Mr. Torrance the message as soon as I could, without troubling anybody."

"Then it is of moment?"

"Yes. That is, we want him to know, though there's really nothing in it that need worry anybody."

"Then, it is unfortunate that my father is away," said Hetty.

Allonby sat silent a moment or two, apparently reflecting, and then looked up suddenly, as though he had found the solution of the difficulty.

"I could write him."

Hetty laughed. "That was an inspiration! You can be positively brilliant, Chris. You will find paper and special envelopes in the office, as well as a big stick of sealing-wax."

Allonby, who appeared unable to find a neat rejoinder, went out; and when he left Flora Schuyler smiled as she saw the carefully fastened envelope lying on Torrance's desk, as well as something else. Torrance was fastidiously neat, and the blotting pad from which the soiled sheets had been removed bore the impress of Christopher Allonby's big, legible writing. It was, however, a little blurred, and Miss Schuyler, who had her scruples, made no attempt to read it then. It was the next afternoon, and Torrance had not yet returned, when a mounted man rode up to the Range, and was shown into the room where the girls sat together.

"Mr. Clavering will be kind of sorry Mr. Torrance wasn't here, but he has got it fixed quite straight," he said.

"What has he fixed?" said Hetty.

"Well," said the man, "your father knows, and I don't, though I've a kind of notion we are after one of the homestead-

boys. Any way, what I had to tell him was this. He could ride over to the Cedar Bluff at about six this evening with two or three of the boys, if it suited him, but if it didn't, Mr. Clavering would put the thing through."

Hetty asked one or two leading questions, but the man had evidently nothing more to tell, and when he went out, the two girls looked at one another in silence. Hetty's eyes were anxious and her face more colourless than usual.

"Flo," she said sharply, "are we thinking the same thing?"

"I don't know," said Miss Schuyler. "You have not told me your notions yet. Still, this is clear to both of us, Mr. Clavering expects to meet somebody at the Cedar Bluff, and your father is to bring two or three men with him. The question is, what could they be wanted for?"

"No," said Hetty, with a little quiver in her voice, "it is who they expect to meet. You know what day this is?"

"Wednesday."

Once more there was silence for a few seconds, but the thoughts of the two girls were unconcealed now, and when she spoke Hetty closed her hand.

"Think, Flo. There must be no uncertainty." Miss Schuyler slipped out of the room and when she came back she brought an envelope, splashed with red wax, on a blotting-pad.

"There's the key. All is fair—in war!" she said.

A pink tinge crept into Hetty's cheeks, and a sparkle into her eyes as she looked at her companion.

"Don't make me angry with you, Flo," she said. "We can't read it."

"No?" said Miss Schuyler quietly, holding up the pad. "Now I think we can. This is another manifestation of the superiority of the masculine mind. Give me your hand-glass, Hetty."

"Of course," said Hetty, with a little gasp. "Still—it's horribly mean."

There was a slightly contemptuous hardness in Flora Schuyler's eyes. "If you let the man who rides by the bluff on Wednesdays fall into Clavering's hands, it would be meaner still."

The next moment Hetty was out of the room, and Miss Schuyler sat down with a face that had grown suddenly weary. But it betrayed nothing when Hetty came back with the glass, and when she held up the blotter in hands that were perfectly steady, they read:

"I have fixed it with the Sheriff. Clavering's boys had, as you guessed, been watching for Larry on the wrong day; but now we have found out it is Wednesday we'll make sure of him. If you care to come around to the bluff about six that night, you will probably see us seize him; but if you would sooner stand out in this case, it wouldn't count. We don't expect any difficulty."

Hetty flushed crimson. "Flo," she said, "it was the letter arranging his own arrest he brought me back."

"That is not the point," said Miss Schuyler sharply. "What are you going to do?"

Hetty laughed mockingly. "You and I are going to drive over to the Newcombes and stay the night. You get nervous when my father is away. But we are not going there quite straight; and you had better put your warmest things on."

An hour later two of the best horses in Torrance's stable drew the lightest sleigh up to the door, and Miss Schuyler turned with a smile to the remonstrating housekeeper.

"Nothing would induce me to stay here another night when Mr. Torrance was away," she said. "You can tell him that, if he is vexed with Hetty, and you needn't worry. We will be safe at Mrs. Newcombe's before an hour is over."

The housekeeper shook her head. "I guess not. It's a league round by the bridge, and you couldn't find the other trail in the dark."

Miss Schuyler laughed. "Then, look at the time, and we'll let you know when we get there," she said.

Hetty whipped the team, and with a whirling of dusty snow beneath the runners, they swept away. Both sat silent, until the beat of hoofs rang amidst the trees as they swept through the gloom of the big bluff at a gallop, and Hetty laughed excitedly.

"Hold fast, Flo. You did that very well; but we have our alibi to prove, and are not going near the bridge," she said.

She flicked the horses, and the trees swept away behind them and the long white levels rolled back faster yet to the drumming hoofs. The rush of cold wind stung Miss Schuyler's face like the lash of a whip, her eyes grew hazy, and she held the furs about her as she swayed with the lurching of the sleigh. Darkness was closing in when they came to the forking of the trail, and, with a little cry of warning, Hetty lashed the team. The lurches grew sharper, and Miss Schuyler gasped now and then as she felt the sleigh swing rocking down a long declivity. Scattered birches raced up out of it, and the hammering beat of hoofs swelled into a roar as it rolled along a thicker belt of trees.

They rose higher and higher, a dusky wall athwart the way, and Miss Schuyler felt for a better hold for her feet, and grasped the big strapped robe as she looked in vain for any opening. That team had done nothing for more than a week, and there was no stinting of oats and maize at Cedar. Hetty, however, did not attempt to hold them, but sat swaying to the jolting, leaning forward as the shadowy barrier rushed up towards them, until, before she quite realized how they got there, Miss Schuyler found herself hurled forward down what appeared to be a steadily sloping tunnel. Dim trees swept by and drooping boughs lashed at her. Now and then there was a sharp crackling or a sickening lurch, and still they sped on furiously, until a faint white shining appeared ahead.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"The river," said Hetty. "Hold fast! There's a piece like a toboggan-leap quite near."

She flung herself backwards as the lace-like birch twigs smote her furs; and when one of the horses stumbled Miss Schuyler with difficulty stifled a cry. The beast, however, picked up its stride again, there was a lurch, and the rocking sleigh appeared to leap clear of the snow. A crash followed, and they were flying out of the shadow again across a strip of faintly shining plain with another belt of dusky trees rolling back towards them. Beyond them, low in the soft indigo, a pale star was shining. Hetty glanced at it as she shook the reins, and once more something in her laugh stirred Miss Schuyler.

"I know when that star comes out," she said. "If Larry's only there we can warn him and make our ride on time."

In another minute they were in among the trees, and Hetty, springing down, plodded through the loose snow at the horses' heads, urging them with hand and voice up the incline which wound tortuously into the darkness. Now and then, one of them stumbled, and there was a great trampling of hoofs, but the girl's mittened hand never loosed its grasp; and it was with a little breathless run she clutched the sleigh and swung herself in when the team swept out on the level again. Still, at least a minute had passed before she had the horses in hand. The trail forked again somewhere in the dimness they were flashing through, and it was difficult to see the dusky smear at all.

A lurch that flung Miss Schuyler against her showed that Hetty had found the turning; and a little later, with a struggle, she checked the team, and they slid behind one of the low, rolling rises that seamed the prairie here and there. There was no wind in the hollow behind it and a great stillness under the high vault of blue studded with twinkling stars. The dim whiteness of a long ridge cut sharply against it, and the pale colouring and frosty glitter conveyed the suggestion of pitiless cold. Flora Schuyler shivered, and drew the furs closer round her.

"Is this the place?" she asked.

"Yes," said Hetty, with a little gasp. "If we don't meet him here he will have passed or gone by the other trail, and it will be too late to stop him. Can you hear anything, Flo?"

Miss Schuyler strained her ears, but, though the horses were walking now, she could hear nothing. The deep silence round them was emphasized by the soft trample of the hoofs and thin jingle of steel that seemed unreal and out of place there in the wilderness of snow and stars.

"No," she said, in a strained voice; "I can hear nothing at all. It almost makes one afraid to listen."

They drove slowly for a minute or two, and then Hetty pulled up the team. "I can't go on, and it is worse to stand still," she said. "Flo, if he didn't stop—and he wouldn't—they would shoot him. He must be coming. Listen. There's a horrible buzzing in my ears—I can't hear at all."

Miss Schuyler listened for what appeared an interminable time, and wondered afterwards that she had borne the tension without a sign. The great stillness grew overwhelming now the team had stopped, and there was that in the utter cold and sense of desolation that weighed her courage down. She felt her insignificance in the face of that vast emptiness and destroying frost, and wondered at the rashness of herself and Hetty and Larry Grant who had ventured to believe they could make any change in the great inexorable scheme of which everything that was to be was part. Miss Schuyler was

not fanciful, but during the last hour she had borne a heavy strain, and the deathly stillness of the northwestern waste under the Arctic frost is apt to leave its impress on the most unimaginative.

Suddenly very faint and far off, a rhythmic throbbing crept out of the darkness, and Flora Schuyler, who, fearing her ears had deceived her at first, dared not speak, felt her chilled blood stir when Hetty flung back her head.

“Flo—can’t you hear it? Tell me!”

Miss Schuyler nodded, for she could not trust her voice just then; but the sound had grown louder while she listened and now it seemed flung back by the rise. Then, she lost it altogether as Hetty shook the reins and the sleigh went on again. In a few minutes, however, there was an answer to the thud of hoofs, and another soft drumming that came quivering through it sank and swelled again. By and by a clear, musical jingling broke in, and at last, when a moving object swung round a bend of the rise, a voice that rang harsh and commanding reached them.

“Pull right up there, and wait until we see who you are,” it said.

“Larry!” cried Hetty; and the second time her strained voice broke and died away. “Larry!”

It was less than a minute later when a sleigh stopped close in front of them, and, leaving one man in it, Grant sprang stiffly down. It took Hetty a minute or two more to make her warning plain, and Miss Schuyler found it necessary to put in a word of amplification occasionally. Then, Grant signed to the other man.

“Will you drive Miss Schuyler slowly in the direction she was going, Breckenridge?” he said. “Hetty, I want to talk to you, and can’t keep you here.”

Hetty was too cold to reflect, and, almost before she knew how he had accomplished it, found herself in Grant’s sleigh and the man piling the robes about her. When he wheeled the horses she was only conscious that he was very close to her and that Breckenridge and Miss Schuyler were driving slowly a little distance in front of them. Then, glancing up, as though under compulsion, she saw that Grant was looking down upon her.

“It is not what I meant to tell you, but doesn’t this remind you of old times, Hetty?” he said.

“I don’t want to remember them—and what have they to do with what concerns us now?” said the girl.

There was a new note in the man’s voice that was almost exultant in its quietness. “A good deal, I think. Hetty, if you hadn’t driven so often beside me here, would you have done what you have to-night?”

“No,” said the girl tremulously.

“No,” Grant said. “You have done a rash as well as a very generous thing.”

“It was rash; but what could I do? We were, as you remind me, good friends once.”

“Yes,” he said. “I can’t thank you, Hetty—thanks of any kind wouldn’t be adequate—and there is nothing else I can offer to show my gratitude, because all I had was yours already. You have known that a long while, haven’t you?”

The girl looked away from him. “I was not good enough to understand its value at first, and when I did I tried to make you take it back.”

“I couldn’t,” he said gently. “It was perhaps worth very little; but it was all I had, and—since that day by the river—I never asked for anything in return. It was very hard not to now and then, but I saw that you had only kindness to spare for me.”

“Then why do you talk of it again?”

“I think,” said Grant very quietly, “it is different now. After to-night nothing can be quite the same again. Hetty, dear, if you had missed me and I had ridden on to the bridge——”

“Stop!” said the girl with a shiver. “I dare not think of it. Larry, can’t you see that just now you must not talk in that strain to me?”

“But there is a difference?” and Grant looked at her steadily.

For a moment the girl returned his gaze, her face showing very white in the faint light flung up by the snow; but she sat very straight and still, and the man’s passion suddenly fell from him.

“Yes,” she said softly, “there is. I was only sure of it when I fancied I had missed you a few minutes ago; but that can’t

affect us, Larry. We can neither of us go back on those we belong to, and I know how mean I was when I tried to tempt you. You were staunch, and if I were less so, you would not respect me."

Grant sighed. "You still believe your father right?"

"Yes," said Hetty. "I must hope so; and if he is wrong, I still belong to him."

"But you can believe that I am right, too?"

"Yes," said Hetty simply. "I am, at least, certain you think you are. Still, it may be a long and bitter while before we see this trouble through. I have done too much to-night—that is, had it been for anyone but you—and you will not make my duty too hard for me."

Larry's pulses were throbbing furiously; but he had many times already checked the passionate outbreak that he knew would have banished any passing tenderness the girl had for him.

"No, my dear," he said. "But the trouble can't last for ever, and when it is over you will come to me? I have been waiting—even when I felt it was hopeless—year after year for you."

Hetty smiled gravely. "Whether I shall ever be able to do that, Larry, neither you nor I can tell; but at least I shall never listen to anyone else. That is all I can promise; and we must go on, each of us doing what is put before us, and hoping for the best."

Larry swept off his fur cap, and, stooping, kissed her on the cheek. "It is the first time, Hetty. I will wait patiently for the next; but I shall see you now and then?"

The girl showed as little sign of resentment as she did of passion. "If I meet you; but that must come by chance," she said. "I want you to think the best of me, and if the time should come, I know I would be proud of you. You have never done a mean thing since I knew you, Larry, and that means a good deal now."

Grant pulled the team up in silence, and called to Breckenridge, who checked his horses and getting down looked straight in front of him as his comrade handed Hetty into her sleigh. Then they stood still, saying nothing while the team swept away.

Hetty was also silent, though she drove furiously, and Flora Schuyler did not consider it advisable to ask any questions, while the rush of icy wind and rocking of the sleigh afforded scanty opportunity for conversation. She was also very cold, and greatly relieved, when a blink of light rose out of the snow. Five minutes later somebody handed her out of the sleigh, and she saw a man glance at the team.

"You have been sending them along. Was it you or Hetty who drove, Miss Schuyler?" he said.

Flora Schuyler laughed. "Hetty, of course; but I want you to remember when we came in," she said, mentioning when they left Cedar. "I told Mrs. Ashley we would get here inside an hour, and she wouldn't believe me."

"If anyone wants to know when you came in, send them to me," said the man. "There are not many horses that could have made it in the time."

XVIII

A FUTILE PURSUIT

Hetty's sleigh was sliding, a dim moving shadow, round a bend in the rise when Breckenridge touched his comrade, who stood gazing silently across the prairie.

"It's abominably cold, Larry," he said, with a shiver. "Hadn't we better get on?"

Grant said nothing as he took his place on the driving-seat, and the team had plodded slowly along the trail for at least five minutes before he spoke.

"You heard what Miss Torrance told me?" he said.

"Yes," Breckenridge said. "I notice, however, we are still heading for the bridge. Can't you cross the ice, Larry?"

"If I wanted to I fancy I could."

"Then why don't you?"

Grant laughed. "Well," he said, "there's only one trail through the bluff, and it's not the kind I'm fond of driving over in the dark."

Breckenridge twisted in his seat, and looked at him. "Pshaw!" he said. "It would be a good deal less risky than meeting the Sheriff at the bridge. You are not going to do anything senseless, Larry?"

"No; only what seems necessary."

Breckenridge considered. "Now," he said slowly, "I can guess what you're thinking, and, of course, it's commendable; but one has to be reasonable. Is there anything that could excite the least suspicion that Miss Torrance warned you?"

"There are two or three little facts that only need putting together."

"Still, if we called at Muller's and drove home by the other trail it wouldn't astonish anybody."

"It would appear a little too much of a coincidence in connection with the fact that Miss Torrance and I were known to be good friends, and the time she left Cedar. As the cattle-men have evidently found out, I have crossed the bridge at about the same time every Wednesday; and two of the cow-boys saw us near Harper's."

"Larry," said Breckenridge, "if you were merely one of the rest your intentions would no doubt become you, but the point is that every homesteader round here is dependent on you. If you went down, the opposition to the cattle-men would collapse, or there would be general anarchy, and that is precisely why Torrance and the Sheriff are anxious to get their hands on you. Now, doesn't it strike you that it's your plain duty to keep clear of any unnecessary peril?"

Grant shook his head. "No," he said. "It seems to me that argument has quite frequently accounted for a good deal of meanness. It is tolerably presumptuous for any man to consider himself indispensable."

"Well," said Breckenridge, divided between anger and approval, "I have found out already that it's seldom any use trying to convince you, but each time you made this round I've driven with you, and it's quite obvious that if one of us crossed the bridge it would suit the purpose. Now, I don't think the Sheriff could rake up very much against me."

Grant laid his hand on the lad's shoulder. "I'm going to cross the bridge, but I don't purpose that either of us should fall into the Sheriff's clutches," he said. "You saw what Jardine's glass had gone down to?"

Breckenridge nodded. "It dropped like that before the last blizzard we had."

Grant turned and looked about him, and Breckenridge shivered as he followed his gaze. They had driven out from behind the rise now and a bitter wind met them in the face. There was not very much of it as yet, but all feeling seemed to die out of the lad's cheeks under it, and it brought a little doleful moaning out of the darkness. Behind them stars shone frostily in the soft indigo, but elsewhere a deepening obscurity was creeping up across the prairie, and sky and snow were blurred and merged one into the other.

"There's one meaning to that," said Grant. "We'll have snow in an hour or two, and when it comes it's going to be difficult to see anything. In the meanwhile, we'll drive round by Busby's and get our supper while the cow-boys cool.

The man who hangs around a couple of hours doing nothing in a frost of this kind is not to be relied upon when he's wanted in a hurry."

He flicked the horses, and in half an hour the pair were sitting in a lonely log-house beside a glowing stove while its owner prepared a meal. Two other men with bronzed faces sat close by, and Breckenridge fancied he had never seen his comrade so cheerful. His cares seemed to have fallen from him, his laugh had a pleasant ring, and there was something in his eyes which had not been there for many weary months. Breckenridge wondered whether it could be due to anything Miss Torrance had said to him, but kept his thoughts to himself, for that was a subject upon which one could not ask questions.

In the meanwhile, Clavering and the Sheriff found the time pass much less pleasantly—on the bluff. The wind that whistled through it grew colder as one by one the stars faded out, and there was a mournful wailing amidst the trees. Now and then, a shower of twigs came rattling down from branches dried to brittleness by the frost, and the Sheriff brushed them off disgustedly, as, huddling lower in the sleigh from which the horses had been taken out, he packed the robes round him. He had lived softly, and it would have suited him considerably better to have spent that bitter evening in the warmth and security of Clavering's ranch.

"No sign of him yet?" he said, when Christopher Allonby and Clavering came up together. "Larry will stay at home to-night. He has considerably more sense than we seem to have."

"I have seen nothing," said Allonby, who, in the hope of restoring his circulation, had walked up the trail. "Still, the night is getting thicker, and nobody could make a sleigh out until it drove right up to him."

"If Larry did come, you could hear him," said the Sheriff.

Allonby lifted his hand, and, as if to supply the answer, with a great thrashing of frost-nipped twigs the birches roared about them. The blast that lashed them also hurled the icy dust of snow into the Sheriff's face.

"I don't know," said the lad. "Nobody could hear very much through that."

"Ugh!" said the Sheriff. "We will have a blizzard on us before long, and Government pay doesn't warrant one taking chances of that kind. Aren't we playing a fool's game, Clavering?"

Clavering laughed somewhat unpleasantly. "There are other emoluments attached to your office which should cover a little inconvenience," he said. "Now, I fancy I know Larry Grant better than the rest of you, and it would take quite a large-sized blizzard to keep him at home when he had anything to do. Once you put him out of the way it will make things a good deal more pleasant for everybody. Larry is the one man with any brains the homesteaders have in this part of the country, and while they would make no show without him, we can expect nothing but trouble while he's at liberty. It seems to me that warrants our putting up with a little unpleasantness."

"Quite improving!" said Allonby, who was not in the best of temper just then. "One could almost wonder if you had any personal grudge against the man, Clavering. You are so astonishingly disinterested when you talk of him. Now, if I didn't like a man I'd make an opportunity of telling him."

Clavering laughed. "You're young, Chris, or you wouldn't worry about folks' motives when their efforts suit you. What are the men doing?"

"Freezing, and grumbling!" said Allonby. "They've made up their minds to get Larry this time or we wouldn't have kept them here. It's the horses I'm anxious about. They seem to know what is coming, and they're going to give us trouble."

"A fool's game!" repeated the Sheriff, with a shiver. "Got any of those cigars with you, Clavering? If I'm to stay here, I have to smoke."

Clavering threw him the case and turned away with Allonby. They went down through the bluff together and stood a few moments looking up the trail. It led downwards towards them, a streak of faintly shining whiteness, through the gloom of the trees, and the wind that set the branches thrashing whirled powdery snow into their faces, though whether this came down from the heavens or was uplifted from the frozen soil they did not know. With eyes dimmed and tingling cheeks, they moved back again amidst the birches; but even there it was bitterly cold, and Allonby was glad to turn his face from the wind a moment as they stopped to glance at the tethered horses. They were stamping impatiently, while the man on watch, who would have patted one of them, sprang backwards when the beast lashed out at him.

"If Larry doesn't come soon, I guess we're going to find it hard to keep them here," he said. "They're 'most pulling the branches they're hitched to off the trees."

Allonby nodded. “Larry would be flattered if he knew the trouble you and I were taking over him, Clavering,” he said. “It’s also the first time I’ve seen you worry much about this kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Citizen’s duty! I think that’s the way you put it?”

Clavering laughed. “If you want to be unpleasant, Chris, can’t you try a different line? That one’s played out. It’s too cold to quarrel.”

“I don’t feel pleasant,” said Allonby. “In fact, I don’t like this thing, any way. Before Larry got stuck with his notions he was a friend of mine.”

“If the boys don’t get too cold to shoot it’s quite likely he will be nobody’s friend to-morrow,” said Clavering cruelly. “We’ll go round and look at them.”

They went back into the trail once more, and the icy gusts struck through them as they plodded up it; but they found no man keeping watch beside it, as there should have been. The cow-boys had drawn back for shelter among the trees, and Clavering, who found them stamping and shivering, had some difficulty in getting them to their posts again. They had been there two hours, and the cold was almost insupportable.

“I guess it’s no use,” said Allonby. “As soon as we have gone on every boy will be back behind his tree, and I don’t know that anybody could blame them. Any way I’m ’most too cold for talking.”

They went back together, and, while the cow-boys, who did as Allonby had predicted, slowly froze among the trees, rolled themselves in the sleigh-robes and huddled together. It was blowing strongly now, and a numbing drowsiness had to be grappled with as the warmth died out of them. At last when a few feathery flakes came floating down, the Sheriff shook himself with a sleepy groan.

“There is not a man living who could keep me here more than another quarter of an hour,” he said. “Are the boys on the look-out by the trail, Allonby?”

“They were,” said the lad drowsily. “I don’t know if they’re there now, and it isn’t likely. Clavering can go and make sure if he likes to, but if anyone wants me to get up, he will have to lift me.”

Neither Clavering nor the Sheriff appeared disposed to move, and it was evident that both had abandoned all hope of seeing Larry Grant that night. Ten minutes that seemed interminable passed, and the white flakes that whirled about them grew thicker between the gusts and came down in a bewildering rush. The Sheriff shook the furs off him and stood up with a groan.

“Tell them to bring the horses. I have had quite enough,” he said.

Allonby staggered to his feet, and reeled into the wood. There was a hoarse shouting, and a trampling of hoofs that was drowned in a roar of wind, and when that slackened a moment a faint cry went up.

“Hallo!” said the Sheriff; “he’s coming.”

Then, nobody quite remembered what he did. Here and there a man struggled with a plunging horse in the darkness of the wood, and one or two blundered into each other and fell against the trunks as they ran on foot. They were dazed with cold, and the snow, that seemed to cut their cheeks, was in their eyes.

Allonby, however, saw that Clavering was mounted, and the horse he rode apparently going round and round with him, while by and by he found himself in the saddle. He was leaning low over the horse’s neck, with one moccasined foot in the stirrup and the other hanging loose, while the branches lashed at him, when something dark and shapeless came flying down the trail.

He heard a hoarse shout and a rifle flashed, but the wind drowned the sound and before he was in the trail the sleigh, which was what he supposed the thing to be, had flashed by. One cannot handily fit spurs to moccasins, and, as his hands were almost useless, it was some time before he induced the horse, which desired to go home uphill, to take the opposite direction. Then, he was off at a gallop, with a man whom he supposed to be Clavering in front of him, and the Sheriff, who seemed to be shouting instructions, at his side. Allonby did not think that anybody heard them, but that was of no great moment to him then, for the trail was narrow and slippery here and there, and he was chiefly concerned with the necessity of keeping clear of his companion. He could not see the sleigh now and scarcely fancied that anybody else did,

but he could hear the beat of hoofs in front of him when the wind sank a trifle, and rode on furiously down-hill at a gallop. The horse had apparently yielded to its terror of the storm, and Allonby had more than a suspicion that, had he wanted to, he could neither have turned it nor pulled it up.

Clavering still held in front of him, but the Sheriff was dropping back a little, and the lad did not know whether any of the rest were following. He was, however, certain that, barring a fall, a mounted man could overtake a sleigh, and that the up grade beyond the bridge would tell on the beasts that dragged a weight behind them. So while the snow whirled past him and the dim trees flashed by, he urged on the beast until he heard the bridge rattle under him and felt the pace slacken—the trail had begun to lead steeply up out of the hollow.

The horse was flagging a little by the time they reached the crest of the rise, and for a few moments Allonby saw nothing at all. The roar of the trees deafened him, and the wind drove the snow into his eyes. Then, as he gasped and shook it from him when the gust had passed, he dimly made out something that moved amidst the white haze and guessed that it was Clavering. If that were so, he felt it was more than likely that the sleigh was close in front of him. A few minutes later he had come up with the man whose greater weight was telling, and while they rode stirrup to stirrup and neck by neck, Allonby fancied there was something dim and shadowy in front of them.

Clavering shouted as he dropped behind, and Allonby who failed to catch what he said was alone, blinking at the filmy whiteness, through which he had blurred glimpses of the object ahead, now growing more distinct. He could also, when the wind allowed it, hear the dull beat of hoofs. How long it took him to overtake it he could never remember; but at last the sleigh was very close to him, and he shouted. There was no answer; but Allonby, who could scarcely hear his own voice, did not consider this astonishing, and tried again. Still no answer came back, and, coming up with the sleigh at every stride, he dragged the butt of his sling rifle round and fumbled at the strap with a numbed and almost useless hand.

He could see the back of the sleigh, but nothing else, and lurching perilously in the saddle he got the rifle in his hand; but, cold and stiffened as he was, he dared not loose his grasp on the bridle, and so, with the butt at his hip, he raced up level with the sleigh. Then, the horse, perhaps edged off the beaten trail into the snow outside it, blundered in its stride, and the rifle, that fell as the lad swayed, was left behind. He had both hands on the bridle the next moment, and leaning down sideways fancied there was nobody in the sleigh. It took him a second or two to make quite sure of it, and at least a minute more before he brought the horse to a standstill in the trail. By that time the sleigh had swept on into the sliding whiteness. Wheeling his horse, Clavering rode out of the snow and pulled up in evident astonishment.

“Have you let him get away?” he gasped.

“He wasn’t there,” said Allonby.

“Not there! I saw him and another man when they drove past us in the bluff.”

“Well,” said Allonby, “I’m quite certain there’s nobody in that sleigh now.”

The wind that roared about them cut short the colloquy, and a minute or two later Allonby became sensible that Clavering was speaking again.

“Larry and the other man must have dropped into the soft snow when the team slowed up on the up grade, knowing the horses would go on until they reached their stable,” he said. “Well, they’ll be away through the bluff now, and a brigade of cavalry would scarcely find them on such a night. In fact, we will have to trust the beasts to take us home.”

Just then the Sheriff, with one or two cow-boys, rode up, and Allonby, who did not like the man, laughed as he signed him to stop.

“You can go back and get your driving horses in. We have been chasing a sleigh with no one in it,” he said. “Larry has beaten us again!”

XIX

TORRANCE ASKS A QUESTION

There was but one lamp lighted in the hall at Cedar Range, and that was turned low, but there was light enough to satisfy Clavering, who stood beneath it with Hetty's maid close beside him and a little red leather case in his hand. The girl's eyes were eager, but they were fixed upon the case and not the man, who had seen the keenness in them and was not displeased. Clavering had met other women in whom cupidity was at least as strong as vanity.

"Now I wonder if you can guess what is inside there, and who it is for," he said.

The maid drew a trifle nearer, stooping slightly over the man's hand, and she probably knew that the trace of shyness, which was not all assumed, became her. She was also distinctly conscious that the pose she fell into displayed effectively a prettily rounded figure.

"Something for Miss Torrance?" she said.

Clavering's laugh was, as his companion noticed, not quite spontaneous. "No," he said. "I guess you know as well as I do that Miss Torrance would not take anything of this kind from me. She has plenty of them already."

The maid knew this was a fact, for she had occasionally spent a delightful half-hour adorning herself with Hetty's jewellery.

"Well," she said, with a little tremor of anticipation in her voice, "what is inside it?"

Clavering laid the case in her hand. "It is yours," he said. "Just press that spring."

It was done, and she gasped as a gleam of gold and a coloured gleam met her eyes. "My!" she said. "They're real—and it's for me?"

Clavering smiled a little, and taking her fingers lightly closed them on the case.

"Of course," he said. "Well, you're pleased with it?"

The sparkle in the girl's eyes and the little flush in her face was plain enough, but the man's soft laugh was perfectly genuine. It was scarcely a gift he had made her; but while he expected that the outlay upon the trinket would be repaid him, he could be generous when it suited him, and was quite aware that a less costly lure would have served his purpose equally. He also knew when it was advisable to offer something more tasteful than the obtrusive dollar.

"Oh," said the girl, "it's just lovely!"

Clavering, who had discretion, did not look round, but, though he kept his dark eyes on his companion's face, he listened carefully. He could hear the wind outside, and the crackle of the stove, but nothing else, and knew that the footsteps of anyone approaching would ring tolerably distinctly down the corridor behind the hall. He also remembered that the big door nearest them was shut.

"Well," he said, "it wouldn't do to put anything that wasn't pretty on a neck like that, and I wonder if you would let me fix it."

The girl made no protest; but though she saw the admiration in the man's dark eyes as she covertly looked up, it would have pleased her better had he been a trifle more clumsy. His words and glances were usually bold enough, but, as he clasped the little brooch on, his fingers were almost irritatingly deft and steady. Men, she knew, did not make fools of themselves from a purely artistic appreciation of feminine comeliness.

"Now," she said, slipping away from him with a blush, "I wonder what you expect for this."

Clavering's eyebrows went up and there was a faint assumption of haughtiness in his face, which became it.

"Only the pleasure of seeing it where it is. It's a gift," he said.

"Well," said the girl, "that was very kind of you; but you're quite sure you never gave Miss Torrance anything of this kind?"

"No. I think I told you so."

The maid was not convinced. “But,” she said, looking at him sideways, “I thought you did. She has a little gold chain, very thin, and not like the things they make now—and just lately she is always wearing it.”

“I never saw it.”

The girl smiled significantly. “I guess that’s not astonishing. She wears it low down on her neck—and the curious thing is that it lay by and she never looked at it for ever so long.”

Clavering felt that the dollars the trinket had cost him had not been wasted; but though he concealed his disgust tolerably well, the maid noticed it. She had, however, vague ambitions, and a scarcely warranted conviction that, given a fair field, she could prove herself a match for her mistress.

“Then, if it wasn’t you, it must have been the other man,” she said.

“The other man?”

“Yes,” with a laugh. “The one I took the wallet with the dollars to.”

Clavering hoped he had not betrayed his astonishment; but she had seen the momentary flash in his eyes and the involuntary closing of his hand.

“Now,” he said firmly, “that can’t be quite straight, and one should be very careful about saying that kind of thing.”

The girl looked at him steadily. “Still, I took a wallet with dollar bills in it to Mr. Grant—at night. I met him on the bluff, and Miss Torrance sent them him.”

It was possible that Clavering would have heard more had he followed the line of conduct he had adopted at first; but he stood thoughtfully silent instead, which did not by any means please his companion as well. He had a vague notion that this was a mistake; but the anger he did not show was too strong for him. Then, he fancied he heard a footstep on the stairway, and laughed in a somewhat strained fashion.

“Well, we needn’t worry about that; and I guess if I stay here any longer, Mr. Torrance will be wondering where I have gone,” he said.

He went out by one door, and a few moments later Miss Schuyler came in by another. She swept a hasty glance round the hall, most of which was in the shadow, and her eyes caught the faint sparkle at the maid’s neck. The next moment the girl moved back out of the light; but Miss Schuyler saw her hand go up, and fancied there was something in it when it came down again. She had also heard a man’s footstep, and could put two and two together.

“Miss Torrance wants the silk. It was here, but I don’t see it,” she said. “Who went out a moment or two ago?”

The girl opened a bureau. “Mr. Clavering. He left his cigar-case when he first came in.”

She took out a piece of folded silk, and Miss Schuyler noticed the fashion in which she held it.

“It is the lighter shade we want; but the other piece is very like it. Unroll it so I can see it,” she said.

The maid seemed to find this somewhat difficult; but Miss Schuyler had seen a strip of red leather between the fingers of one hand, and understanding why it was so, went out thoughtfully. She knew the appearance of a jewel-case tolerably well, and had more than a suspicion as to whom the girl had obtained it from. Miss Schuyler, who would not have believed Clavering’s assertion about the trinket had she heard it, wondered what he expected in exchange for it, which perhaps accounted for the fact that she contrived to overtake him in the corridor at the head of the stairs.

“When you left Hetty and me alone we understood it was because Mr. Torrance was waiting for you,” she said.

“Yes,” said Clavering, smiling. “It is scarcely necessary to explain that if he hadn’t been I would not have gone. I fancied he was in the hall.”

Flora Schuyler nodded as though she believed him, but she determined to leave no room for doubt. “He is in his office,” she said. “Have you the deerskin cigar-case you showed us with you? You will remember I was interested in the Indian embroidery.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t,” said Clavering. “Torrance’s cigars are better than mine, so I usually leave mine at home. But I’ll bring the case next time, and if you would like to copy it, I could get you a piece of the dressed hide from one of the Blackfeet.”

He turned away, and Flora Schuyler decided not to tell Hetty what she had heard—Hetty was a little impulsive occasionally—but it seemed to Miss Schuyler that it would be wise to watch her maid and Clavering closely.

In the meantime, the man walked away towards Torrance's office, considering what the maid had told him. He had found it difficult to credit, but her manner had convinced him, and he realized that he could not afford the delay he had hitherto considered advisable. A young woman, he reflected, would scarcely send a wallet of dollars at night to a man whose plans were opposed to her father's without a strong motive, and the fact that Hetty wore a chain hidden about her neck had its meaning. He had, like most of his neighbours, laughed at Larry's hopeless devotion, but he had seen similar cases in which the lady at last relented, and while he knew Hetty's loyalty to her own people, and scarcely thought that she had more than a faint, tolerant tenderness for Larry, it appeared eminently desirable to prevent anything of that kind happening. Torrance, who was sitting smoking, glanced at him impatiently when he went in.

"You have been a long while," he said.

"I have a sufficient excuse, sir," said Clavering.

"Well," said Torrance drily, "they are quite clever girls, but I have found myself wishing lately they were a long way from here. That, however, is not what I want to talk about. Apparently none of us can get hold of Larry."

"It is not for the want of effort. There are few things that would please me better."

Torrance glanced at Clavering sharply. "No. I fancied once or twice you had a score of your own against him. In fact, I heard Allonby say something of the same kind, too."

"Chris is a trifle officious," said Clavering. "Any way, it's quite evident that we shall scarcely hold the homestead-boys back until we get our thumb on Larry."

"How are we going to do it? He has come out ahead of us so far."

"We took the wrong way," said Clavering. "Now, Larry, as you know, puts all his dealings through the Tillotson Company. Tillotson, as I found out in Chicago, has a free hand to buy stocks or produce with his balances, and Larry, who does not seem to bank his dollars, draws on him. It's not an unusual thing. Well, I've been writing to folks in Chicago, and they tell me Tillotson is in quite a tight place since the upward move in lard. It appears he has been selling right along for a fall."

Torrance looked thoughtful. "Tillotson is a straight man, but I've had a notion he has been financing some of the homestead-boys. He handles all Larry's dollars?"

Clavering nodded. "He put them into lard. Now, the Brand Company hold Tillotson's biggest contract, and if it suited them they could break him. I don't think they want to. Tillotson is a kind of useful man to them."

Torrance brought his fist down on the table. "Well," he said grimly, "we have a stronger pull than Tillotson. Most of the business in this country goes to them, and if he thought it worth while, Brand would sell all his relations up to-morrow. I'll go right through to Chicago and fix the thing."

Clavering smiled. "If you can manage it, you will cut off Larry's supplies."

"Then," said Torrance, "I'll start to-morrow. Still, I don't want to leave the girls here, and it would suit me if you could drive them over to Allonby's. I don't mind admitting that they have given me a good deal of anxiety, though they've made things pleasant, too, and I've 'most got afraid of wondering what Cedar will feel like when they go away."

"Will Miss Torrance go away?"

"She will," said Torrance, with a little sigh, though there was pride in his eyes, "when the trouble's over—but not before. She came home to see the old man through."

Clavering seized the opportunity. "Did you ever contemplate the possibility of Miss Torrance marrying anybody here?"

"I have a notion that there's nobody good enough," Torrance said quickly.

Clavering nodded, though he felt the old man's eyes upon him, and did not relish the implication. "Still, I fancy the same difficulty would be met with anywhere else, and that encourages me to ask if you would have any insuperable objections to myself?"

Torrance looked at him steadily. "I have been expecting this. Once I thought it was Miss Schuyler; but she does not like

you.”

“I am sorry,” and Clavering wondered whether his host was right, “though, the latter fact is not of any great moment. I have long had a sincere respect for Miss Torrance, but I am afraid it would be difficult to tell you all I think of her.”

“The point,” said Torrance, somewhat grimly, “is what she thinks of you.”

“I don’t know. It did not seem quite fitting to ask her until I had spoken to you.”

Torrance said nothing for almost a minute, and to Clavering the silence became almost intolerable. The old man’s forehead was wrinkled and he stared at the wall in front of him with vacant eyes. Then, he spoke very slowly.

“That was the square thing, and I have to thank you. For twenty years now I have worked and saved for Hetty—that she might have the things her mother longed for and never got. And I’ve never been sorry—the girl is good all through. It is natural that she should marry; and even so far as the dollars go, she will bring as much to her husband as he can give her, and if it’s needful more; but there are one or two points about you I don’t quite like.”

The old man’s voice vibrated and his face grew softer and the respect that Clavering showed when he answered was not all assumed.

“I know my own unworthiness, sir, but I think any passing follies I may have indulged in are well behind me now.”

“Well,” said Torrance drily, “it’s quite hard to shake some tastes and habits off, and one or two of them have a trick of hanging on to the man who thinks he has done with them. Now, I want a straight answer. Do you know any special reason why it would not be the square thing for you to marry my daughter?”

A faint colour crept into Clavering’s face. “I know a good many which would make the bargain unfair to her,” he said, “but there are very few men in this country who would be good enough for her.”

Torrance checked him with a lifted hand. “That is not what I mean. It is fortunate for most of us that women of her kind believe the best of us and can forgive a good deal. I am not speaking generally: do you know any special reason—one that may make trouble for both of you? It’s a plain question, and you understand it. If you do, we’ll go into the thing right now, and then, if it can be got over, never mention it again.”

Clavering sat silent, knowing well that delay might be fatal, and yet held still by something he had heard in the old man’s voice and seen in his eyes. However, he had succeeded in signally defeating one blackmailer.

“Sir,” he said, very slowly, “I know of no reason now.”

Torrance had not moved his eyes from him. “Then,” he said, “I can only take your word. You are one of us and understand the little things that please girls like Hetty. If she will take you, you can count on my good will.”

Clavering made a little gesture of thanks. “I ask nothing more, and may wait before I urge my suit; but it seems only fair to tell you that my ranching has not been very profitable lately and my affairs——”

Torrance cut him short. “In these things it is the man that counts the most, and not the dollars. You will not have to worry over that point, now you have told me I can trust Hetty to you.”

He said a little more on the same subject, and then Clavering went out with unpleasantly confused sensations through which a feeling of degradation came uppermost. He had not led an exemplary life, but pride had kept him clear of certain offences, and he had as yet held his word sacred when put upon his honour. It was some minutes before he ventured to join Hetty and Miss Schuyler, who he knew by the sound of the piano were in the hall.

Hetty sat with her fingers on the keyboard, the soft light of the lamps in the sconces shining upon her—very pretty, very dainty, an unusual softness in the eyes. She turned towards Clavering.

“You went in to get it”—touching the music—“just because you heard me say I would like those songs. A four days’ ride, and a blizzard raging on one of them!” she said.

Clavering looked at her gravely with something in his eyes that puzzled Miss Schuyler, who had expected a wittily graceful speech.

“You are pleased with them?” he said.

“Yes,” said the girl impulsively. “But I feel horribly mean because I sent you, although, of course, I didn’t mean to. It was very kind of you, but you must not do anything of that kind again.”

Clavering, who did not appear quite himself, watched her turn over the music in silence, for though the last words were spoken quietly, there was, he and Miss Schuyler fancied, a definite purpose behind them.

“Then, you will sing one of them?” he said.

Hetty touched the keys—there was a difference in her when she sang, for music was her passion, and as the clear voice thrilled the two who listened, a flush of exaltation, that was almost spiritual, crept into her face. Clavering set his lips, and when the last notes sank into the stillness Miss Schuyler wondered what had brought the faint dampness to his forehead. She did not know that all that was good in him had revolted against what he had done, and meant to do, just then, and had almost gained the mastery. Unfortunately, instead of letting Hetty sing again and fix Clavering’s half-formed resolution, she allowed her distrust of him to find expression; for capable young woman though she was, Flora Schuyler sometimes blundered.

“The song was worth the effort,” she said. “Mr. Clavering is, however, evidently willing to do a good deal to give folks pleasure.”

Clavering glanced at her with a little smile. “Folks? That means more than one.”

“Yes; it generally means at least two.”

Hetty laughed as she looked round. “Is there anybody else he has been giving music to?”

“I fancy the question is unnecessary,” Flora said. “He told us he came straight here, and there is nobody but you and I at Cedar he would be likely to bring anything to.”

“Of course not! Well, I never worry over your oracular observations. They generally mean nothing when you understand them,” said Hetty.

Flora Schuyler smiled maliciously at Clavering. She did not know that when a good deed hung in the balance she had, by rousing his intolerance of opposition, just tipped the beam.

XX

HETTY'S OBSTINACY

It was very cold, the red sun hung low above the prairie's western rim, and Clavering, who sat behind Hetty and Miss Schuyler in the lurching sleigh, glanced over his shoulder anxiously.

"Hadn't you better pull up and let me have the reins, Miss Torrance?" he said.

Hetty laughed. "Why?" she asked, "I haven't seen the horse I could not drive."

"Well," said Clavering drily, "this is the first time you have either seen or tried to drive Badger, and I not infrequently get out and lead the team down the slope in front of you when I cross the creek. It has a very awkward bend in it."

Hetty looked about her, and, as it happened, the glare of sunlight flung back from the snow was in her eyes. Still, she could dimly see the trail dip over what seemed to be the edge of a gully close ahead, and she knew the descent to the creek in its bottom was a trifle perilous. She was, however, fearless and a trifle obstinate, and Clavering had, unfortunately, already ventured to give her what she considered quite unnecessary instructions as to the handling of the team. There had also been an indefinite change in his attitude towards her during the last week or two, which the girl, without exactly knowing why, resented and this appeared a fitting opportunity for checking any further presumption.

"You can get down now if you wish," she said. "We will stop and pick you up when we reach the level again."

Clavering said nothing further, for he knew that Miss Torrance was very like her father in some respects, and Hetty shook the reins. The next minute they had swept over the brink, and Flora Schuyler saw the trail dip steeply but slantwise to lessen the gradient to the frozen creek. The sinking sun was hidden by the high bank now and the snow had faded to a cold blue-whiteness, through which the trail ran, a faint line of dusky grey. It was difficult to distinguish at the pace the team were making, and the ground dropped sharply on one side of it.

"Let him have the reins, Hetty," she said.

Unfortunately Clavering, who was a trifle nettled and knew that team, especially the temper of Badger the near horse better than Hetty did, laughed just then.

"Hold fast, Miss Schuyler, and remember that if anything does happen, the right-hand side is the one to get out from," he said.

"Now," said Hetty, "I'm not going to forgive you that. You sit quite still, and we'll show him something, Flo."

She touched the horses with the lash, and Badger flung up his head; another moment and he and the other beast had broken into a gallop. Hetty threw herself backwards with both hands on the reins, but no cry escaped her, and Clavering, who had a suspicion that he could do no more than she was doing now, even if he could get over the back of the seat in time, which was out of the question, set his lips as he watched the bank of snow the trail twisted round rush towards them. The sleigh bounced beneath him in another second or two, there was a stifled scream from Flora Schuyler, and leaning over he tore the robe about the girls from its fastenings. Then, there was a bewildering jolting and a crash, and he was flung out head foremost into dusty snow.

When he scrambled to his feet again Hetty was sitting in the snow close by him, and Flora Schuyler creeping out of a wreath of it on her hands and knees. The sleigh lay on one side, not far away, with the Badger rolling and kicking amidst a tangle of harness, though the other horse was still upon its feet.

Clavering was pleased to find all his limbs intact, and almost as gratified to see only indignant astonishment in Hetty's face. She rose before he could help her and in another moment or two Flora Schuyler also stood upright, clinging to his arm.

"No," she said, with a little gasp, "I don't think I'm killed, though I felt quite sure of it at first. Now I only feel as though I'd been through an earthquake."

Hetty turned and looked at Clavering, with a little red spot in either cheek. "Why don't you say something?" she asked. "Are you waiting for me?"

“I don’t know that anything very appropriate occurs to me. You know I’m devoutly thankful you have both escaped injury,” said the man, who was more shaken than he cared to admit.

“Then I’ll have to begin,” and Hetty’s eyes sparkled. “It was my fault, Mr. Clavering, and, if it is any relief to you, I feel most horribly ashamed of my obstinacy. Will that satisfy you?”

Clavering turned his head away, for he felt greatly inclined to laugh, but he knew the Torrance temper. Hetty had been very haughty during that drive, but she had not appeared especially dignified when she sat blinking about her in the snow, nor had Miss Schuyler, and he felt that they realized it; and in feminine fashion blamed him for being there. It was Miss Schuyler who relieved the situation.

“Hadn’t you better do something for the horse? It is apparently trying to hang itself—and I almost wish it would. It deserves to succeed.”

Clavering could have done very little by himself, but in another minute Hetty was kneeling on the horse’s head, while, at more than a little risk from the battering hoofs, he loosed some of the harness. Then, the Badger was allowed to flounder to his feet, and Clavering proceeded to readjust his trappings. A buckle had drawn, however, and a strap had burst.

“No,” said Hetty sharply. “Not that way. Don’t you see you’ve got to lead the trace through. It is most unfortunate Larry isn’t here.”

Clavering glanced at Miss Schuyler, and both of them laughed, while Hetty frowned.

“Well,” she said, “he would have fixed the thing in half the time, and we can’t stay here for ever.”

Clavering did what he could; but repairing harness in the open under twenty or thirty degrees of frost is a difficult task for any man, especially when he has no tools to work with and cannot remove his mittens, and it was at least twenty minutes before he somewhat doubtfully announced that all was ready. He handed Miss Schuyler into the sleigh, and then passed the reins to Hetty, who stood with one foot on the step, apparently waiting for something.

“I don’t think he will run away again,” he said.

The girl glanced at him sharply. “I am vexed with myself. Don’t make me vexed with you,” she said.

Clavering said nothing, but took the reins and they slid slowly down into the hollow, and, more slowly still, across the frozen creek and up the opposite ascent. After awhile Hetty touched his shoulder.

“I really don’t want to meddle; but, while caution is commendable, it will be dark very soon,” she said.

“Something has gone wrong,” Clavering said gravely. “I’m afraid I’ll have to get down.”

He stood for several minutes looking at the frame of the sleigh and an indented line ploughed behind it in the snow, and then quietly commenced to loose the horses.

“Well,” said Hetty sharply, “what are you going to do?”

“Take them out,” said Clavering.

“Why?”

Clavering laughed. “They are not elephants and have been doing rather more than one could expect any horse to do. It is really not my fault, you know, but one of the runners has broken, and the piece sticks into the snow.”

“Then, whatever are we to do?”

“I am afraid you and Miss Schuyler will have to ride on to Allonby’s. I can fix the furs so they’ll make some kind of saddle, and it can’t be more than eight miles or so.”

Miss Schuyler almost screamed. “I can’t,” she said.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Flo,” said Hetty. “You’ll just have to.”

Clavering’s fingers were very cold, and the girls’ still colder, before he had somehow girthed a rug about each of the horses and ruthlessly cut and knotted the reins. The extemporized saddles did not look very secure, but Hetty lightly swung herself into one, though Miss Schuyler found it difficult to repress a cry, and was not sure that she quite succeeded, when Clavering lifted her to the other.

“I’m quite sure I shall fall off,” she said.

Hetty was evidently very much displeased at something, for she seemed to forget Clavering was there. “If you do I’ll never speak to you again,” she said. “You might have been fond of him, Flo. There wasn’t the least necessity to put your arm right around his neck.”

Clavering wisely stooped to do something to one of his moccasins, for he saw an ominous sparkle in Miss Schuyler’s eyes, but he looked up prematurely and the smile was still upon his lips when he met Hetty’s gaze.

“How are you going to get anywhere?” she asked.

“Well,” said Clavering, “it is quite a long while now since I was able to walk alone.”

Hetty shook her bridle, and the Badger started at a trot; but when Miss Schuyler followed, Clavering, who fancied that her prediction would be fulfilled, also set off at a run. He was, however, not quite fast enough, for when he reached her Miss Schuyler was sitting in the snow. She appeared to be unpleasantly shaken and her lips were quivering. Clavering helped her to her feet, and then caught the horse.

“The wretched thing turned round and slid me off,” she said, when he came back with it, pointing to the rug.

Clavering tugged at the extemporized girth. “I am afraid you can only try again. I don’t think it will slip now,” he said.

Miss Schuyler, who had evidently lost her nerve, mounted with difficulty and after trotting for some minutes pulled up once more, and was sitting still looking about her hopelessly when Clavering rejoined her.

“I am very sorry, but I really can’t hold on,” she said.

Clavering glanced at the prairie, and Hetty looked at him. Nothing moved upon all the empty plain which was fading to a curious dusky blue. Darkness crept up across it from the east, and a last faint patch of orange was dying out on its western rim, while with the approaching night there came a stinging cold.

“It might be best if you rode on, Miss Torrance, and sent a sleigh back for us,” he said. “Walk your horse, Miss Schuyler, and I’ll keep close beside you. If you fell I could catch you.”

Hetty’s face was anxious, but she shook her head. “No, it was my fault, and I mean to see it through,” she said. “You couldn’t keep catching her all the time, you know. I’m not made of eider-down, and she’s a good deal heavier than me. It really is a pity you can’t ride, Flo.”

“Nevertheless,” said Miss Schuyler tartly, “I can’t—without a saddle—and I’m quite thankful I can’t drive.”

Hetty said nothing, and they went on in silence, until when a dusky bluff appeared on the skyline, Clavering, taking the bridle, led Miss Schuyler’s horse into a forking trail.

“This is not the way to Allonby’s,” said Hetty.

“No,” said Clavering quietly. “I’m afraid you would be frozen before you got there. The homestead-boys who chop their fuel in the bluff have, however, some kind of shelter, and I’ll make you a big fire.”

“But——” said Hetty.

Clavering checked her with a gesture. “Please let me fix this thing for you,” he said. “It is getting horribly cold already.”

They went on a trifle faster without another word, and presently, with crackle of dry twigs beneath them, plodded into the bush. Dim trees flitted by them, branches brushed them as they passed, and the stillness and shadowiness affected Miss Schuyler uncomfortably. She started with a cry when there was a sharp patter amidst the dusty snow; but Clavering’s hand was on the bridle as the horse, snorting, flung up its head.

“I think it was only a jack-rabbit; and I can see the shelter now,” he said.

A few moments later he helped Miss Schuyler down, and held out his hand to Hetty, who sprang stiffly to the ground. Then, with numbed fingers, he broke off and struck a sulphur match, and the feeble flame showed the refuge to which he had brought them. It was just high enough to stand in, and had three sides and a roof of birch logs, but the front was open and the soil inside it frozen hard as adamant. An axe and a saw stood in a corner, and there was a hearth heaped ready with kindling chips.

“If you will wait here I’ll try to get some wood,” he said.

He went out and tethered the horses, and when his footsteps died away, Miss Schuyler shivering crept closer to Hetty, who flung an arm about her.

“It’s awful, Flo—and it’s my fault,” she said. Then she sighed. “It would all be so different if Larry was only here.”

“Still,” said Flora Schuyler, “Mr. Clavering has really behaved very well; most men would have shown just a little temper.”

“I almost wish he had—it would have been so much easier for me to have kept mine and overlooked it graciously. Flo, I didn’t mean to be disagreeable, but it’s quite hard to be pleasant when one is in the wrong.”

It was some time before Clavering came back with an armful of birch branches, and a suspiciously reddened gash in one of his moccasins—for an axe ground as the Michigan man grinds it is a dangerous tool for anyone not trained to it to handle in the dark. In ten minutes he had a great fire blazing, and the shivering girls felt their spirits revive a little under the cheerful light and warmth. Then, he made a seat of the branches close in to the hearth and glanced at them anxiously.

“If you keep throwing wood on, and sit there with the furs wrapped round you, you will be able to keep the cold out until I come back,” he said.

“Until you come back!” said Hetty, checking a little cry of dismay. “Where are you going?”

“To bring a sleigh.”

“But Allonby’s is nearly eight miles away. You could not leave us here three hours.”

“No,” said Clavering gravely. “You would be very cold by then. Still, you need not be anxious. Nothing can hurt you here; and I will come, or send somebody for you, before long.”

Hetty sat very still while he drew on the fur mittens he had removed to make the fire. Then, she rose suddenly.

“No,” she said. “It was my fault—and we cannot let you go.”

Clavering smiled. “I am afraid your wishes wouldn’t go quite as far in this case as they generally do with me. You and Miss Schuyler can’t stay here until I could get a sleigh from Allonby’s.”

He turned as he spoke, and was almost out of the shanty before Hetty, stepping forward, laid her hand upon his arm.

“Now I know,” she said. “It is less than three miles to Muller’s, but the homestead-boys would make you a prisoner if you went there. Can’t you see that would be horrible for Flo and me? It was my wilfulness that made the trouble.”

Clavering very gently shook off her grasp, and Miss Schuyler almost admired him as he stood looking down upon her companion with the flickering firelight on his face. It was a striking face, and the smile in the dark eyes became it. Clavering had shaken off his furs, and the close-fitting jacket of dressed deerskin displayed his lean symmetry, for he had swung round in the entrance to the shanty and the shadows were black behind him.

“I think the fault was mine. I should not have been afraid of displeasing you, which is what encourages me to be obstinate now,” he said. “One should never make wild guesses, should they, Miss Schuyler?”

He had gone before Hetty could speak again, and a few moments later the girls heard a thud of hoofs as a horse passed at a gallop through the wood. They stood looking at each other until the sound died away, and only a little doleful wind that sighed amidst the birches and the snapping of the fire disturbed the silence. Then, Hetty sat down and drew Miss Schuyler down beside her.

“Flo,” she said, with a little quiver in her voice, “what is the use of a girl like me? I seem bound to make trouble for everybody.”

“It is not an unusual complaint, especially when one is as pretty as you are,” said Miss Schuyler. “Though I must confess I don’t quite understand what you are afraid of, Hetty.”

“No?” said Hetty. “You never do seem to understand anything, Flo. If he goes to Muller’s the homestead-boys, who are as fond of him as they are of poison, might shoot him, and he almost deserves it. No, of course, after what he is doing for us, I don’t mean that. It is the meanness that is in me makes me look for faults in everybody. He was almost splendid—and he has left his furs for us—but he mayn’t come back at all. Oh, it’s horrible!”

Hetty’s voice grew indistinct, and Flora Schuyler drew the furs closer about them, and slipped an arm round her waist. She began to feel the cold again, and the loneliness more, while, even when she closed her eyes, she could not shut out the menacing darkness in front of her. Miss Schuyler was from the cities, and it was not her fault that, while she possessed sufficient courage of a kind, she shrank from the perils of the wilderness. She would have found silence

trying, but the vague sounds outside, to which she could attach no meaning, were more difficult to bear. So she started when a puff of wind set the birch twigs rattling or something stirred the withered leaves, and once or twice a creaking branch sent a thrill of apprehension through her and she almost fancied that evil faces peered at her from the square gap of blackness. Now and then, a wisp of pungent smoke curled up and filled her eyes, and little by little she drew nearer to the fire with a physical craving for the warmth of it and an instinctive desire to be surrounded by its brightness, until Hetty shook her roughly by the arm.

"Flo," she said, "you are making me almost as silly as you are, and that capote—it's the prettiest I have seen you put on—is burning. Sit still, or I'll pinch you—hard."

Hetty's grip had a salutary effect, and Miss Schuyler, shaking off her vague terrors, smiled a trifle tremulously.

"I wish you would," she said. "Your fingers are real, any way. I can't help being foolish, Hetty—and is the thing actually burning?"

Hetty laughed. "I guessed that would rouse you—but it is," she said. "I have made my mind up, Flo. If he doesn't come in an hour or so, we'll go to Muller's, too."

Miss Schuyler was by no means sure that this would please her, but she said nothing and once more there was a silence she found it difficult to bear.

In the meanwhile, Clavering, whose foot pained him, was urging the Badger to his utmost pace. He rode without saddle or stirrups, which, however, was no great handicap to anyone who had spent the time he had in the cattle country, and, though it was numbingly cold and he had left his furs behind him, scarcely felt the frost, for his brain was busy. He knew Hetty Torrance, and that what he had done would count for much with her; but that was not what had prompted him to make the somewhat perilous venture. Free as he was in his gallantries, he was not without the chivalrous daring of the South his fathers came from, and Hetty was of his own caste. She, at least, would have been sure of deference from him, and, perhaps, have had little cause for complaint had he married her. Of late the admiration he felt for her was becoming tinged with a genuine respect.

He knew that the homesteaders, who had very little cause to love him, were in a somewhat dangerous mood just then, but that was of no great moment to him. He had a cynical contempt for them, and a pride which would have made him feel degraded had he allowed any fear of what they might do to influence him. He had also, with less creditable motives, found himself in difficult positions once or twice already, and his quickly arrogant fearlessness had enabled him to retire from them without bodily hurt or loss of dignity.

The lights of Muller's homestead rose out of the prairie almost before he expected to see them, and a few minutes later he rode at a gallop up to the door. It opened before he swung himself down, for the beat of hoofs had carried far, and when he stood in the entrance, slightly dazed by the warmth and light, there was a murmur of wonder.

"Clavering!" said somebody, and a man he could not clearly see laid a hand on his shoulder.

He shook the grasp off contemptuously, moved forward a pace or two, and then sat down blinking about him. Muller sat by the stove, a big pipe in hand, looking at him over his spectacles. His daughter stood behind him knitting tranquilly, though there was a shade more colour than usual in her cheeks, and a big, grim-faced man stood at the end of the room with one hand on a rifle that hung on the wall. Clavering instinctively glanced over his shoulder, and saw that another man now stood with his back to the door.

"You have come alone?" asked the latter.

"Oh, yes," said Clavering unconcernedly. "You might put my horse in, one of you. If I could have helped it, I would not have worried you, but my sleigh got damaged and Miss Torrance and another lady are freezing in the Bitter Creek bluff, and I know you don't hurt women."

"No," said the man dropping his hand from the rifle, with a little unpleasant laugh. "We haven't got that far yet, though your folks are starving them."

"Well," said Clavering, "I'm going to ask you to send a sledge and drive them back to Cedar or on to Allonby's."

The men exchanged glances. "It's a trick," said one.

"So!" said Muller. "Der ambuscade. Lotta, you ride to Fremont, und Larry bring. I show you how when we have drubbles mit der *franc tireurs* we fix der thing."

Clavering exclaimed impatiently. “You have no time for fooling when there are two women freezing in the bluff. Would I have come here, knowing you could do what you liked with me, if I had meant any harm to you?”

“That’s sense, any way,” said one of the men. “I guess if he was playing any trick, one of us would be quite enough to get even with him. You’ll take Truscott with you, Muller, and get out the bob-sled.”

Muller nodded gravely. “I go,” he said. “Lotta, you der big kettle fill before you ride for Larry. We der bob-sled get ready.”

“You are not going to be sorry,” said Clavering. “This thing will pay you better than farming.”

The man by the door turned with a hard laugh. “Well,” he said, “I guess we’d feel mean for ever if we took a dollar from you!”

Clavering ignored the speech. “Do you want me?” he said, glancing at Muller.

“No,” said the man, who now took down the rifle from the wall. “Not just yet. You’re going to stop right where you are. The boys can do without me, and I’ll keep you company.”

Ten minutes later the others drove away, and, with a significant gesture, Clavering’s companion laid the rifle across his knees.

XXI

CLAVERING APPEARS RIDICULOUS

There was silence in the log-house when the men drove away, and Clavering, who sat in a corner, found the time pass heavily. A clock ticked noisily upon the wall, and the stove crackled when the draughts flowed in; but this, he felt, only made the stillness more exasperating. The big, hard-faced bushman sat as motionless as a statue and almost as expressionless, with a brown hand resting on the rifle across his knees, in front of a row of shelves which held Miss Muller's crockery. Clavering felt his fingers quiver in a fit of anger as he watched the man, but he shook it from him, knowing that he would gain nothing by yielding to futile passion.

"I guess I can smoke," he said flinging his cigar-case on the table. "Take one if you feel like it."

The swiftness with which the man's eyes followed the first move of his prisoner's hand was significant, but he shook his head deliberately.

"I don't know any reason why you shouldn't, but you can keep your cigars for your friends," he said.

He drawled the words out, but the vindictive dislike in his eyes made them very expressive, and Clavering, who saw it, felt that any attempt to gain his jailer's goodwill would be a failure. As though to give point to the speech, the man took out a pipe and slowly filled it with tobacco from a little deerskin bag.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Clavering, partly to hide his anger, and partly because he was more than a little curious on the subject.

"Well," said the man reflectively. "I don't quite know. Keep you here until Larry comes, any way. It wouldn't take long to fix it so you'd be sorry you had worried poor folks if the boys would listen to me."

This was even less encouraging; but there were still points on which Clavering desired enlightenment.

"Will Muller bring Miss Torrance and her companion here?" he asked.

The bushman nodded. "I guess he will. It's quite a long way to Allonby's, and they'll be 'most frozen after waiting in the bluff. Now, I'm not anxious for any more talk with you."

A little flush crept into Clavering's forehead; but it was not the man's contemptuous brusqueness which brought it there, though that was not without its effect. It was evident that the most he could hope for was Larry's clemency, and that would be difficult to tolerate. But there was another ordeal before him. Hetty was also coming back, and would see him a prisoner in the hands of the men he had looked down upon with ironical contempt. Had the contempt been assumed, his position would have been less intolerable; but it was not, and the little delicately venomous jibes he seldom lost an opportunity of flinging at the homesteaders expressed no more than he felt, and were now and then warranted.

Clavering, of course, knew that to pose as a prisoner as the result of his efforts on her behalf would stir Hetty's sympathy, and his endurance of persecution at the hands of the rabble for his adherence to the principles he fancied she held would further raise him in her estimation; but he had no desire to acquire her regard in that fashion. He would have preferred to take the chances of a rifle-shot, for while he had few scruples he had been born with a pride which, occasionally at least, prevented his indulgence in petty knavery; and, crushing down his anger, he set himself to consider by what means he could extricate himself.

None, however, were very apparent. The homesteader showed no sign of drowsiness or relaxed vigilance, but sat tranquilly alert, watching him through the curling smoke. It was also some distance to the door, which, from where Clavering sat, appeared to be fastened and he knew the quick precision with which the bushman can swing up a rifle, or if it suits him fire from the hip. A dash for liberty could, he fancied, have only one result; it was evident that he must wait.

Now waiting is difficult to most men, and especially to those in whose veins there flows the hot Southern blood, and Clavering felt the taste of the second excellent cigar grow bitter in his mouth. He sat very still, with half-closed eyes, and a little ironical smile upon his lips when his grim companion glanced at him. In the meantime the stove crackled less noisily and the room grew steadily colder. But Clavering scarcely felt the chill, even when the icy draughts whirled the cigar-smoke about him, for he began to see that an opportunity would be made for him, and waited, strung up and intent.

When he thought he could do so unobserved, he glanced at the clock whose fingers now moved with a distressful rapidity, knowing that his chance would be gone if the bob-sled arrived before the cold grew too great for his jailer.

Ten minutes dragged by, then another five, and still the man sat smoking tranquilly, while Clavering realized that, allowing for all probable delays, Muller and Miss Torrance should arrive before the half-hour was up. Ten more minutes fled by, and Clavering, quivering in an agony of impatience, found it almost impossible to sit still; but at last the bushman stood up and laid his rifle on the table.

"You will stop right where you are," he said. "I'm going to put a few billets in the stove."

Clavering nodded, for he dared not trust himself to speak, and the man, who took up an armful of the billets, dropped a few of them through the open top of the stove. One, as it happened, jammed inside it, so that he could get no more in, and he laid hold of an iron scraper to free it with. He now stood with his back to Clavering, but the rifle still lay within his reach upon the table.

Clavering rose up, and, though his injured foot was painful, moved forward a pace or two noiselessly in his soft moccasins. A billet had rolled in his direction, and swaying lithely from the waist, with his eyes fixed upon the man, he seized it. The homesteader was stooping still, and he made another pace, crouching a trifle, with every muscle hardening.

Then, the man turned sharply, and hurled the scraper straight at Clavering. It struck him on the face, but he launched himself forward, and, while the homesteader grabbed at his rifle, fell upon him. He felt the thud of the billet upon something soft, but the next moment it was torn from him, the rifle fell with a clatter, and he and the bushman reeled against the stove together. Then, they fell against the shelves and with a crash they and the crockery went down upon the floor.

Clavering was supple and wiry and just then consumed with an almost insensate fury. He came down uppermost but his adversary's leg was hooked round his knee, and the grip of several very hard fingers unpleasantly impeded his respiration. Twice he struck savagely at a half-seen brown face, but the grip did not relax, and the knee he strove to extricate began to pain him horribly. The rancher possessed no mean courage and a traditional belief in the prowess of his caste, was famed for proficiency in most manly sports; but that did not alter the fact that the other man's muscle, hardened by long use of the axe, was greater than his own, and the stubborn courage which had upheld the homesteader in his struggle with adverse seasons and the encroaching forest was at least the equal of that born in Clavering.

So the positions were slowly reversed, until at last Clavering lay with his head amidst a litter of broken cups and plates, and the homesteader bent over him with a knee upon his chest.

"I guess you've had 'bout enough," he said. "Will you let up, or do you want me to pound the life out of you?"

Clavering could not speak, but he managed to make a movement with his head, and the next moment the man had dragged him to his feet and flung him against the table. He caught at it, gasping, while his adversary picked up the rifle.

"You will be sorry for this night's work yet," he said.

The homesteader laughed derisively. "Well," he said, "I guess you're sorry now. Anyone who saw you would think you were. Get right back to the chair yonder and stay there."

It was at least five minutes before Clavering recovered sufficiently to survey himself, and then he groaned. His deerskin jacket was badly rent, there was a great burn on one side of it, and several red scratches defaced his hands. From the splotches on them after he brushed back his ruffled hair he also had a suspicion that his head was cut, and the tingling where the scraper had struck him suggested a very visible weal. He felt dizzy and shaken, but his physical was less than his mental distress. Clavering was distinguished for his artistic taste in dress and indolent grace; but no man appears dignified or courtly with discoloured face, tattered garments, and dishevelled hair. He thought he heard the bob-sled coming and in desperation glanced at his jailer.

"If you would like ten dollars you have only got to let me slip into that other room," he said.

The bushman grinned sardonically, and Clavering's fears were confirmed. "You're that pretty I wouldn't lose sight of you for a hundred," he said. "No, sir; you're going to stop where you are."

Clavering anathematized him inwardly, knowing that the beat of hoofs was unmistakable—he must face what he dreaded most. A sword-cut, or even a rifle-shot, would, he fancied, have entitled him to sympathy, not untinged with admiration, but he was unpleasantly aware that a man damaged in an encounter with nature's weapons is apt to appear either brutal

or ludicrous, and he had noticed Miss Torrance's sensibility. He set his lips, and braced himself for the meeting.

A few minutes later the door opened, and, followed by the fräulein Muller, Hetty and Miss Schuyler came in. They did not seem to have suffered greatly in the interval, which Clavering knew was not the case with him, and he glanced at the homesteader with a little venomous glow in his eyes when Hetty turned to him.

"Oh!" she said with a gasp, and her face grew pale and stern as closing one hand she, too, looked at the bushman.

Clavering took heart at this; but his enemy's vindictiveness was evidently not exhausted, for he nodded comprehendingly.

"Yes," he said, "he's damaged. He got kind of savage a little while ago, and before I could quiet him he broke up quite a lot of crockery."

The imperious anger faded out of Hetty's face, and Flora Schuyler understood why it did so as she glanced at Clavering. There was nothing that could appeal to a fastidious young woman's fancy about him just then; he reminded Miss Schuyler of a man she had once seen escorted homewards by his drunken friends after a fracas in the Bowery. At the same time it was evident that Hetty recognized her duty, and was sensible, if not of admiration, at least of somewhat tempered sympathy.

"I am dreadfully sorry, Mr. Clavering—and it was all my fault," she said. "I hope they didn't hurt you very much."

Clavering, who had risen, made her a little inclination; but he also set his lips, for Hetty had not expressed herself very tactfully, and just then Muller and another man came in and stood staring at them. The rancher endeavoured to smile, with very small success for he was consumed with an unsatisfied longing to destroy the bushman.

"I don't think you need be, Miss Torrance," he said. "I am only sorry I could not come back for you; but unfortunately—circumstances—prevented me."

"You have done enough," said Hetty impulsively, apparently forgetting the presence of the rest. "It was splendid of you."

Then the bushman looked up again with an almost silent chuckle. "I guess if it had been your plates he sat on, you wouldn't be quite so sure of it—and the circumstance was me," he said.

Hetty turned from the speaker, and glanced at the rest. Muller was standing near the door, with his spectacles down on his nose and mild inquiry in his pale blue eyes, and a big bronzed Dakota man beside him was grinning visibly. The fräulein was kneeling despairingly amidst her shattered china, while Flora Schuyler leaned against the table with her lips quivering and a most suspicious twinkle in her eyes.

"Flo," said Hetty half-aloud. "How can you?"

"I don't know," said Miss Schuyler, with a little gasp. "Don't look at me, Hetty. I really can't help it."

Hetty said no more, but she glanced at the red-cheeked fräulein, who was gazing at a broken piece of crockery with tearful eyes, and turned her head away. Clavering saw the effort it cost her to keep from laughing, and writhed.

"Well," said the man who had come with Muller, pointing to the wreck, "what started you smashing up the house?"

"It's quite simple," said the bushman. "Mr. Clavering and I didn't quite agree. He had a billet in his hand when he crept up behind me, and somehow we fell into the crockery. I didn't mean to damage him, but he wanted to get away, you see."

Hetty swung round towards Muller. "You haven't dared to make Mr. Clavering a prisoner?"

Muller was never very quick at speech, and the American by his side answered for him. "Well, we have got to keep him until Larry comes. He'll be here 'most directly."

"Flo," said Hetty, with relief in her face, "Larry is coming. We need not worry about anything now."

The fräulein had risen in the meanwhile, and was busy with the kettle and a frying-pan. By and by, she set a steaming jug of coffee and a hot cornmeal cake before her guests for whom Muller had drawn out chairs. They were glad of the refreshment, and still more pleased when Grant and Breckenridge came in. When Larry shook hands with them, Hetty contrived to whisper in his ear:

"If you want to please me, get Clavering away."

Grant glanced at her somewhat curiously, but both were sensible that other eyes were upon them, and with a just perceptible nod he passed on with Muller into the adjoining room. Clavering and the two Americans followed him with

Breckenridge, and Grant who had heard something of what had happened from the fräulein, asked a few questions.

“You can go when it pleases you, Clavering,” he said. “I am sorry you have received some trifling injury, but I have an idea that you brought it upon yourself. In the face of your conduct to them it seems to me that my friends were warranted in detaining you until they made sure of the correctness of your story.”

Clavering flushed, for there was a contemptuous incisiveness in Grant’s voice which stung his pride.

“I don’t know that I am very grateful,” he said angrily, “and you are probably doing this because it suits you. In any case, your friends dare not have offered violence to me.”

Grant smiled grimly. “I wouldn’t try them too far. But I don’t quite catch your meaning. I can gain nothing by letting you go.”

“It should be tolerably plain. I fancied you desired to please some friends at Cedar who send money to you.”

There was a murmur of astonishment from the rest and Clavering saw that the shot had told.

“I guess he’s lying, Larry,” said one of them.

Grant stood still a moment with his eyes fixed on Clavering. “I wonder,” he said, “if you are hazarding a guess.”

“No,” said Clavering, “I don’t think I am. I know you got a wallet of dollars—though I don’t know who sent them. Are you prepared to deny it?”

“I’m not prepared to exchange any words with you,” said Grant. “Go while the door is open, and it would not be advisable for you to fall into our hands again. We hanged a friend of yours who, I fancy, lived up to, at least, as high a standard as you seem to do.”

When Clavering had left the room, the others turned to Grant. “You have something to tell us?”

“No,” said Grant quietly. “I don’t think I have.”

The men looked at each other, and one of them said, “That fellow’s story sounded kind of ugly. What were you taking dollars from the cattle-men for, Larry?”

Grant saw the growing distrust in their eyes, but his own were resolute.

“I can’t help that,” he said. “I am with you, as I have always been, but there are affairs of mine I can’t have anybody inquiring into. That is all I can tell you. You will have to take me on trust.”

“You’re making it hard,” said the man who had spoken first.

Before Grant could answer, Clavering returned ready for his ride, but Grant gave him no opportunity to address Hetty and Miss Schuyler. “It is too far to drive to Allonby’s in the sled,” he said to them. “My sleigh is at your service. Shall I drive you?”

Hetty, for a moment, looked irresolute, but she saw Clavering’s face, and remembered what was due to him and what he had apparently suffered for her sake.

“It wouldn’t be quite fair to dismiss Mr. Clavering in that fashion,” she said.

Grant glanced at her, and the girl longed for an opportunity of making him understand what influenced her. But this was out of the question.

“Then, if he will be surety for their safety, the team is at Mr. Clavering’s disposal,” he said.

Clavering said nothing to Grant, but he thrust his hand into his pocket and laid a five-dollar bill on the table.

“I am very sorry I helped to destroy some of your crockery, fräulein, and this is the only amend I can make,” he said. “If I knew how to replace the broken things I wouldn’t have ventured to offer it to you.”

The little deprecatory gesture was graceful, and Hetty flashed an approving glance at him; but she also looked at Grant, as if to beseech his comprehension, when she went out. Larry, however, did not understand her, and stood gravely aside as she passed him. He said nothing, but when he was fastening the fur robe round her in the sleigh Hetty spoke.

“Larry,” she said softly, “can’t you understand that one has to do the square thing to everybody?”

Then, Clavering, who could not hear what she was saying, flicked the horses and the sleigh slid away into the darkness.

A moment or two later, while the men still lingered talking without and Larry stood putting on his furs in the room, Breckenridge saw Miss Muller, who had been gazing at the money rise, and as though afraid her resolution might fail her, hastily thrust it into the stove.

“You are right,” he said. “That was an abominably unfair shot of Clavering’s, Larry. Of course, you couldn’t answer him or tell anybody, but it’s horribly unfortunate. The thing made the impression he meant it to.”

“Well,” said Larry bitterly, “I have got to bear it with the rest. I can’t see any reason for being pleased with anything to-night.”

Breckenridge nodded, but once more a little twinkle crept into his eyes. “I scarcely think you need worry about one trifle, any way,” he said. “If you think Miss Torrance or Miss Schuyler wanted Clavering to drive them, you must be unusually dense. They only asked him to because they have a sense of fairness, and I’d stake a good many dollars on the fact that when Miss Schuyler first saw him she was convulsed with laughter.”

“Did Miss Torrance seem amused?” Grant asked eagerly.

“Yes,” said Breckenridge decisively. “She did though she tried to hide it. Miss Torrance has, of course, a nice appreciation of what is becoming. In fact, her taste is only slightly excelled by Miss Schuyler’s.”

Grant stared at him for a moment, and then for the first time, during several anxious months, broke into a great peal of laughter.

XXII

THE CAVALRY OFFICER

The winter was relaxing its iron grip at last and there were alternations of snow and thaw and frost when one evening a few of his scattered neighbours assembled at Allonby's ranch. Clavering was there, with Torrance, Hetty, and Miss Schuyler, among the rest; but though the guests made a spirited attempt to appear unconcerned, the signs of care were plainer in their faces than when they last met, and there were times when the witty sally fell curiously flat. The strain was beginning to tell, and even the most optimistic realized that the legislature of the State was more inclined to resent than yield to any further pressure that could be exerted by the cattle-barons. The latter were, however, proud and stubborn men, who had unostentatiously directed affairs so long that they found it difficult to grasp the fact that their ascendancy was vanishing. Showing a bold front still, they stubbornly disputed possession of every acre of land the homesteaders laid claim upon. The latters' patience was almost gone, and the more fiery spirits were commencing to obstruct their leader's schemes by individual retaliation and occasionally purposeless aggression.

Torrance seemed older and grimmer, his daughter paler, and there were moments when anxiety was apparent even in Clavering's usually careless face. He at least, was already feeling the pinch of straitened finances, and his only consolations were the increasing confidence that Torrance reposed in him, and Hetty's graciousness since his capture by the homesteaders. It was, perhaps, not astonishing that he should mistake its meaning, for he had no means of knowing, as Miss Schuyler did, that the cattle-baron's daughter met Larry Grant now and then.

Hetty was sitting in a corner of the big room, with Flo Schuyler and Christopher Allonby close at hand, and during a lull in the conversation she turned to him with a smile.

"You find us a little dull to-night, Chris?" she said.

Allonby laughed. "There was a time when you delighted in trapping me into admissions of that kind, but I'm growing wise," he said. "In fact, another year like this one would make an old man of me. I don't mind admitting that there is something wrong with the rest. I have told them the stories they have laughed over the last three years, and could not raise a smile from one of them; and when I got my uncle started playing cards I actually believe your father forgot what trumps were, for the first time in his life!"

"That is significant," said Hetty, whose face had grown serious. "Nothing has gone well for us lately, Chris."

Allonby sighed. "We don't like to acknowledge it, but it's a fact," he said. "Still, there's hope yet, if we can just stir up the homestead-boys into wrecking a railroad bridge or burning somebody's ranch."

"It is a little difficult to understand how that would improve affairs, especially for the man whose place was burned," said Miss Schuyler drily.

"One can't afford to be too particular," said Allonby, with a deprecating gesture. "You see, once they started in to do that kind of thing the State would have to crush them, which, of course, would suit us quite nicely. As it is, after the last affair at Hamlin's, they have sent in a draft of cavalry."

"And you are naturally taking steps to bring about the things that would suit you?" asked Flora Schuyler.

Allonby did not see the snare. "Well," he said, "I am not an admirer of Clavering, but I'm willing to admit that he has done everything he could; in fact, I'm 'most astonished they have stood him so long, and I don't think they would have done so, but for Larry. Anyway, it's comforting to know Larry is rapidly making himself unpopular among them."

A spot of colour showed in Hetty's cheek, and there was a little gleam in Flora Schuyler's eyes as she fixed them on the lad.

"You evidently consider Mr. Grant is taking an unwarranted liberty in persuading his friends to behave themselves as lawful citizens should?" she said.

"I don't quite think you understand me, of course, one could scarcely expect it from a lady; but if you look at the thing from our point of view, it's quite easy."

Flora Schuyler smiled satirically. "I fancy I do, though I may be mistaken. Subtleties of this kind are, as you suggest,

beyond the average woman."

"You are laughing at me, and it's quite likely I deserve it. We will talk of something else. I was telling you about the cavalry officer."

"No," said Hetty, "I don't think you were."

"Then I meant to. He has just come up from the Apache country—a kind of quiet man, with a good deal in him and a way of making you listen when you once start him talking. We half expect him here this evening, and if he comes, I want you to be nice to him. You could make him believe we are in the right quite easily."

"From the Apache country?" and Flora Schuyler glanced at Hetty.

Allonby nodded. "New Mexico, Arizona, or somewhere there. Now, just when you were beginning to listen, there's Mr. Torrance wanting me."

He rose with evident reluctance, and Miss Schuyler sat reflectively silent when he moved away.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Hetty sharply.

"That the United States is not after all such a very big country. One is apt to run across a friend everywhere."

Hetty did not answer, but Miss Schuyler knew that she was also wondering about the cavalry officer, when half an hour later it became evident, from the sounds outside, that a sleigh had reached the door, and when a little further time had passed Allonby ushered a man in blue uniform into the room. Hetty set her lips when she saw him.

"Oh!" said Miss Schuyler. "I felt quite sure of it. This is the kind of thing that not infrequently happens, and it is only the natural sequence that he should turn up on the opposite side to Larry."

"Flo," said Hetty sharply, "what do you mean?"

"Well," she said lazily, "I fancy that you should know better than I do. I have only my suspicions and some little knowledge of human nature to guide me. Now, of course, you convinced us that you didn't care for Cheyne, but we have only your word to go upon in regard to Larry."

Hetty turned upon her with a flash in her eyes. "Don't try to make me angry, Flo. It's going to be difficult to meet him as it is."

"I don't think you need worry," and Flora Schuyler laughed. "He is probably cured by this time, and has found somebody else. They usually do. That ought to please you."

In the meantime, Allonby and the man he was presenting to his friends were drawing nearer. Hetty rose when the pair stopped in front of them.

"Captain Jackson Cheyne, who is coming to help us. Miss Torrance and Miss Schuyler, the daughter and guest of our leader," said Allonby, and the soldierly man with the quiet, brown face, smiling, held out his hand.

"We are friends already," he said, and passed on with Allonby.

"Was it very dreadful, Hetty?" said Flora Schuyler. "I could see he means to come back and talk to you."

Hetty also fancied Cheyne wished to do so, and spent the next hour or two in avoiding the encounter. With this purpose she contrived to draw Chris Allonby into one of the smaller rooms where the card-tables were then untenanted, and listened with becoming patience to stories she had often heard before. She, however, found it a little difficult to laugh at the right places, and at last the lad glanced reproachfully at her.

"It spoils everything when one has to show you where the point is," he said; and Hetty, looking up, saw Cheyne and Flora Schuyler in the doorway.

"Miss Newcombe is looking for you, Mr. Allonby," said the latter.

There was very little approval in the glance Hetty bestowed upon Miss Schuyler and Allonby seemed to understand it.

"She generally is, and that is why I'm here," he said. "I don't feel like hearing about any more lepidoptera to-night, and you can take her Captain Cheyne instead. He must have found out quite a lot about beetles and other things that bite you down in Arizona."

Miss Schuyler, disregarding Hetty, laughed. "You had better go," she said. "I see her coming in this direction now, and

she has something which apparently contains specimens in her hand."

Allonby fled, but he turned a moment in the doorway. "Do you think you could get me a real lively tarantula, Captain Cheyne?" he said. "If a young lady with a preoccupied manner asks you anything about insects, tell her you have one in your pocket. It's the only thing that will save you."

He vanished with Miss Schuyler, and Hetty, somewhat against her wishes, found herself alone with Cheyne. He was deeply sunburned, and his face thinner than it had been, but the quiet smile she had once found pleasure in was still in his eyes.

"Your young friend did his best, and I am half afraid he had a hint," he said.

Hetty blushed. "I am very pleased to see you," she said hastily. "How did you like New Mexico?"

"As well as I expected," Cheyne answered with a dry smile. "It is not exactly an enchanting place—deformed mountains, sun glare, adobe houses, loneliness, and dust. My chief trouble, however, was that I had too much time to think."

"But you must have seen somebody and had something to do."

"Yes," Cheyne admitted. "There was a mining fellow who used to come over and clean out my whiskey, and sing gruesome songs for hours together to a banjo that had, I think, two strings. I stayed out all night quite frequently when I had reason to believe that he was coming. Then, we killed a good many tarantulas—and a few equally venomous pests—but when all was done it left one hours to sit staring at the sage-brush and wonder whether one would ever shake off the dreariness of it again."

"It must have been horribly lonely," Hetty said.

"Well," said Cheyne, very slowly, "there was just one faint hope that now and then brightened everything for me. I thought you might change. Perhaps I was foolish—but that hope would have meant so much to me. I could not let it go."

Hetty turned and looked at him with a softness in her eyes, for the little tremor in his voice had touched her.

"And I was hoping you had forgotten," she said.

"No," said Cheyne quietly. "I don't think I ever shall. You haven't a grain of comfort to offer me?"

Hetty shook her head, and involuntarily one hand went up and rested a moment on something that lay beneath the laces at her neck. "No," she said. "I am ever so sorry, Jake, but I have nothing whatever to offer you—now."

"Then," said Cheyne, with a little gesture of resignation, "I suppose it can be borne because it must be—and I think I understand. I know he must be a good man—or you would never have cared for him."

Hetty looked at him steadily, but the colour that had crept into her cheek spread to her forehead. "Jake," she said, "no doubt there are more, but I have met two Americans who are, I think, without reproach. I shall always be glad I knew them—and it is not your fault that you are not the right one."

Cheyne made her a little grave inclination. "Then, I hope we shall be good friends when I meet the other one. I am going to stay some little time in the cattle country."

"I almost hope you will not meet just yet," Hetty said anxiously, "and you must never mention what I have told you to anybody."

"You have only told me that I was one of two good Americans," said Cheyne, with a quiet smile which the girl found reassuring. "Now, you don't want to send me away?"

"No," said Hetty. "It is so long since I have seen you. You have come to help us against our enemies?"

Cheyne saw the girl's intention, and was glad to fall in with it, but he betrayed a little embarrassment. "Not exactly, though I should be content if my duty amounts to the same thing," he said. "We have been sent in to help to restore order, and it is my business just now to inquire into the doings of a certain Larry Grant. I wonder if you could tell me anything about him?"

He noticed the sudden intentness of Hetty's face, though it was gone in an instant.

"What have you found out?" she asked.

"Very little that one could rely upon. Everybody I ask tells me something different, he seems a compound of the qualities

of Coleman the Vigilante, our first President, and the notorious James boys. As they were gentlemen of quite different character, it seems to me that some of my informants are either prejudiced or mistaken."

"Yes," said Hetty. "He is like none of them. Larry is just a plain American who is fearlessly trying to do what he feels is right, though it is costing him a good deal. You see, I met him quite often before the trouble began."

Cheyne glanced at her sharply, but Hetty met his gaze. "I don't know," he answered, "that one could say much more of any man."

Just then Flora Schuyler and Miss Allonby came in. "Hetty," said the latter, "everybody is waiting for you to sing."

In the meanwhile, Allonby and his nephew sat with Torrance and Clavering, and one or two of the older men, in his office room. Clavering had just finished speaking when Allonby answered Torrance's questioning glance.

"I have no use for beating round the bush," he said. "Dollars are getting scarce with me, and, like some of my neighbours, I had to sell out a draft of stock. The fact that I'm throwing them on the market now is significant."

One of the men nodded. "Allonby has put it straight," he said. "I was over fixing things with the station agent, and he is going to send the first drafts through to Omaha in one lot if two of his biggest locomotives can haul the cars. Still, if Clavering has got hold of the right story, how the devil did the homestead-boys hear of it?"

Clavering glanced at Torrance with a little sardonic smile on his lips. "I don't quite know, but a good many of our secrets have been leaking out."

"You're quite sure you are right, Clavering?" somebody asked.

"Yes. The information is worth the fifty dollars I paid for it. The homestead-boys mean to run that stock train through the Bitter Creek bridge. As you know, it's a good big trestle, and it is scarcely likely we would get a head of stock out of the wreck alive."

There were angry ejaculations and the faces round the table grew set and stern. Some of the men had seen what happens when a heavy train goes through a railroad trestle.

"It's devilish!" said Allonby. "Larry is in the thing?"

"Well," said Clavering drily, "it appears the boys can't do anything unless they have an order from their executive, and the man who told me declared he had seen one signed by him. Still, one has to be fair to Larry, and it is quite likely some of the foreign Reds drove him into it. Any way, if we could get that paper—and I think I can—it would fix the affair on him."

Torrance nodded. "Now we have the cavalry here, it would be enough to have him shot," he said. "Well, this is going to suit us. But there must be no fooling. We want to lay hands upon them when they are at work on the trestle."

The other men seemed doubtful, and Allonby made a protest. "It is by no means plain how it's going to suit me to have my steers run through the bridge," he said. "I can't afford it."

Clavering laughed. "You will not lose one of them," he said. "Now, don't ask any questions, but listen to me."

There were objections to the scheme he suggested, but he won over the men who raised them, and when all had been arranged and Allonby had gone back to his other guests, Clavering appeared satisfied and Torrance very grim. Unfortunately, however, they had not bound Christopher Allonby to silence, and when he contrived to find a place near Miss Schuyler and Hetty he could not refrain from mentioning what he had heard. This was, however, the less astonishing since the cattle-barons' wives and daughters shared their anxieties and were conversant with most of what happened.

"You have a kind of belief in the homestead-boys, Hetty?" he said.

"Yes, but everybody knows who I belong to."

"Of course! Well, I guess you are not going to have any kind of belief in them now. They're planning to run our big stock train through the Bitter Creek bridge."

Hetty turned white. "They would never do that. Their leaders would not let them."

"No?" said Allonby. "I'm sorry to mention it, but it seems they have Larry's order."

A little flush crept into Flora Schuyler's face, but Hetty's grew still more colourless and her dark eyes glowed. Then she

shook her shoulders, and said with a scornful quietness, “Larry would not have a hand in it to save his life. There is not a semblance of truth in that story, Chris.”

Allonby glanced up in astonishment, but he was youthful, and that Hetty could have more than a casual interest in her old companion appeared improbable to him.

“It is quite a long time since you and Larry were on good terms, and no doubt he has changed,” he said. “Any way, his friends are going to try giant powder on the bridge, and if we are fortunate Cheyne will get the whole of them, and Larry, too. Now, we’ll change the topic, since it does not seem to please you.”

He changed it several times, but his companions, though they sat and even smiled now and then, heard very few of his remarks.

“I’m going,” he said at last, reproachfully. “I am sorry if I have bored you, but it is really quite difficult to talk to people who are thinking about another thing. It seems to me you are both in love with somebody, and it very clearly isn’t me.”

He moved away, and for a moment Hetty and Miss Schuyler did not look at one another. Then Hetty stood up.

“I should have screamed if he had stayed any longer,” she said. “The thing is just too horrible—but it is quite certain Larry does not know. I have got to tell him somehow. Think, Flo.”

XXIII

HETTY'S AVOWAL

The dusk Hetty had anxiously waited for was creeping across the prairie when she and Miss Schuyler pulled up their horses in the gloom of the birches where the trail wound down through the Cedar bluff. The weather had grown milder and great clouds rolled across the strip of sky between the branches overhead, while the narrow track amidst the whitened trunks was covered with loose snow. There was no frost, and Miss Schuyler felt unpleasantly clammy as she patted her horse, which moved restively now and then, and shook off the melting snow that dripped upon her; but Hetty seemed to notice nothing. She sat motionless in her saddle with the moisture glistening on her furs, and the thin white steam from the spume-flecked beast floating about her, staring up the trail, and when she turned and glanced over her shoulder her face showed white and drawn.

"He must be coming soon," she said, and Miss Schuyler noticed the strained evenness of her voice. "Yes, of course he's coming. It would be too horrible if we could not find him."

"Jake Cheyne and his cavalry boys would save the bridge," said Flora Schuyler, with a hopefulness she did not feel.

Hetty leaned forward and held up her hand, as though to demand silence that she might listen, before she answered her.

"There are some desperate men among the homestead-boys, and if they found out they had been given away they would cut the track in another place," she said. "If they didn't and Cheyne surprised them, they would fire on his troopers and Larry would be blamed for it. He would be chased everywhere with a price on his head, and anyone he wouldn't surrender to could shoot him. Flo, it is too hard to bear, and I'm afraid."

Her voice failed her, and Miss Schuyler, who could find no words to reassure her, was thankful that her attention was demanded by her restive horse. The strain was telling on her, too, and, with less at stake than her companion, she was consumed by a longing to defeat the schemes of the cattle-men, who had, it seemed to her with detestable cunning, decided not to warn the station agent, and let the great train go, that they might heap the more obloquy upon their enemies. The risk the engineer and brakesmen ran was apparently nothing to them, and she felt, as Hetty did, that Larry was the one man who could be depended on to avert bloodshed. Yet there was still no sign of him.

"If he would only come!" she said.

There was no answer. Loose snow fell with a soft thud from the birch branches, and there was a little sighing amidst the trees. It was rapidly growing darker, but Hetty sat rigidly still in her saddle, with her hand clenched on the bridle. Five long minutes passed. Then, she turned suddenly, exultation in her voice.

"Flo," she said, "he's coming!"

Miss Schuyler could hear nothing for another minute or two, and then, when a faint sound became audible through the whispering of the trees, she wondered how her companion could be sure it was the fall of hoofs, or that the horse was not ridden by a stranger. But there was no doubt in Hetty's face, and Flora Schuyler sighed as she saw it relax and a softness creep into the dark eyes. She had seen that look in the faces of other women and knew its meaning.

The beat of hoofs became unmistakable, and she could doubt no longer that a man was riding down the trail. He came into sight in another minute, a shadowy figure swinging to the stride of a big horse, with the line of a rifle-barrel across his saddle, and then, as he saw them, rode up at a gallop, scattering the snow.

"Hetty!" he said, a swift flush of pleasure sweeping his face, and Miss Schuyler set her lips as she noticed that he did not even see her.

Hetty gathered up her bridle, and wheeled her horse. "Ride into the bluff—quick," she said. "Somebody might see us in the trail."

Larry did as he was bidden, and when the gloom of the trees closed about them, sprang down and looped his bridle round a branch. Then, he stood by Hetty's stirrup, and the girl could see his face, white in the faint light the snow flung up. She turned her own away when she had looked down on it.

"I have had an anxious day, but this makes up for everything," he said. "Now—and it is so long since I have seen you—

can't we, for just a few minutes, forget our troubles?"

He held out his hand, as though to lift her down, but the girl turned her eyes on him and what he saw in them checked him suddenly.

"No," she said, with a tremor in her voice, "we can't get away from them. You must not ask any question until you have heard everything!"

She spoke with a swift conciseness that omitted no point and made the story plain, for there was a high spirit in the girl, and a tangible peril that could be grappled with had a bracing effect on her. Grant's face grew intent as he listened, and Hetty, looking down, could see the firmer set of his lips, and the glint in his eyes. The weariness faded out of it, and once more she recognized the alert, resourceful, and quietly resolute Larry she had known before the troubles came. He turned swiftly and clasped her hand.

"I wonder if you know how much you have done for me?"

Hetty smiled and allowed her fingers to remain in his grasp. "Then, you have heard nothing of this?" she said.

"No," said the man. "But Hetty——"

Again the girl checked him with a gesture. "And I need not ask you whether you would have had a hand in it?"

Grant laughed a little scornful laugh that was more eloquent than many protestations. "No," he said, "you needn't. I think you know me better than that, Hetty?"

"Yes," said the girl softly. "You couldn't have had anything to do with that kind of meanness. Larry, how was it they did not tell you?"

She felt the grasp of the man's fingers slacken and saw his arm fall to his side. His face changed suddenly, growing stern and set, until he turned his head away. When he looked round again the weariness was once more plain in it, and she almost fancied he had checked a groan.

"You have brought me back to myself," he said. "Only a few seconds ago I could think of nothing but what you had done for me. I think I was almost as happy as a man could be, and now——"

Hetty laid her hand on his shoulder. "And now? Tell me, Larry."

"No," said the man. "You have plenty of troubles of your own."

The grasp of the little hand grew tighter, and when Grant looked up he saw the girl smiling down on him half-shyly, and yet, as it were, imperiously.

"Tell me, dear," she said.

Larry felt his heart throb, and his resolution failed him. He could see the girl's eyes, and their compelling tenderness.

"Well," he said, huskily, "what I have dreaded has come. The men I have given up everything for have turned against me. No, you must not think I am sorry for what I have done, and it was right then; but they have listened to some of the crazy fools from Europe and are letting loose anarchy. I and the others—the sensible Americans—have lost our hold on them, and yet it was we who brought them in. We took on too big a contract—and I'm most horribly afraid, Hetty."

The light had almost gone, but his face still showed drawn and white and Hetty bent down nearer him.

"Put your hand in mine, Larry," she said softly. "I have something to tell you."

The man obeyed her, wondering, while a thrill ran through him as the mittened fingers closed upon his own.

"Hetty," he said, "I have only brought trouble on everyone. I'm not fit to speak to you."

"No," said the girl, with a throb in her voice. "You have only done what very few other men would have dared to do, and many a better girl than I am would be proud to be fond of you. Now listen, Larry. For years you were ever so good to me, and I was too mean and shallow and selfish even to understand what you were giving me. I fancied I had a right to everything you could do. But come nearer, Larry."

She drew him closer to her, until his garments pressed the horse's flank and the blanket skirt she wore, and leaned down still further with her hand upon his shoulder.

"I found out, dear, and now I want you to forgive me and always love me."

The grasp on her hand became compelling, and she moved her foot from the stirrup as the man's arm reached upwards towards her waist. Had she wished she could not have helped herself; as she slipped from the saddle the arm closed round her and it was several seconds before she and Grant stood a pace apart, with tingling blood, looking at one another. There was no sign of Flora Schuyler, they were alone, enfolded in the silence of the bluff.

"It is wonderful," he said. "I can't even talk, Hetty. I want to realize it."

Hetty laughed but there was a note in her voice that set the man's heart beating furiously. "Yes, it is wonderful it should come to me," she said. "No, you needn't look round, Larry. There is nothing and nobody that counts now except you and me. I am just beginning to understand your patience, and how hard I must have been to you."

"I waited a long time," he said. "It was worth while. Even the troubles I felt crushing me seem very little now. If they were only over, and there was nothing to come between you and me!"

"Larry," the girl said very softly, "are you sure they need do that? It has been so horrible lately, and I can't even sleep at night for thinking of the risks that you are taking."

Grant closed one hand, but it was too dark now for Hetty to see his face, and she was glad of it.

"You mean—" he said hoarsely, and stopped.

"Just this," her voice almost a whisper. "I am frightened of it all, and when you want me I will come to you. No, wait just a little. I could never marry the man who was fighting against my father and the people I belong to, while, now I know what you are, I could never ask him to go back on what he felt was right; but, Larry, the men you did so much for have turned against you, and the things they are doing are not right, and would never please you. Can't we go away and leave the trouble behind us? Nobody seems to want us now."

There was a cold dew on the man's forehead the girl could not see. "And your father?" he said.

"I would never help anyone against him, as I told you," said the girl. "Still, there are times when his bitterness almost frightens me. It is hard to admit it, even to you, but I can't convince myself that he and the others are not mistaken, too. I can't believe any longer that you are wrong, dear. Besides, though he says very little, I feel he wants me to marry Clavering."

"Clavering?" said Larry.

"Yes," said Hetty, with a shiver. "I dislike him bitterly—and I should be safe with you."

Grant held out his hands. "Then, you must come, my dear. One way or other the struggle will soon be over now, and if I have to go out an outcast I can still shelter you."

THERE WAS A NOTE IN HER VOICE THAT SET THE MAN'S HEART BEATING FURIOUSLY.—*Page 267.*

The girl drew back a pace. "I can't turn against my own people—but yours have turned on you. That makes it easier. If you will take me, dear, we will go away."

Grant turned from her, and ground his heel into the snow. He had already given up almost everything that made life bright to him, but he had never felt the bitterness he did at that moment, when he realized that another and heavier sacrifice was demanded of him.

"Hetty," he said slowly, "can't you understand? I and the others brought the homesteaders in; this land has fed me and given me all I have, and now I can't go back on it and them. I would not be fit to marry you if I went away."

The words were very simple, but the man's voice betrayed what he felt. Hetty understood, and the pride she had no lack of came to the rescue.

"Yes," she said with a little sob, "Larry you are right. You will forgive me, dear, for once more tempting you. Perhaps it will all come right by and by. And now I must go."

There was a crackle of brittle twigs, and Grant dimly saw Miss Schuyler riding towards them. Reaching out, he took Hetty's hands and drew her closer.

"There is just one thing you must promise me, my dear," he said. "If your father insists on your listening to Clavering, you will let me know. Then I will come to Cedar for you, and there are still a few Americans who have not lost confidence in their leader and will come with me. Nothing must make you say yes to him."

"No," said Hetty simply. "If I cannot avoid it any other way, I will send for you. I can't wait any longer—and here is Flo."

Larry stooped; but before she laid her foot in the hand he held out for her to mount by, Hetty bent her head swiftly, and kissed him.

"Now," she said softly, "do you think I could listen to Clavering? You will do what you have to, and I will wait for you. It is hard on us both, dear; but I can't help recognizing my duty, too."

Larry lifted her to the saddle, and she vanished into the gloom of the birches before he could speak to Miss Schuyler,

who wheeled her horse and followed her. A few minutes more and he was riding towards Fremont as fast as his horse could flounder through the slushy snow, his face grown set and resolute again, for he knew he had difficult work to do.

“I don’t quite know what has come over you, Larry,” Breckenridge said an hour or two later with a puzzled look at Grant as he lifted his eyes from the writing pad on his knee. “I haven’t seen you so obviously contented for months, and yet the work before us may be grim enough. The most unpleasant point about it is that Clavering must have got hold of one of your warrant forms. It was a mistake to trust anybody with one not filled in.”

“Well, I feel that way too,” Grant confessed, “and at the same time I’m desperately anxious. We are going to have trouble with the boys right along the line, and there is no man living can tell what will happen if any of them go down in an affair with the cavalry.”

“It wouldn’t be difficult to guess what the consequences would be if they cut the track just before the stock train came through. You are quite sure they have not changed their minds again?”

“Yes,” said Larry quietly. “I bluffed it out of Harper. He would have taken a hand in, and only kicked when it came to taking lives. More of the others cleared out over that point, too, and as the rest were half-afraid of some of those who objected giving them away, they changed their plans; but it seems quite certain they mean to pull the rails up at the bend on the down grade by the bunch grass hollow. It is fortunate, any way. Cheyne and his cavalry will be watching the bridge, you see; but you had better get ready. I’ll have the last instructions done directly, and it will be morning before you are through.”

Breckenridge poured himself out a big cup of coffee from the jug on the stove, put on a black leather jacket, and went out to the stable. When he came back, Grant handed him a bundle of notes.

“You will see every man gets one and tell him all he wants to know. I dare not put down too much in black and white. They are to be round at the rise behind the depot at six Thursday night.”

“You believe they will come?”

“Yes,” Grant said firmly. “They are good men, and I’m thankful there are still so many of them, because just now they are all that is standing between this country and anarchy.”

Breckenridge smiled a little, but his voice was sympathetic. “Well,” he said, “I am glad, on my own account, too. It’s nicer to have the chances with you when you have to reckon with men of the kind we are going to meet, but I shall not be sorry when this trouble’s through. It is my first attempt at reforming and a little of it goes a long way with me. I don’t know that there is a more thankless task than trying to make folks better off than they want, or deserve, to be.”

He went out with a packet of messages, and Grant sat still, with care in his face, staring straight in front of him.

XXIV

THE STOCK TRAIN

It was almost unpleasantly hot in the little iron-roofed room at the railroad depot, and the agent, who flung the door open, stood still a minute or two blinking into the darkness. A big lamp that flickered in the wind cast an uncertain gleam upon the slushy whiteness under foot, and the blurred outline of a towering water-tank showed dimly through the sliding snow. He could also just discern the great locomotive waiting on the side-track, and the sibilant hiss of steam that mingled with the moaning of the wind whirling a white haze out of the obscurity. Beyond the track, and showing only now and then, the lights of the wooden town blinked fitfully; on the other hand and behind the depot was an empty waste of snow-sheeted prairie. The temperature had gone up suddenly, but the agent shivered as he felt the raw dampness strike through him, and, closing the door, took off and shook his jacket and sat down by the stove again.

He wore a white shirt of unusually choice linen, with other garments of fashionable city cut, for a station agent is a person of importance in the West, and this one was at least as consequential as most of the rest. He had finished his six o'clock supper at the wooden hotel a little earlier; and as the next train going west would not arrive for two or three hours, he took out a rank cigar, and, placing his feet upon a chair, prepared to doze the time away, though he laid a bundle of accounts upon his knee, in case anyone should come in unexpectedly. This, however, was distinctly improbable on such a night.

The stove flung out a drowsy heat, and it was not long before his eyes grew heavy. He could still hear the wailing of the wind and the swish of the snow that whirled about the lonely building, and listened for a while with tranquil contentment; for the wild weather he was not exposed to enhanced the comfort of the warmth and brightness he enjoyed. Then, the sounds grew less distinct and he heard nothing at all until he straightened himself suddenly in his chair as a cold draught struck him. A few flakes of snow also swept into the room and he saw that the door was open.

"Hallo!" he called. "Wait there a moment. I guess this place doesn't belong to you."

A man who looked big and shapeless in his whitened furs signed to somebody outside without answering, and four or five other men in fur caps and snow-sprinkled coats came in. They did not seem to consider it necessary to wait for permission, and it dawned upon the agent that something unusual was about to happen.

"We have a little business to put through," said one.

"Well," said the agent brusquely, "I can't attend to you now. You can come back later—when the train comes in."

One of the newcomers smiled sardonically, and the agent recognized two of his companions. They were men of some importance in that country, who had, however joined the homestead movement and were under the ban of the company's chief supporters, the cattle-barons. There was accordingly no inducement to waste civility on them; but he had an unpleasant feeling that unnecessary impertinence would not be advisable.

"It has got to be put through now," said the first of them, with a little ring in his voice. "We want a locomotive and a calaboose to take us to Boynton, and we are quite willing to pay anything reasonable."

"It can't be done. We have only the one loco here, and she is wanted to shove the west-bound train up the long grade to the hills."

"I guess that train will have to get through alone to-night," said another man.

The agent got up with an impatient gesture. "Now," he said, "I don't feel like arguing with you. You can't have the loco."

"No?" said the homesteader, with a little laugh. "Well, I figure you're mistaken. We have taken charge of her already and only want the bill. If you don't believe me, call your engineer."

The agent strode to the door, and there was a momentary silence after he called, "Pete!"

Then, a shout came out of the sliding snow: "I can't come."

It broke off with significant suddenness, and the agent turned to the man who had first spoken. "You are going to be sorry for this, Mr. Grant," he said and then tried to slip away, but one of the others pulled the door to and stood with his back to it while Grant, smiling, said, "I'm quite willing to take my chances. Have the stock-cars passed Perry's siding?"

“I don’t know,” said the agent.

“Then, hadn’t you better call them up and see? We are giving you the first chance of doing it out of courtesy, but one of us is a good operator.”

“I was on the Baltimore and Ohio road,” said one man. “You needn’t play any tricks with me.”

The agent sat down at the telegraph instrument, and looked up when it rapped out an answer to his message.

“Stock train left Birch Hollow. No sign of her yet.”

“That’s all right,” said the man who had served the B. and O. “Tell them to side-track her for half an hour, anyway, after your loco comes through. It’s necessary. Don’t worry ’bout any questions, but tell them to keep us a clear road, now.”

The agent, who saw that the other man was prepared to do the work himself, complied, and the latter once more nodded when the instrument clicked out the answer.

“Make out your bill,” said Grant, taking a wallet from his pocket.

“No,” said the agent; “we’re going to have the law of you.”

Grant laughed. “It strikes me there is very little law in this country now, and your company would a good deal sooner have the dollars than a letter telling them you had let us take one of their locomotives away from you.”

“That,” said the agent reflectively, “sounds quite sensible. Well, I’ll take the dollars. It doesn’t commit us to anything.”

The bills were counted over, and as the men went out Grant turned in the doorway. “It would not be advisable for you to wire any of the folks along the line to stop us,” he said. “We are going through to Boynton as fast as your engineer can shove his loco along, and if anybody switched us into a side-track it would only mean the smashing up of a good deal of the company’s property.”

He had gone out in another moment, and, in a few more, climbed into the locomotive cab, while somebody coupled on a calaboose in the rear. Then, he showed the engineer several bills and the agent’s receipt together.

“If you can hold your tongue and get us through to Boynton five minutes under the mail schedule time, the dollars are yours,” he said.

The engineer looked doubtful for a moment, then, his eyes twinkling, he took the bills.

“Well,” he said, “you’ve got the agent’s receipt, and the rest is not my business. Sit tight, and we’ll show you something very like flying to-night.”

Another man flung open the furnace door, a sudden stream of brightness flashed out as he hurled in coal, the door shut with a clang, and there was a whirr of slipping wheels as the engineer laid his hand on the lever. The great locomotive panted, and Grant, staring out through the glasses, saw a blinking light slide back to them. Then, the plates beneath him trembled, the hammering wheels got hold, and the muffled clanging and thudding swelled into a rhythmic din. The light darted past them, the filmy whiteness which had streamed down through the big headlamp’s glare now beat in a bewildering rush against the quivering glass, and the fan-shaped blaze of radiance drove on faster through the snow.

Five minutes passed, and Grant, who held a watch in his hand, glanced at the engineer as the blaze whirled like a comet along the clean-cut edge of a dusky bluff.

“You’ll have to do better,” he said.

“Wait till we have got her warmed up,” said the man, who stood quietly intent, his lean hand on the throttle. “Then you’ll see something.”

Grant sat down on a tool-locker, took out his cigar-case, and passed it to Breckenridge who sat opposite him. Breckenridge’s face was eager and there was an unusual brightness in his eyes, for he was young and something thrilled within him in unison with the vibration of the great machine. There was, however, very little to see just then beyond the tense, motionless figure of the man at the throttle and the damp-beaded face of another forced up in the lurid glare from the furnace door. A dim whiteness lashed the glasses, and when Breckenridge pressed his face to one of them the blaze of radiance against which the smoke-stack was projected blackly only intensified the obscurity they were speeding through.

Still, there was much to feel and hear—the shrill wail of the wind that buffeted their shelter, the bewildering throb and

quiver of the locomotive which, with its suggestion of Titanic effort, seemed to find a response in human fibre, pounding and clashing with their burden of strain, and the roar of the great drivers that rose and fell like a diapason. Perhaps Breckenridge, who was also under a strain that night, was fanciful, but it seemed to him there was hidden in the medley of sound a theme or motive that voiced man's domination over the primeval forces of the universe, and urged him to the endurance of stress, and great endeavour. It was, for the most part, vague and elusive; but there were times when it rang exultingly through the subtly harmonious din, reminding him of Wagnerian music.

Leaning forward, he touched Grant's knee. "Larry, it's bracing. The last few months were making me a little sick of everything—but this gets hold of one." Grant smiled, but Breckenridge saw how weary his bronzed face showed in the dim lantern light. "There was a time, two or three years ago, when I might have felt it as you seem to do," he said. "I don't seem to have any feeling but tiredness left me now."

"You can't let go," said Breckenridge.

"No," and Grant sighed, "not until the State takes hold instead of me, or the trouble's through."

Breckenridge said nothing further, and Grant sat huddled in a corner with the thin blue cigar-smoke curling about him. He knew it was possible he was taking a very heavy risk just then, since the homesteaders might have changed their plans again; and his task was a double one, for he had not only to save the stock train, but prevent an encounter between his misguided followers and the cavalry. So there was silence between them while, lurching, rocking, roaring, the great locomotive sped on through the night, until the engineer, turning half-round, glanced at Grant.

"Is she making good enough time to suit you? Perry's siding is just ahead, and we'll be on the Bitter Creek trestle five minutes after that," he said.

Grant rose and leaned forward close to the glasses. He could see nothing but the radiance from the headlamp whirling like a meteor through the filmy haze; but the fierce vibration of everything, and the fashion in which the snow smote the glasses, as in a solid stream, showed the pace at which they were travelling. He looked round and saw that Breckenridge's eyes were fixed upon him. His comrade's voice reached him faint and strained through the hammering of the wheels.

"You feel tolerably sure Harper was right about the bridge?"

Grant nodded. "I do."

"What if he was mistaken, and they meant to try there after all? There are eight of us."

"We have got to take the risk," said Grant very quietly, "and it is a big responsibility; but if the boys got their work in and fell foul of Cheyne, we would have half the State ablaze."

He signed for silence, and Breckenridge stared out through the glasses, for he feared his face would betray him, and fancied he understood the burden that was upon the man who, because it seemed the lesser evil, was risking eight men's lives.

As he watched, a blink of light crept out of the snow, grew brighter, and swept back to them. Others appeared in a cluster behind it, a big water-tank flashed by, and the roar of wheels and scream of whistle was flung back by a snow-covered building. Then, as Breckenridge glanced to the opposite side, the blaze of another headlamp dazzled his eyes and he had a blurred vision of a waiting locomotive and a long row of snow-smeared cars. In another second cars and station had vanished as suddenly as they had sprung up out of the night, and they were once more alone in the sliding snow. Breckenridge drew a breath of relief.

"There's the stock train, any way. And now for the bridge!" he said.

"That was the easiest half of it. Muller was there—I saw him—and he could have warned the agent at the last minute," Grant answered.

Neither of them said anything further, but Breckenridge felt his heart beat faster as the snow whirled by. The miles were slipping behind them, and he was by no means so sure as Larry was that no attempt would be made upon the bridge. His fancy would persist in picturing the awful leap into the outer darkness through the gap in the trestle, and he felt his lips and forehead grow a trifle colder and his flesh shrink in anticipation of the tremendous shock. He looked at Grant; the latter's face was very quiet, and had lost its grimness and weariness—there was almost a suggestion of exaltation in it.

"We are almost on the bridge now," he said.

The engineer nodded, and the next moment Breckenridge, who had been watching the light of the headlamp flash along the snow beside the track, saw it sweep on, as it were, through emptiness. Then, he heard a roar of timber beneath him, and fancied he could look down into a black gulf through the filmy snow. He knew it was a single track they were speeding over, and that the platform of the calaboose behind them overhung the frozen river far below.

He set his lips and held his breath for what seemed a very long time, and then, with a sigh of relief, sank back into his seat as he felt by the lessening vibration, that there was frozen soil under them. But in spite of himself the hands he would have lighted a cigar with shook, and the engineer who looked round glanced at him curiously.

“Feeling kind of sick?” he said. “Well, it’s against the regulations, but there’s something that might fix you as well as tea in that can.”

Breckenridge smiled feebly. “The fact is, I have never travelled on a locomotive before, and when I took on the contract I didn’t quite know all I was letting myself in for,” he said.

“How far are we off the long down grade with the curve in it?” asked Grant.

“We might get there in ’bout ten minutes,” said the engineer.

“Slacken up before you reach the grade and put your headlamp out,” said Grant. “I want you to stop just this side of the curve, and wait for me five minutes.”

The engineer looked at him steadily. “Now, there’s a good deal I don’t understand about all this. What do you want me to stop there for?”

“I don’t see why you should worry. It does not concern you. Any way, I have hired this special, and I give you my word that nothing I am going to do will cause the least damage to any of the company’s property. I want you to stop, lend me a lantern, and sit tight in the cab until I tell you to go on. We will make it two dollars a minute.”

The engineer nodded. “I don’t know what you are after, but I guess I can take your word,” he said. “You seem that kind of a man.”

Ten minutes later the fireman vanished into the darkness, and the blaze of the headlamp went out before he returned and the roar of the drivers sank. The rhythmic din grew slack, and became a jarring of detached sounds again, the snow no longer beat on the glasses as it had done, and, rocking less, the great locomotive rolled slowly down the incline until it stopped, and Grant, taking the lantern handed him, sprang down from the cab. Four other men were waiting on the calaboose platform, and when Grant hid the lantern under his fur coat they floundered down the side of the graded track which there crossed a hollow. A raw wind whirled the white flakes about them and Breckenridge could scarcely see the men behind him. He was thankful when, slipping, sliding, stumbling, they gained the level.

From there he could just distinguish the road bed as something solid through the whirling haze, and he felt they were following a bend of it when Grant stopped and a clinking sound came out of the obscurity above them. It might have been made by somebody knocking out key wedges or spikes with a big hammer and in his haste striking the rail or chair.

Then Grant said something Breckenridge could not catch, and they were crawling up the slope, with the clinking and ringing growing a trifle louder. Breckenridge’s heart beat faster than usual, but he was tolerably collected now. He had a weapon he was not unskilled with in his pocket, and the chance of a fight with even desperate men was much less disconcerting than that of plunging down into a frozen river with a locomotive. He had also a reassuring conviction that if Larry could contrive it there would be no fight at all.

He crawled on, with the man behind clutching at him, now and then, and the one in front sliding back on him, until his arms were wet to the elbows and his legs to the knees; but the top of the grade seemed strangely difficult to reach, and he could see nothing with the snow that blew over it in his eyes. Suddenly Larry rose up, there was a shout and a flounder, and, though he did not quite know how he got there, Breckenridge found himself standing close behind his comrade, and in the light of the lantern held up saw a man drop his hammer. There were other men close by, but they were apparently too astonished to think of flight.

“It’s Larry!” somebody exclaimed.

“Stop where you are,” said Grant sharply as one man made a move. “I don’t want to shoot any of you, but I most certainly will if you make me. Are there any more of you?”

“No,” said one of the men disgustedly.

Grant walked forward swinging his lantern until his eyes rested on one partly loosened rail. “And that is as far as you have got?” he said. “Take up your hammer and drive the wood key in. Get hold of their rifles, Charley. I guess they are under that coat.”

There was an angry murmur, and a man started to speak; but Grant stopped him.

“Hammer the wedges in,” he said. “It was pure foolishness made me come here to save you from the cavalry who had heard of what you meant to do, because we have no use for men of your kind in this country. You haven’t even sense enough to keep your rifles handy, and there will be two or three less of you to worry decent folks if you keep us waiting.”

A man took up the hammer, and then waited a moment, looking at those who stood about Larry. He could see the faces of one or two in the lantern light, and recognized that he need expect no support from them. The men were resolute Americans, who had no desire for anything approaching anarchy.

“We are with Larry, and don’t feel like fooling. Hadn’t you better start in?” one of them said.

The rail was promptly fastened, and Grant, after examining it, came back.

“Go on in front of us, and take your tools along! It will not be nice for the man who tries to get away,” he said.

The prisoners plodded dejectedly up the track until they reached the calaboose, into which the others drove them. Then Grant and Breckenridge went back to the locomotive, and the former nodded to the engineer:

“Take us through to Boynton as fast as you can.”

“That is a big load off your mind,” Breckenridge said as the panting engine got under way.

But Grant, huddled in a corner, neither moved nor spoke until, half an hour later, they rolled into a little wooden town and the men in the calaboose got down. There was nobody about the depot to ask them any questions, and they crossed the track to the straggling street apparently on good terms with each other, though four of them knew that unpleasant results would follow any attempt at a dash for liberty. In answer to Grant’s knock, a man let them into one of the stores.

“I guess we’ll lock them in the back store until morning,” he said, after a short conference apart with Grant. “A little cooling down is not going to do them much harm, and I don’t think anyone could get out without an axe.”

The building looked secure and, when food and hot coffee had been served them, Grant retired to rest. He slept soundly, and it was close on daylight when a pounding on the door awakened him.

“I guess you had better get up at once,” their host called.

A few minutes later Grant and Breckenridge went downstairs with him, and the storekeeper, opening a door, lifted the lamp he held and pointed to an open window in the roof. A barrel, with a box or two laid upon it, stood suggestively beneath it.

Breckenridge glanced at Larry, and saw a curious little smile on his face. “Yes,” he said, “it’s quite simple. Now, I never saw that window. Where would they be likely to head for?”

“Pacific Slope,” said the storekeeper. “Wages are high just now, and they seemed quite afraid of you. The west-bound fast freight stopped here for water about two hours ago, and it was snowing that thick nobody would see them getting into a box car. They heave a few dry goods out here occasionally.”

Breckenridge turned to Grant. “You seem relieved.”

“Yes,” said Grant, with a little shake of his shoulders. “If they have lit out of the country it will content me. I have had quite enough hard things to do lately.”

A sudden thought struck Breckenridge. “You didn’t mean—” he said with a shudder.

“I didn’t mean to let them go, but I’m glad they’ve gone,” Grant answered. “We made a warning of one of the cattle-barons’ men, and the man who takes the law into his own hands is doubly bound to do the square thing all round. If he does less, he is piling up a bigger reckoning than I would care to face.”

XXV

CHEYNE RELIEVES HIS FEELINGS

A blustering wind moaned outside the lonely building, and the stove snapped and crackled as the chilly draughts swept into the hall at Cedar Range. Jackson Cheyne had arrived on horseback in the creeping dusk an hour or two earlier, after spending most of four nights and days in the slushy snow, and was now resting contentedly in a big hide chair. Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that Hetty sat close by, he was feeling pleasantly drowsy when she turned to him.

"You have only told us that you didn't find the train-wreckers, and you know we are just dying with curiosity," she said.

Cheyne looked up languidly, wondering whether the half-indifferent inquisitiveness was assumed, as he remembered the anxiety he had seen in Hetty's face when he first came in. Instead of answering directly, he glanced round the little group sitting about the stove—for Miss Schuyler, and Christopher Allonby and his cousin were there, as well as Hetty.

"One would scarcely fancy you were dying of anything," he said. "In fact, it would be difficult to imagine any of you looking better. I wonder if you know that with the way that the light falls that dusky panelling forms a most effective background, Miss Schuyler?"

Flora Schuyler laughed. "We are not to be put off. Tell us what you found—and you needn't have any diffidence: we are quite accustomed to hearing the most astonishing things at Cedar."

"The trouble is that I didn't find anything. I spent several most unpleasant hours watching a railroad-trestle in blinding snow, until the cattle-train went by in safety. Nobody seemed to have the slightest wish to meddle with it."

Without exactly intending it he allowed his eyes to rest on Hetty a moment, and fancied he saw relief in her face. But it was Flora Schuyler who turned to him.

"What did you do then?"

"I and the boys then decided it would be advisable to look for a ranch where we could get food and shelter, and had some difficulty in finding one. In the morning, we made our way back to the depot, and discovered that a gentleman you know had hired a locomotive a little while after the cattle-train started."

"Larry, of course!" ejaculated Chris Allonby. "I wanted to stake five dollars with Clavering that he would be too smart for him again."

Cheyne looked at him inquiringly. "I don't quite understand."

"No?" and Allonby's embarrassment was unmistakable. "Well, there is no great reason why you should. I have a habit of talking at random occasionally. There are quite enough sensible people in this country without me just now."

"Then," said Cheyne, "I went on to an especially forlorn place called Boynton, and discovered with some difficulty that Mr. Grant, who hired the locomotive, had stopped it at a dangerous curve and picked several men up. He took them on to Boynton, and there they seem to have disappeared, though it was suggested that they had departed for a place unknown, either on the top of, or underneath a fast freight train."

Chris Allonby chuckled. "Well," he said, "we haven't the least use for Larry here, but I am almost proud he was a friend of mine."

Cheyne glancing round at the others fancied there was a little glow in Hetty's eyes and a trace of warmer colour in Flora Schuyler's face. It was only just perceptible to him, but he had less doubt when he saw that Miss Allonby was watching her companion covertly, for he was quite aware that the perceptions of the average young woman were likely to be much keener than his own in such affairs.

"I can't help fancying you have a clue to what really happened, Miss Torrance," he said.

"Yes," said Hetty quietly. "It is quite plain to me that Larry saved the train."

Cheyne glanced at her sharply, and then turned to Allonby. "It strikes you that way, too?"

"Of course," said Allonby unguardedly. "It is too bad of Larry. He has beaten us again, though Clavering fixed the thing

quite nicely."

Cheyne's face grew stern. "I am to understand that you did not warn the engineer or any of the railroad men?"

"No," said Allonby, with evident embarrassment. "We didn't. It was necessary to make the thing as ugly for Larry's friends as we could, and we knew you would be at the bridge. If you had caught them in the act, with the train not far away, it would have looked ever so much better for us—and you."

He stopped, with an unpleasant feeling that he had blundered. Cheyne's face had become grimmer. Miss Schuyler's lips were curled in a little scornful smile, and there was a curious sparkle in Hetty's eyes.

"I wonder if you quite recognize the depth of Mr. Grant's iniquity yet?" Flora Schuyler asked.

Cheyne smiled. "I confess I should very much like to meet the man. You see, my profession prevents my being a partisan, and the cleverness and daring of what he has evidently done appeals to me. He took the chances of his own men turning on him to save them from an affray with us, brought them off, and sent your cattle-train through; and what, it seems to me, was more than all, disregarded the probability of his enemies associating him with the contriving of the outrage."

"Wouldn't you have done that?" asked Miss Allonby.

"No," said the soldier quietly. "I don't think I should. A man who would do what this one has done would be very likely to take a hand in that kind of thing."

Again there was an almost embarrassing silence broken by Miss Allonby. "I wonder who could have told him."

Nobody spoke until Cheyne felt it advisable to break the silence.

"You have no sympathy with Grant, Miss Allonby?"

"No," said the girl plaintively. "I don't go quite as far as Mr. Clavering and my cousin do—though Chris generally talks too much—but Larry is a nuisance, and really ought to be crushed. You see, we had everything we wanted before he and the others made the trouble here."

"That is quite convincing," Cheyne said, with somewhat suspicious gravity. He looked at the others, and fancied that Hetty would have answered but that Flora Schuyler flashed a warning glance at her.

"One could almost fancy that most of us have too much now," she said. "Are we better, braver, stronger, or of choicer stuff than those others who have nothing, and only want the little the law would give them? Oh, yes, we are accomplished—very indifferently, some of us—and have been better taught, though one sometimes wonders at the use we make of it; but was that education given us for our virtues, or thrust upon us by the accident that our fathers happened to be rich?"

"You will scarcely approve, Miss Allonby?" said Cheyne.

The girl's lips curled scornfully. "I never argue with people who talk like that. It would not be any use—and they would never understand me; but everybody knows we were born different from the rabble. It is unfortunate you and Larry couldn't go up and down the country together, convincing people, Flo."

Cheyne, seeing the gleam in Miss Schuyler's eyes, wondered whether there had been malice in the speech, and was not sorry that Torrance and Clavering came in just then.

"I have just come from Newcombe's and heard that you had failed," said Torrance. "If you will come along to my room, I should like to hear about it."

Cheyne smiled as he rose. "I don't know that failed was quite the correct word. My object was to protect the track, and so far as I could discover, no attempt was made to damage it."

Torrance glanced at him sharply as they moved away. "Now, we were under the impression that it was the capture of the man responsible for the affair."

"Then," said the soldier drily, "I am afraid you were under a misapprehension."

He passed the next half-hour with Torrance amicably, and it was not until he was returning to the hall with Clavering that he found an opportunity of expressing himself freely. Torrance, he realized, was an old man, and quite incapable of regarding the question except from his own point of view.

"I am just a little astonished you did not consider it advisable to follow the thing up further, when you must have seen what it pointed to," said Clavering.

“That,” said Cheyne, smiling, “is foolish of you. I would like to explain that I am not a detective or a police officer.”

“You were, at least, sent here to restore tranquillity.”

“Precisely!” said Cheyne. “By the State. To maintain peace, and not further the cattle-men’s schemes. I am, for the present, your leader’s guest; but I have no reason for thinking he believes that in any way constitutes me his ally. In his case I could not use the word accomplice.”

Clavering flashed an observant glance at him. “It should be evident which party is doing the most to bring about tranquillity.”

“It is not,” said Cheyne. “I don’t know that it is my business to go into that question; but one or two of the efforts you have made lately would scarcely impress the fact on me.”

“You are frank, any way,” with a disagreeable laugh.

“No,” said Cheyne, with a twinkle in his eyes, “I’m not sure that I am. We occasionally talk a good deal more plainly in the United States cavalry.”

He passed on to the hall and Clavering went back to Torrance’s room. “We have got to get rid of that man, sir,” he said. “If we don’t, Larry will have him. Allonby had better go and worry the Bureau into sending for another two or three squadrons under a superior officer.”

Torrance sighed heavily. “I’m ’most afraid they are not going to take kindly to any more worrying,” he said. “In fact, now it’s evident how the feeling of the State is going, I have an idea they’d sooner stand in with the homestead boys. Still, we can try it, any way.”

It was about the same time that Grant flung himself wearily into a chair in the great bare room at Fremont ranch. His face was haggard, his eyes heavy, for he had spent the greater part of several anxious days and nights endeavouring to curb the headstrong passions of his followers, and riding through leagues of slushy snow.

“Will you hurry Tom up with the supper, while I look through my letters?” he said.

Breckenridge went out, and, when he came back a little while later, found Grant with a strip of paper on his knee.

“More bad news?” he asked.

Grant made no answer, but passed the strip of paper across to him, and Breckenridge’s pulses throbbed fast with anger as he read: “It is quite difficult to sit on both sides of the fence, and the boys have no more use for you. Still, there was a time when you did what you could for us, and that is why I am giving you good advice. Sit tight at Fremont, and don’t go out at nights.”

“The consumed asses!” he said. “You see what he means? They have gone after the herring Clavering drew across the trail.”

The bronze grew darker in Larry’s face, and his voice was hoarse. “Yes—they figure the cattle-men have bought me over. Well, there were points that would have drawn any man’s suspicions—the packet I would not give up to Chilton—and, as you mention, Miss Torrance’s wallet. Still, it hurts.”

Breckenridge saw the veins swell up on his comrade’s forehead and the trembling of his hands. “Don’t worry about them. They are beasts, old man,” he said.

Grant said nothing for at least a minute, and then clenched one lean brown hand. “I felt it would come, and yet it has shaken most of the grit out of me. I did what I could for them—it was not easy—and they have thrown me over. That is hard to bear, but there’s more. No man can tell, now there is no one to hold them in, how far they will go.”

Breckenridge’s answer was to fling a cloth upon the table and lay out the plates. Grant sat very still; his voice had been curiously even, but his set face betrayed what he was feeling, and there was something in his eyes that Breckenridge did not care to see. He also felt that there were troubles too deep for any blundering attempt at sympathy, but the silence grew oppressive, and by and by he turned to his companion again.

“We’ll presume the fellow who wrote that means well,” he said. “What does his warning point to?”

Grant smiled bitterly. “An attempt upon my homestead or my life, and I have given them already rather more than either is worth to me,” he said.

Breckenridge was perfectly sensible that he was not shining in the rôle of comforter; but he felt it would be something accomplished if he could keep his comrade talking. He had discovered that verbal expression is occasionally almost a necessity to the burdened mind, though Larry was not greatly addicted to relief of that description.

“Of course, this campaign has cost you a good deal,” he said.

“Probably five thousand dollars—all that seemed good in life—and every friend I had.”

“After all, Larry, the thing may be no more than a joke or an attempt at bluff. Even admitting that it is not, it probably only expresses the views of a few of the boys.”

Grant shook his head. “No. I believe it is quite genuine. I saw how affairs were going even before I wouldn’t give Chilton the packet; most of the boys were ready to break away then. Well, one could scarcely blame them for not trusting me, and I felt I was laying down my authority when I sent the stock train through.”

“Not blame them!” said Breckenridge, clenching his fist, his eyes blazing. “Where in the wide world would the crazy fools get another man like you? But if you can take it quietly, I ought to, and the question is, what are you going to do?”

“What I can,” said Grant. “Hold the boys clear of trouble where it is possible. There are still one or two who will stand behind me, and what we can’t do may be done for us. When a man is badly wanted in this country he usually comes to the front, and I will be glad to drop out when I see him.”

“Larry,” Breckenridge said slowly, “I am younger than you are, and I haven’t seen as much, but it would be better for me if I had half your optimism. Still, that was not quite what I was asking. If the beasts actually mean to burn your place or attempt your life you are surely not going to give them the opportunity. Can’t we fix up a guard among the few sensible men or send for the cavalry?”

Grant smiled wearily as he shook his head. “No,” he said. “The one thing I can’t do is to lift my hand against the men I brought here in a private quarrel.”

Just then the cook came in with the supper, and, though the pair had eaten nothing since sunrise and ridden through soft snow most of that day, it cost Breckenridge an effort to clear the plate set before him. Grant scarcely touched the food, and it was a relief to both when the meal was over, and Grant’s plate, still half-filled, was taken away. After he had several times lighted a cigar and let it go out again, Breckenridge glanced at him deprecatingly.

“I can’t keep it up any longer, and I know how it is with you, because I feel the thing myself,” he said. “Now, if you want me here, I’ll stay, but I have a notion the poor attempts at talk I’m making are only worrying you.”

Grant smiled, but Breckenridge saw the answer in his face, and went out hastily, which was, under the circumstances, the wisest thing he could do. Then, Grant stretched his arms wearily above his head, and a faint groan escaped him.

“It had to come—but it hurts,” he said.

XXVI

LARRY'S REWARD

Late one night Larry came home to Fremont, wet with rain and splashed with mire, for it was thawing fast and he had ridden far. He sloughed off his outer garments, and turned to Breckenridge, who had been waiting him, with a little, weary smile.

"The dollars are safe, any way, and that is a big load off my mind," he said. "Gillot has them in his safe, and nobody can touch them without a countersigned order from the executive."

Breckenridge heaved a sigh of relief, for he knew that Gillot, who had a store in the railroad town, was a determined man, and quite capable of taking care of what had been entrusted him. The dollars in question, which had been raised by levy and sent by sympathizers, had been placed in Larry's hands to further the homesteaders' objects in that district as he deemed advisable. He had, however, for reasons Breckenridge was acquainted with, just relinquished the responsibility.

"I think you were wise," said the lad. "It roused a good deal of feeling when you wouldn't let Harper and his friends have what they asked for, and the boys were very bitter at the meeting while you were away!"

"Well," said Grant drily, "I knew what they wanted those dollars for, and if I'd had twice as many I would not have given them one."

"They could not have done much harm with the few they wanted, and it would have saved you a good deal of unpleasantness. I didn't like the way the boys were talking, and it was quite plain the men who kept their heads were anxious. In fact, two or three of them offered to come over and sleep here until the dissatisfaction had simmered down."

"You did not accept their offer?"

"No, but I wish you would."

Grant shook his head. "It wouldn't suit me to own up that I was afraid of my friends—and I don't want to believe there are any of them who would injure me. If there were, I could not draw trigger on them in defence of my own property."

"Then we will hope for the best," said Breckenridge, somewhat doubtfully.

Grant, who had had supper somewhere else, presently retired, and Breckenridge, who found the big room dreary without him, followed a little later. It was long before he slept, for he had seen the temper of the more reckless spirits at the meeting he had attended, and he could not shake off the memory of his comrade's face. Larry had made no protest, but Breckenridge could understand what he was feeling. The ranch was very quiet, but he did not think his comrade slept; in this, however, he was wrong, for, worn out by physical effort and mental strain, Larry had sunk into heavy slumber.

Two or three hours later Breckenridge awakened suddenly. He sat up listening, still a little dazed with sleep, but nothing disturbed the silence of the wooden building, and it was a moment or two before the moan of the wind forced itself on his perceptions. Then, he thought he heard the trampling of a horse and stealthy footsteps in the mire below, and, springing from his bed, ran to the window. The night was dark, but he could dimly see a few shadowy figures moving towards the house. In another minute he slipped into part of his clothing and hastening into Grant's room shook him roughly.

"Get up! There are men outside."

Larry was on his feet in a few seconds and struggling into his garments. "Light the lamps downstairs," he ordered.

Breckenridge stood still, astonished. "That would give them an advantage. They might be the Sheriff's boys."

"No," said Larry, with a laugh that sounded very bitter, "I don't think they are! Go down, and do what I tell you."

Breckenridge went, but his fingers shook so that he broke several sulphur matches in his haste before he had lighted one big lamp in the log-built hall. Then, as he turned towards the living room, there was a pounding on the door, and while he stood irresolute Grant, partly dressed, came running down the stairway. Two other men showed dimly behind him, but Breckenridge scarcely saw them, for he sprang through the doorway into the unlighted room, and the next moment fell over a table. Picking himself up with an objurgation, he groped along the wall for the rack where the rifles stood, and

was making his way back towards the blink of light with two of them in his hands, when a hoarse voice demanded admission and the door rattled under the blows showered upon it. Then, as he came out into the hall, Grant turned to him.

“Put those rifles down,” he said quietly.

Breckenridge stared at him. “But——”

“Put them down!” said Grant, with a little impatient gesture; Breckenridge let the weapons fall but he was pleased to see the cook, who now stood at the foot of the stairway, slip softly forward and pick up one of them. Grant was looking at the door and did not see the man move back half-way up the stairs as silently as he came.

Once more a hoarse shout rose from outside: “Open that door before we break it in!”

For a moment or two, as if to give point to the warning, the door creaked and rattled as the axe-heads beat upon it, and then the din ceased suddenly, for Grant, who recognized the voice, raised his hand.

“Open it for them,” he said, so loudly that he could be heard outside.

Breckenridge was almost glad to obey. It would have pleased him better to have taken his place, rifle in hand, with the cook on the stairway, but since Grant had evidently determined not to oppose the assailants’ entrance by violence, it was a relief to do anything that would terminate the suspense. Still, his heart throbbed painfully as he seized the bolt, and he glanced round once more in what he felt was futile protest. Grant, who evidently saw what he was thinking in his face, only smiled a little and signed with his hand.

Breckenridge drew the bolt, and sprang backwards as the door swung open. Men with axes and rifles showed up in the light; but while here and there an axe flashed back a twinkling gleam, or a face shone white, the rest was blurred and shadowy, and he could only see hazy figures moving against the blackness of the night. His companion was standing alone in the middle of the hall, motionless and impassive, with nothing in his hands.

“Now,” he said, in a voice that jarred on Breckenridge’s ears, “the door is open. What do you want?”

“We want you,” said one of the men outside.

“Then, I’ll come out and talk to you,” said Grant.

Breckenridge laid a restraining hand upon his arm, but he shook it off, and moving forward stopped just outside the threshold. The lad could not see his face, but he noticed that he stood very straight, with his head thrown back a trifle, and that one or two of those without edged farther into the shadowy crowd. Glancing behind him, he also saw the cook leaning forward on the stairway with the rifle glinting in his hands.

“Well?” said Grant, and his voice rang commandingly.

“We have come for the dollars,” said a man. “We want them, and they’re ours.”

“Then, you must ask your committee for them. They are not in my house.”

“Bluff!” said somebody; and an angry clamour broke out.

“Hand them out,” cried one voice, “before we burn the place for you.”

Larry swung up one hand commandingly, and Breckenridge felt a thrill of pride when, as if in tribute to his comrade’s fearlessness, a sudden silence followed. Larry stood alone, statuesque in poise, with arm stretched out in the face of the hostile crowd, and once more the respect the men had borne him asserted itself.

“You will listen to me, boys, and it may be the last time I shall speak to you,” he said. “You know that right back from the beginning I have done the best I could for you, and now I feel it in me that if you will wait just a little longer the State will do more than I could ever do. Can’t you understand that if you go round destroying railroad-trestles, shooting cattle, and burning ranches, you are only playing into the hand of your enemies, and the very men in the legislature who would, if you kept your patience, make your rights sure to you, will be forced to turn the cavalry loose on you? Can’t you sit tight another month or two, instead of throwing all we have fought for away?”

The silence that followed the speech lasted for a space of seconds, and then, when Breckenridge hoped Grant might still impose prudence upon the crowd, there were murmurs of doubt and suspicion. They grew rapidly louder, and a man stepped out from the rest.

“The trouble is that we don’t believe in you, Larry,” he said. “You were with us solid one time, but that was before the

cattle-barons bought you."

A derisive laugh followed, and when Grant turned a little Breckenridge saw his face. The bronze in it had faded, and left paler patches, that seemed almost grey, while the lad, who knew his comrade's pride and uprightness, fancied he could guess how that taunt, made openly, had wounded him.

"Well," he said, very slowly, "I can only hope you will have more confidence in your next leader; but I am on the list of the executive still, and if the house was full of dollars I wouldn't give you one of them with which to make trouble that you'll most surely be sorry for. Any way, those I had are safe in a place where, while your committee keep their heads, you will not lay hands on them."

A shout of disbelief was followed by uproar, through which there broke detached cries: "Pull him down! He has them all the time! Pound them out of him! Burn the place down for a warning to the cattle-men!"

They died away when one of the men, with emphatic gestures, demanded attention. Moving out from the rest, he turned to Grant. "You have rifles and cartridges here, and after all, those are what we want the most. Now—and it's your last chance—hand them out."

"No," said Grant.

The man made a little gesture of resignation. "Boys," he said, "you will have to go in and take them."

Grant still stood motionless and unyielding on his threshold, but he had only a moment's grace, for the men outside surged on again, and one swung a rifle-butt over him. Breckenridge saw his comrade seize it, and had sprung to his side when a rifle flashed on the stairway behind him and a man cried out and fell. The next instant another rifle-butt whirled, and Grant, reeling sideways, went down and was trampled on.

Breckenridge ran towards the rifle still lying in the hall, but before he could reach it there was a roar of voices and a rush of feet, and the men who poured in headlong were upon him. Something hard and heavy smote him in the face, and as he reeled back gasping there was another flash on the stairway. His head struck something, and he was never sure of what happened during the next half-hour.

When, feeling very dizzy, Breckenridge raised himself in the corner where he had been lying, the hall was empty save for two huddled figures in the doorway, and while he blinked at them in a half-dazed fashion, it seemed to him that a red glare, which rose and fell, shone in. He could also smell burning wood, and saw dim wreaths of smoke drive by outside. His hearing was not especially acute just then, but he fancied that men were trampling, and apparently dragging furniture about, all over the building. Then, as his scattered senses came back to him, he rose feebly to his feet, and finding to his astonishment that he still possessed the power of locomotion, walked unevenly towards the motionless objects in the doorway. One of them, as he expected, was Grant, who was lying very white and still, just as he had fallen.

"Larry," Breckenridge said, and shivered at the sound of his own voice. "Larry!"

But there was no answer, and Breckenridge sat down by Grant's side with a little groan, for his head swam once more and he felt a horrible coldness creeping over him. How long he sat there, while the smoke that rolled in from outside grew denser, he did not know; but by and by he was dimly conscious that the men were coming down the stairway. They clustered about him, and one of them, stooping over the injured homesteader, signed to his comrades.

"Put him into the wagon, and start off at once," he said.

Three or four men came out from the rest, and when they shuffled away with their burden, the one who seemed to be leader pointed to Grant as he turned to Breckenridge.

"He would have it, and the thump on the head he got would have put an end to most men," he said. "Still, I don't figure you need worry about burying him just yet, and I want a straight answer. Are those dollars in the house?"

Breckenridge sat blinking at him a moment, and then very shakily dragged himself to his feet, and stood before the man, with one hand clenched. His face was white and drawn and there was a red smear on his forehead.

"If you would not believe the man who lies there, will you take my word?" he said unevenly. "He told you they were not."

"I guess he spoke the truth," said somebody. "Any way, we can't find them. Well, what is to be done with him?"

Breckenridge, who was not quite himself, laughed bitterly. "Leave him where he is, and go away. You have done

enough," he said. "He gave you all he had—and I know, as no other man ever will, what it cost him—and this is how you have repaid him."

Some of the men looked confused, and the leader made a deprecatory gesture. "Any way, we'll give you a hand to put him where you want."

Breckenridge waved him back fiercely. "I am alone; but none of you shall lay a hand on him while I can keep you off. If you have left any life in him, the touch of your fingers would hurt him more than anything."

The other man seemed to have a difficulty in finding an answer, and while he stared at Breckenridge there was a trample of hoofs in the mire outside, and a shout. Breckenridge could not catch its meaning, but the men about him streamed out of the hall and he could hear them mounting in haste. As the rapid beat of hoofs gradually died away, looking up at a sound, he saw the cook bending over his comrade. The man, seeing in his eyes the question he dared not ask, shook his head.

"No, I guess they haven't killed him," he said. "Kind of knocked all the senses out of him; and now I've let the rest out, we'll get him to bed."

"The rest?" Breckenridge asked bewildered.

The man nodded. "Yes," he said, "I guess I got one or two of the homestead-boys, and then Charley and I lit out through a back window, and slipped round to see why the stockboys weren't coming. It was quite simple. The blame firebugs had put a man with a rifle at the door of their sleeping shed."

Three or four other men trooped in somewhat sheepishly, though, as the cook had explained, it was not their fault they had arrived after the fight was over; and while they carried their master upstairs Breckenridge thought he heard another beat of hoofs. He paid no great attention to it, but when Larry had been laid on the bed glanced towards the window at the streaks of flame breaking through the smoke that rolled about a birch-log building.

"What can be done?" he said.

"I don't know that we can do anything," answered the cook. "The fire has got too good a holt, but it's not likely to light anything else the way the wind is. It was one of them blame Chicago rustlers put the firestick in."

"Pshaw!" said Breckenridge. "Let it burn. I mean, what can be done for Larry?"

"We might give him some whiskey—only we haven't any. Still, I've seen this kind of thing happen in the Michigan lumber-camps, and I guess he's most as well without it. You want to give a man's brains time to settle down after they've had a big shake-up."

Breckenridge sat down limply on the foot of the bed, faint and dizzy, and wondering if he really heard a regular, rhythmic drumming through the snapping of the flame. It grew louder while he listened, and a faint musical jingling became audible with it.

"That sounds like cavalry," the cook said. "They have been riding round and seen the blaze."

And a few minutes later a voice rose sharply outside, and some, at least, of the riders pulled up. The cook, at a sign from Breckenridge, went down, and came back by and by with a man in bespattered blue uniform.

"Captain Cheyne, United States cavalry—at your service," he said. "I am afraid I have come a trifle late to be of much use; but a few of my men are trying to pick up the rustlers' trail. Now, how did that man get hurt, and what is the trouble about?"

Breckenridge told him as concisely as he could, and Cheynes bent over the silent figure on the bed.

"Quietness is often good in these cases; but there is such a thing as collapse following the shock, and I guess by your friend's face it might be well to try to rouse him," he said. "Have you any brandy?"

"No," said Breckenridge. "It has been quite a time since we had that or any other luxuries in this house. Its owner stripped himself for the benefit of the men who did their best to kill him."

Cheyne brought out a flask. "This should do as well," he said. "You can tell that man to boil some water, and in the meanwhile help me to get the flask top into your partner's mouth."

It was done with some difficulty, and Breckenridge waited anxiously until a quiver ran through the motionless body.

Then Cheyne repeated the dose, and Larry gasped and slowly opened his eyes. He said something the others could not catch, and closed them again; but Breckenridge fancied a little warmth crept into his pallid skin.

“I guess that will do,” said Cheyne. “In one or two of my stations we had to be our own field hospital; but I don’t know enough of surgery to take the responsibility of stirring up his circulation any further. Still, when you can get them ready, we will have hot bottles at his feet.”

“My boys have got the fire under,” Cheyne said, coming in an hour later. “Now, I have been in the saddle most of the day, and while your cook has promised to billet the boys, I’ll have to ask you for shelter. If you told me a little about what led up to this trouble, it might pass the time.”

“I don’t see why I should,” Breckenridge informed him.

“It could not hurt you, any way,” suggested Cheyne, “and it might do you good.”

Breckenridge looked at him steadily, and felt a curious confidence in the discretion of the quiet, bronze-faced man. As the result of it, he told him a good deal more than he had meant to do when he commenced the story.

“I think you have done right,” Cheyne said. “A little rough on him! I had already figured he was that kind of a man. Well, I hear the rest of the boys coming back, and I’ll send up a sergeant who knows a good deal about these accidents to look after him.”

The sergeant came up by and by and kept watch with Breckenridge for a while; but, after an hour or so Breckenridge’s head grew very heavy, and the sergeant, taking his arm, silenced his protests by nipping it and quietly put him out of the room. When he awoke next morning he found that Grant was capable at least of speech, for Cheyne was asking him questions, and receiving very unsatisfactory answers.

“In fact,” said the cavalry officer, “you don’t feel disposed to tell me who the men that tried to burn your place were, or anything about them?”

“No,” Larry said feebly. “It would be pleasanter if you concluded I was not quite fit to talk just now.”

Cheyne glanced at Breckenridge, who was watching him anxiously. “In that case I could not think of worrying you, and have no doubt I can find out. In the meanwhile I guess the best thing you can do is to go to sleep again.”

He drew Breckenridge out of the room, and shook hands with him. “If you are wanted I’ll send for you,” he said. “Keep your comrade quiet, and I should be astonished if he is not about again in a day or two.”

Then, he went down the stairway and swung himself into the saddle, and with a rattle and jingle he and the men behind him rode away.

XXVII

CLAVERING'S LAST CARD

There was an impressive silence in Hetty's little drawing-room at Cedar Range when Cheyne, who had ridden there the day after he left Fremont, told his story. He had expected attention, but the effect his narrative produced astonished him. Hetty had softly pushed her chair back into the shadow where the light of the shaded lamp did not fall upon her, but her stillness was significant. He could, however, see Miss Schuyler, and wondered what accounted for the impassiveness of her face, now the colour that had flushed her cheek had faded. The silence was becoming embarrassing when Miss Schuyler broke it.

"Mr. Grant is recovering?" she asked.

"Yes," said Cheyne. "He was coming round when I left him. The blow might have been a dangerous one; but I had a suspicion he had more than that to contend with."

"Yes?" said Hetty, a little breathlessly.

"Of course, his affairs were not my business," Cheyne went on, "but it seemed to me the man had been living under a heavy strain; and though we were strangers, I could not help feeling a sympathy that almost amounted to a liking for him. He must have found it trying when the men he had done his best for came round to burn his place; but I understand he went out to speak to them with empty hands when they struck him down."

"What made them attack him?" asked Miss Schuyler.

"I'm not quite sure, but I have an idea they were displeased because he did not countenance their attempt to wreck the cattle-train. Then, I believe he held some dollars in trust for them, and, as they presumably wanted them for some fresh outrage, would not give them up. Mr. Grant is evidently a man with a sense of responsibility."

Hetty looked up suddenly. "Yes," she said. "He would have let them tear him to pieces before he gave them one."

Cheyne noticed the faint ring in her voice, and fancied it would have been plainer had she not laid a restraint upon herself. A vague suspicion he had brushed away once more crept into his mind.

"Well," he said, slowly, watching Hetty the while, "I fancy the efforts he made to save your friends' stock will cost him a good deal. The point is that a man of his abilities must have recognized it at the time."

Hetty met his glance, and Cheyne saw the little glow in her eyes. "Do you think that would have counted for anything with such a man?"

Cheyne made a little gesture of negation that in a curious fashion became him. "No. That is, I do not believe he would have let it influence him."

"That," said Miss Schuyler, "is a very comprehensive admission."

Cheyne smiled. "I don't know that I could desire a higher tribute paid to me. Might one compliment you both on your evident desire to be fair to your enemies?"

He saw the faint flush in Hetty's face, and was waiting with a curious expectancy for her answer, when Torrance came in. He appeared grimly pleased at something as he signed to Cheyne.

"His friends have burned the rascal out," he said. "Well, I don't know that we could have hoped for anything better; but I want to hear what you can tell me about it. You will have to spare me Captain Cheyne for a little, Hetty."

Cheyne rose and went away with him, while, when the door closed behind them, Hetty—who had seen the vindictive satisfaction in her father's face—turned to her companion with a flash of imperious anger in her eyes.

"Flo," she said, "how can he? It's wicked of him."

Miss Schuyler checked her with a gesture. "Any way, he is your father."

Hetty flushed, but the colour faded and left her face white again. "Well," she said, "Clavering isn't, and it is he who has made him so bitter against Larry. Flo, it's horrible. They would have been glad if the boys had killed him, and when he's

ill and wounded they will not let me go to him."

Her voice broke and trembled, and Flora Schuyler laid a hand restrainingly upon her arm. "Of course. But why should you, Hetty?"

Hetty, who shook off her grasp, rose and stood quivering a little, but very straight, looking down on her with pride, and a curious hardness in her eyes.

"You don't know?" she said. "Then I'll tell you. Because there is nobody like Larry, and never will be. Because I love him better than I ever fancied I could love anybody, and—though it's 'most wonderful—he has loved me and waited ever so patiently. Now they are all against him, I'm going to him. Flo, they have 'most made me hate them, the people I belong to, and I think if I was a man I could kill Clavering."

Flora Schuyler sat very still a moment, but it was fortunate she retained her composure whatever she may have felt, for Hetty was in a mood for any rashness. Stretching out her hand, she drew the girl down beside her with a forceful gentleness.

"Hetty," she said, "I think I know how such a man as Larry is would feel, and you want him to be proud of you. Well, there are things that neither he nor you could do, and you must listen to me quietly."

She reasoned with the girl for a while until Hetty shook the passion from her.

"Of course you are right, Flo," she said, and her voice was even. "If he could bear all that, I can be patient too. Larry has had ever so many hard things to do, but it is only because it would not be fair to him I'm not going to him now. Flo, you will not leave me until the trouble's through?"

Miss Schuyler turned and kissed her, and then, rising quietly, went out of the room. She had shown Hetty her duty to Larry, which she felt would be more convincing just then than an exposition of what she owed her father, and had reasons for desiring solitude to grapple with affairs of her own. What she had done had cost her an effort, but Flora Schuyler was fond of Hetty and recognized the obligation of the bond she was contracting when she made a friend.

Some minutes had passed when Hetty rose and took down her writing-case from a shelf. She could at least communicate with Larry, for the maid, who had more than one admirer among the cow-boys, had found a means by which letters could be conveyed; but the girl could not command her thoughts, and written sympathy seemed so poor and cold a thing. Two letters were written and flung into the stove, for Flora Schuyler's counsel was bearing fruit; and she had commenced two more when there was a tapping at the door. Hetty looked up with a little flash in her eyes, and swept the papers into the writing-case as Clavering came in. Then she rose, and stood looking at him very coldly.

It was an especially unfortunate moment for the man to approach her in, and, though he did not know why it should be so, he recognized it; but there were reasons that made any further procrastination distinctly unadvisable.

"There is something I have been wanting to tell you for a long time, Hetty," he said.

"It would be better for you to wait a little longer," the girl said chillingly. "I don't feel inclined to listen to anything to-night."

"The trouble," said Clavering, who spoke the truth, "is that I can't. It has hurt me to keep silent as long as I have done already."

He saw the hardening of Hetty's lips, and knew that he had blundered; but he was committed now, and could only obey when she said, with a gesture of weariness "Then go on."

The abrupt command would probably have disconcerted most men and effectually spoiled the appeal they meant to make, and Clavering's face flushed as he recognized its ludicrous aspect. Still, he could not withdraw then, and he made the best of a difficult position with a certain gracefulness which might, under different circumstances, have secured him a modicum of consideration. As it was, however, Hetty's anger left her almost white, and there was a light he did not care to see in her eyes when she turned towards him.

"I am glad you have told me this," she said. "Since nothing else would convince you, it will enable me to talk plainly; I don't consider it an honour—not in the least. Can't you see that it is wholly and altogether out of the question that I should ever think in that way of you?"

Clavering gasped, and the darker colour that was in his cheek showed in his forehead too. Hetty reminded him very much of her father, then—and he had witnessed one or two displays of the cattle-baron's temper.

“I admit that I have a good many shortcomings, but, since you ask, I must confess that I don’t quite understand why my respectful offer should rouse your indignation.”

“No?” said Hetty coldly, with the vindictive sparkle still in her eyes. “Then aren’t you very foolish?”

Clavering smiled, though it was not easy. “Well,” he said, “I was evidently too audacious; but you have not told me yet why the proposal I ventured to make should appear quite preposterous.”

“I think,” said Hetty, “it would be considerably nicer for you if I didn’t. I can, however, tell you this—I would never, under any circumstances, marry you.”

Clavering bent his head, and took himself away with the best grace he could, while Hetty, who, perhaps because she had been under a heavy strain, became suddenly sensible of a most illogical desire to laugh, afterwards admitted that he really accomplished it becomingly. But the laughter that would have been a relief to her did not come, and after toying in a purposeless fashion with her writing-case, she rose and slipped out of the room, unfortunately leaving it open.

A few minutes later Clavering met the maid in the corridor that led to Torrance’s room, and the girl, who saw his face, and may have guessed what had brought the anger into his eyes, stopped a moment. It is also probable that, being a young woman with quick perceptions, she had guessed with some correctness how far his regard for Hetty went.

“You don’t seem pleased to-night,” she said.

“No?” said Clavering, with a little laugh which rang hollow. “Well, I should be. It is quite a while since I had a talk with you.”

“Pshaw!” said the girl, who failed to blush, though she wished to, watching him covertly. “Now, I wonder if what I’m going to tell you will make you more angry still. Suppose you heard Miss Torrance had been sending letters to Larry Grant?”

“I don’t know that I should believe it,” said Clavering, as unconcernedly as he could.

“Well, she has,” the girl said. “What is more, she has been going out to meet him in the Cedar Bluff.”

Clavering’s face betrayed him, and for a moment the girl, who saw his lips set, was almost afraid. He contrived, however, to make a light answer, and was about to ask a question when a door creaked. The next moment Torrance came out into the corridor, and Clavering’s opportunity vanished with the maid. Torrance, who had evidently not seen her, kept him talking for a while.

In the meanwhile, the girl contrived an excuse for entering the room where she was quite aware Hetty and Clavering had met. She did not find her mistress, but, as it happened, noticed the writing-case, and, having a stake in affairs, opened it. Inside she found two sheets of paper, and after considering the probabilities of detection appropriated one of them on which was written, “Larry dear.”

She had, however, no intention of showing it to Clavering just then, but, deciding that such a paper might be worth a good many dollars to the person who knew how to make use of it, she slipped it into her pocket, and went out into the hall, where she saw him talking to Torrance. As she watched they shook hands, and Clavering swung himself on to the back of a horse somebody led up to the door. It was two or three weeks before he came back again, and was led straight to the room where Torrance and some of his neighbours were sitting. Clavering took his place among the rest, and watched the faces that showed amidst the blue cigar-smoke. Some were intent and eager, a few very grim, but the stamp of care was on all of them save that of Torrance, who sat immobile and expressionless at the head of the table. Allonby was speaking somewhat dejectedly.

“It seems to me that we have only gone round,” he said. “It has cost us more dollars than any of us care to reckon, and I for one am tolerably near the end of my tether.”

“So are the homestead-boys. We can last them out, and we have got to,” said somebody.

Allonby raised his hand with a little hopeless gesture. “I’m not quite sure; but what I want to show you is that we have come back to the place we started from. When we first met here we decided that it was advisable to put down Larry Grant, and though we have not accomplished it yet, it seems to me more necessary than ever just now.”

“I don’t understand you,” said one of the younger men. “Larry’s boys have broken loose from him, and he can’t worry anybody much alone.”

Torrance glanced at Allonby with a sardonic twinkle in his eyes. “That sounds very like sense,” he said.

“Well,” said Allonby drily, “it isn’t, and I think you know it at least as well as I do. It is because the boys have broken out we want to get our thumb on Larry.”

There was a little murmur of bewilderment, for men were present that night who had not attended many meetings of the district committee.

“You will have to make it plainer,” somebody said.

Allonby glanced at Torrance, who nodded, and then went on. “Now, I know that what I am going to tell you does not sound nice, and a year ago I would have had unpleasant thoughts of the man who suggested any course of that kind to me; but we have got to go under or pull down the enemy. The legislature are beginning to look at things with the homesteaders’ eyes, and what we want is popular sympathy. We lost a good chance of getting it over the stock-train. Larry was too clever for us again, and that brings me to the point which should be quite plain. The homestead-boys have lost their heads and will cut their own throats if they are let alone. They are ripe for ranch-burning and firing on the cavalry, and once they start the State will have to step in and whip them out for us.”

“But where does Larry come in?” asked somebody.

“That,” said Clavering, “is quite easy. So long as Larry is loose he will have a following, and somehow he will hear of and stop their wildest moves. As most of you know, I don’t like him; but Larry is not a fool.”

“To be quite plain, we are to cut out the restraining influence, and give the rabble a free hand to let loose anarchy,” said one man. “Then, you can strike me off the roll. That is a kind of meanness that wouldn’t suit me!”

There were murmurs of approval from one or two of the company, but Torrance checked them. “Gentlemen,” he said, “we must win or be beaten and get no mercy. You can’t draw back, and the first step is to put Larry down. If the State had backed us we would have made an end of the trouble, and it is most square and fitting they should have the whipping of the rabble forced upon them now. Are we cavalry troopers or a Sheriff’s *posse*, to do their work for them, and be kicked by way of thanks? They would not nip the trouble when they could, and we’ll sit tight and watch them try to crush it when it’s ’most too big for them.”

Again there was a murmur, of grim approval this time; but one of the objectors rose with an ironical smile.

“You have made a very poor show at catching Larry so far,” he said. “Are you quite sure the thing is within your ability?”

“I guess it is,” said Torrance sharply. “He is living at his homestead, and we need not be afraid of a hundred men with rifles coming to take him from us now.”

“He has a few neighbours who believe in him,” one of the men said. “They are not rabble, but level-headed Americans, with the hardest kind of grit in them. It wouldn’t suit us to be whipped again.”

Clavering stood up, with his eyes fixed on Torrance. “I agree with our leader—it can be done. In fact, I quite believe we can lay our hands on Larry alone,” he said. “Can I have a word with you, Mr. Torrance?”

Torrance nodded, and, leaving Allonby speaking, led Clavering into an adjoining room. “Sit down, and get through as quick as you can,” he said.

For five minutes Clavering spoke rapidly, in a slightly strained voice, and a dark flush spread across the old man’s face and grew deeper on his forehead, from which the veins swelled. It had faded before he finished, and there were paler patches in the cattle-baron’s cheeks when he struck the table with his fist.

“Clavering,” he said hoarsely, “if you are deceiving me you are not going to find a hole in this country that would hide you.”

Clavering contrived to meet his gaze, though it was difficult. “I was very unwilling to mention it,” he said. “Still, if you will call Miss Torrance’s maid, and the man who grooms her horses, you can convince yourself. It would be better if I was not present when you talk to them.”

Torrance said nothing, but pointed to the door, and when the maid and man he sent for had gone, sat for five long minutes rigidly still with a set white face and his hands clenched on the table.

“My daughter—playing the traitress—and worse! It is too hard to bear,” he said.

Then he stood up, shaking the passion from him, when Clavering came in, and, holding himself very stiff and square, turned to him.

“I don’t know why you have told me—now—and do not want to hear,” he said. “Still, by the Lord who made us both, if you try to make use of this knowledge for any purpose, or let a whisper get about, I’ll crush you utterly.”

“Have I deserved these threats, sir?”

Torrance looked at him steadily. “Did you expect thanks? The man who grooms her horses would tell me nothing—he lied like a gentleman. But they are not threats. You found buying up mortgages—with our dollars—an easy game.”

“But—” said Clavering.

Torrance stopped him with a little scornful gesture. “I knew when I took this thing up I would have to let my scruples go, and now—while I wonder whether my hands will ever feel clean again—I’m going through. You are useful to the committee, and I’ll have to tolerate you.”

Clavering turned away, with pulses throbbing furiously and rage in his heart, though he had known what the cost would be when he staked everything he hoped for on Larry’s destruction; while his neighbours noticed a change in Torrance when he once more sat down at the head of the table. He seemed several years older, and his face was very grim.

“I believe I can promise you that Larry will make us no more trouble,” he said. “Mr. Clavering has a workable scheme, and it will only need the Sheriff and a few men whom I will choose when I am ready.”

Nobody seemed to consider it advisable to ask questions, and the men dispersed; but as they went down the stairway, Allonby turned to Torrance.

“This thing is getting too big for you and me,” he said. “You have not complained, but to-night one could fancy that it’s breaking you. Now, I’m not made like you, and when I think of what it has cost me I have got to talk.”

Torrance turned, and Allonby shivered as he met his eyes.

“It has cost me what every dollar I ever made could not buy me back,” he said, and the damp showed on his forehead as he checked a groan.

XXVIII

LARRY RIDES TO CEDAR

A soft wind swept the prairie, which was now bare of snow. Larry rode down the trail that led through the Cedar Bluff. He was freely sprinkled with mire, for spring had come suddenly, and the frost-bleached sod was soft with the thaw; and when he pulled up on the wooden bridge to wait until Breckenridge, who appeared among the trees, should join him, the river swirled and frothed beneath. It had lately burst its icy chains, and came roaring down, seamed by lines of foam and strewn with great fragments of half-melted snow-cake that burst against the quivering piles.

"Running strong!" said Breckenridge. "Still, the water has not risen much yet, and as I crossed the big rise I saw two of Torrance's cow-boys apparently screwing up their courage to try the ford."

"It might be done," said Larry. "We have one horse at Fremont that would take me across. The snow on the ranges is not melting yet, and the ice will be tolerably firm on the deep reaches; but it's scarcely likely that we will want to swim the Cedar now."

"No," said Breckenridge, with a laugh, "the bridge is good enough for me. By the way, I have a note for you."

"A note!" said Larry, with a slight hardening of his face, for of late each communication that reached him had brought him fresh anxieties.

"Well," said Breckenridge drily, "I scarcely think this one should worry you. From the fashion in which it reached me I have a notion it's from a lady."

There was a little gleam in Larry's eyes when he took the note, and Breckenridge noticed that he was very silent as they rode on. When they reached Fremont he remained a while in the stable, and when at last he entered the house Breckenridge glanced at him questioningly.

"You have something on your mind," he said. "What have you been doing, Larry?"

Grant smiled curiously. "Giving the big bay a rub down. I'm riding to Cedar Range to-night."

"Have you lost your head?" Breckenridge stared at him. "Muller saw the Sheriff riding in this morning, and it's more than likely he is at the Range. You are wanted rather more badly than ever just now, Larry."

Grant's face was quietly resolute as he took out the note and passed it to his companion. "I have tried to do my duty by the boys; but I am going to Cedar to-night."

Breckenridge opened the note, which had been written the previous day, and read, "In haste. Come to the bluff beneath the Range—alone—nine to-morrow night."

Then, he stared at the paper in silence until Grant, who watched him almost jealously, took it from him. "Yes," he said, though his face was thoughtful, "of course, you must go. You are quite sure of the writing?"

Grant smiled, as it were, compassionately. "I would recognize it anywhere!"

"Well," said Breckenridge significantly, "that is perhaps not very astonishing, though I fancy some folks would find it difficult. The 'In haste' no doubt explains the thing, but it seems to me the last of it does not quite match the heading."

"It is smeared—thrust into the envelope wet," Larry said.

Breckenridge rose, and walked, with no apparent purpose, across the room. "Larry," he said, "Tom and I will come with you. No—you wait a minute. Of course, I know there are occasions on which one's friends' company is superfluous—distinctly so; but we could pull up and wait behind the bluff—quite a long way off, you know."

"I was told to come alone." Larry turned upon him sharply.

Breckenridge made a gesture of resignation. "Then I'm not going to stay here most of the night by myself. It's doleful. I'll ride over to Muller's now."

"Will it be any livelier there?"

Breckenridge wondered whether Larry had noticed anything unusual in his voice, and managed to laugh. "A little," he

said. “The fräulein is pretty enough in the lamplight to warrant one listening to a good deal about Menotti and the *franc tireurs*. She makes really excellent coffee, too,” and he slipped out before Grant could ask any more questions.

Darkness was just closing down when the latter rode away. There was very little of the prairie broncho in the big horse beneath him, whose sire had brought the best blood that could be imported into that country, and he had examined every buckle of girth and headstall as he fastened them. He also rode, for lightness, in a thin deerskin jacket which fitted him closely, with a rifle across his saddle, gazing with keen eyes across the shadowy waste when now and then a half-moon came out. Once he also drew bridle and sat still a minute listening, for he fancied he heard the distant beat of hoofs, and then went on with a little laugh at his credulity. The Cedar was roaring in its hollow and the birches moaning in a bluff, but as the damp wind that brought the blood to his cheeks sank, there was stillness save for the sound of the river, and Grant decided that his ears had deceived him.

It behooved him to be cautious, for he knew the bitterness of the cattle-men against him, and the Sheriff’s writ still held good; but Hetty had sent for him, and if his enemies had lain in wait in every bluff and hollow he would have gone.

While he rode, troubled by vague apprehensions, which now and then gave place to exultation that set his heart throbbing, Hetty sat with Miss Schuyler in her room at Cedar Range. An occasional murmur of voices reached them faintly from the big hall below where Torrance and some of his neighbours sat with the Sheriff over their cigars and wine, and the girls knew that a few of the most daring horsemen among the cow-boys had their horses saddled ready. Hetty lay in a low chair with a book she was not reading on her knee, and Miss Schuyler, glancing at her now and then over the embroidery she paid almost as little attention to, noticed the weariness in her face and the anxiety in her eyes. She laid down her needle when Torrance’s voice came up from below.

“What can they be plotting, Hetty?” she said. “Horses ready, that most unpleasant Sheriff smiling cunningly as he did when I passed him talking to Clavering, and the sense of expectancy. It’s there. One could hear it in their voices, even if one had not seen their faces, and when I met your father at the head of the stairs he almost frightened me. Of course, he was not theatrical—he never is—but I know that set of his lips and look in his eyes, and have more than a fancy it means trouble for somebody. I suppose he has not told you anything—in fact, he seems to have kept curiously aloof from both of us lately.”

Hetty turned towards her with a little spot of colour in her cheek and apprehension in her eyes.

“So you have noticed it, too!” she said very slowly. “Of course, he has been busy and often away, while I know how anxious he must be; but when he is at home he scarcely speaks to me—and then, there is something in his voice that hurts me. I’m ’most afraid he has found out that I have been talking to Larry.”

Miss Schuyler smiled. “Well,” she said, “that—alone—would not be such a very serious offence.”

The crimson showed plainer in Hetty’s cheek and there was a faint ring in her voice. “Flo,” she said, “don’t make me angry—I can’t bear it to-night. Something is going to happen—I can feel it is—and you don’t know my father even yet. He is so horribly quiet, and I’m afraid of as well as sorry for him. It is a long while ago, but he looked just as he does now—only not quite so grim—during my mother’s last illness. Oh, I know there is something worrying him, and he will not tell me—though he was always kind before, even when he was angry. Flo, this horrible trouble can’t go on for ever!”

Hetty had commenced bravely, but she faltered as she proceeded, and Miss Schuyler, who saw her distress, had risen and was standing with one hand on her shoulder when the maid came in. She cast a hasty glance at her mistress, and appeared, Flora Schuyler fancied, embarrassed, and desirous of concealing it.

“Mr. Torrance will excuse you coming down again,” she said. “He may have some of the Sheriff’s men and one or two of the cow-boys in, and would sooner you kept your room. Are you likely to want me in the next half-hour?”

“No,” said Hetty. “No doubt you are anxious to find out what is going on.”

The maid went out, and Miss Schuyler fixed anxious eyes on her companion. “What is the matter with the girl, Hetty?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Did you notice anything?”

“Yes. I think she had something on her mind. Any way, she was unexplainably anxious to get away from you.”

Hetty smiled somewhat bitterly. “Then she is only like the rest. Everybody at Cedar is anxious about something now.”

Flora Schuyler rose, and, flinging the curtains behind her, looked out at the night. The moon was just showing through a

rift in the driving cloud, and she could see the bluff roll blackly down to the white frothing of the river. She also saw a shadowy object slipping through the gloom of the trees, and fancied it was a woman; but when another figure appeared for a moment in the moonlight the first one came flitting back again.

“I believe the girl has gone out to meet somebody in the bluff,” she said.

Hetty made a little impatient gesture. “It doesn’t concern us, any way.”

Miss Schuyler sat down again and made no answer, though she had misgivings, and five or ten minutes passed silently, until there was a tapping at the door, and the maid came in, very white in the face. She clutched at the nearest chair-back, and stood still, apparently incapable of speech, until, with a visible effort, she said: “Somebody must go and send him away. He is waiting in the bluff.”

Hetty rose with a little scream, but Flora Schuyler was before her, and laid her hand upon the maid’s arm.

“Now, try to be sensible,” she said sternly. “Who is in the bluff?”

The girl shivered. “It is not my fault—I didn’t know what they wanted until the Sheriff came. I tried to tell him, but Joe saw me. Go right now, and send him away.”

Hetty was very white and trembling, but Flora Schuyler nipped the maid’s arm.

“Keep quiet, and answer just what we ask you!” she said. “Who is in the bluff?”

“Mr. Grant,” said the girl, with a gasp. “But don’t ask me anything. Send him away. They’ll kill him. Oh, you are hurting me!”

Flora Schuyler shook her. “How did he come there?”

“I took Miss Torrance’s letter, and wrote the rest of it. I didn’t know they meant to do him any harm, but they made me write. I had to—he said he would marry me.”

The maid writhed in an agony of fear, but she stood still shivering when Hetty turned towards her with a blanched face that emphasized the ominous glow in her dark eyes.

“You wicked woman!” she said. “How dare you tell me that?”

“I mean Mr. Clavering. Oh——!”

The maid stopped abruptly, for Flora Schuyler drove her towards the door. “Go and undo your work,” she said. “Slip down at the back of the bluff.”

“I daren’t—I tried,” and the girl quivered in Miss Schuyler’s grasp. “If I could have warned him I would not have told you; but Joe saw me, and I was afraid. I told him to come at nine.”

It was evident that she was capable of doing very little just then, and Flora Schuyler drew her out into the corridor.

“Go straight to your room and stay there,” she said, and closing the door, glanced at Hetty. “It is quite simple. This woman has taken your note-paper and written Larry. He is in the bluff now, and I think she is right. Your friends mean to make him prisoner or shoot him.”

“Stop, and go away,” said Hetty hoarsely. “I am going to him.”

Flora Schuyler placed her back to the door, and raised her hand. “No,” she said, very quietly. “It would be better if I went in place of you. Sit down, and don’t lose your head, Hetty!”

Hetty seized her arm. “You can’t—how could I let you? Larry belongs to me. Let me go. Every minute is worth ever so much.”

“There are twenty of them yet. He has come too early,” said Flora Schuyler, with a glance at the clock. “Any way, you must understand what you are going to do. It was Clavering arranged this, but your father knew what he was doing and I think he knows everything. If you leave this house to-night, Hetty, everybody will know you warned Larry, and it will make a great difference to you. It will gain you the dislike of all your friends and place a barrier between you and your father which, I think, will never be taken away again!”

Hetty laughed a very bitter laugh, and then grew suddenly quiet.

“Stand aside, Flo,” she said. “Nobody but Larry wants me now.”

Miss Schuyler saw that she was determined, and drew aside. “Then,” she said, with a little quiver in her voice, “because I think he is in peril you must go, my dear. But we must be very careful, and I am coming with you as far as I dare.”

She closed the door, and then her composure seemed to fail her as they went out into the corridor; and it was Hetty who, treading very softly, took the lead. Flitting like shadows, they reached the head of the stairway, and stopped a moment there, Hetty’s heart beating furiously. The passage beneath them was shadowy, but a blaze of light and a jingle of glasses came out of the half-opened door of the hall, where Torrance sat with his guests; and while they waited, they heard his voice and recognized the vindictive ring in it. Hetty trembled as she grasped the bannister.

“Flo,” she said, “they may come out in a minute. We have got to slip by somehow.”

They went down the stairway with skirts drawn close about them, in swift silence, and Hetty held her breath as she flitted past the door. There was a faint swish of draperies as Flora Schuyler followed her, but the murmur of voices drowned it; and in another minute Hetty had opened a door at the back of the building. Then, she gasped with relief as she felt the cold wind on her face, and, with Miss Schuyler close behind her, crept through the shadow of the house towards the bluff. When the gloom of the trees closed about them, she clutched her companion’s shoulder.

“No,” she said hoarsely, “not that way. Joe is watching there. We must go right through the bluff and down the opposite side of it.”

They floundered forward, sinking ankle-deep in withered leaves and clammy mould, tripping over rotting branches that ripped their dresses, and stumbling into dripping undergrowth. There was no moon now, and it was very dark, and more than once Flora Schuyler valiantly suppressed the scream that would have been a vast relief to her, and struggled on as silently as she could behind her companion; but it seemed to her that anybody a mile away could have heard them. Then, a little trail led them out of the bluff on the opposite side to the house, and the roar of the river grew louder as they hastened on, still in the gloom of the trees, until something a little blacker than the shadows behind it grew into visibility; and when it moved a little, Flora Schuyler touched Hetty’s arm.

“Yes,” she said. “It is Larry. If I didn’t know the kind of man he is, I would not let you go. Kiss me, Hetty.”

Hetty stood still a second, for she understood, and then very quietly put both hands on Flora Schuyler’s shoulders and kissed her.

“It can’t be very wrong; and you have been a good friend, Flo,” she said.

She turned, and Flora Schuyler, standing still, saw her slim figure flit across a strip of frost-bleached sod as the moon shone through.

XXIX

HETTY DECIDES

It was in a pale flash of silvery light that Larry saw the girl against the gloom of the trees. The moaning of the birches and roar of the river drowned the faint sound her footsteps made, and she came upon him so suddenly, statuesque and slender in her trailing evening dress and etherealized by the moonlight, that as he looked down on the blanched whiteness of her upturned face, emphasized by the dusky hair, he almost fancied she had materialized out of the harmonies of the night. For a moment he sat motionless, with the rifle glinting across his saddle, and a tightening grip of the bridle as the big horse flung up its head, and then, with a sudden stirring of his blood, moved his foot in the stirrup and would have swung himself down if Hetty had not checked him.

"No!" she said. "Back into the shadow of the trees!"

Larry, seeing the fear in her face, touched the horse with his heel, and wheeled it with its head towards the house. He could see the warm gleam from the windows between the birches. Then, he turned to the girl, who stood gasping at his stirrup.

"You sent for me, dear, and I have come. Can't you give me just a minute now?" he said.

"No," said Hetty breathlessly, "you must go. The Sheriff is here waiting for you!"

Larry laughed a little scornful laugh, and slackening the bridle, sat still, looking down on her very quietly.

"I don't understand," he said. "You sent for me!"

"No," the girl again gasped. "Oh, Larry, go away! Clavering and the others who are most bitter against you are in the house."

Instinctively Larry moved his hand on the rifle and glanced towards the building. He could see it dimly, but no sound from it reached him, and Hetty, looking up, saw his face grow stern.

"Still," he persisted, with a curious quietness, "somebody sent a note to me!"

"Yes," said Hetty, turning away from him, "it was my wicked maid. Clavering laid the trap for you."

The man sat very still a moment, and then bent with a swift resoluteness towards his companion.

"And you came to warn me?" he said. "Hetty, dear, look up."

Hetty glanced at him and saw the glow in his eyes, but she clenched her hand, and would have struck the horse in an agony of fear if Larry had not touched him with his heel and swung a pace away from her.

"Oh," she gasped, "why will you waste time! Larry, they will kill you if they find you."

Once more the little scornful smile showed upon Grant's lips, but it vanished and Hetty saw only the light in his eyes.

"Listen a moment, dear," he said. "I have tried to do the square thing, but I think to-night's work relieves me of the obligation. Hetty, can't you see that your father would never give you to me, and you must choose between us sooner or later? I have waited a long while, and would try to wait longer if it would relieve you of the difficulty, but you will have to make the decision, and it can't be harder now than it would be in the future. Promise me you will go back to New York with Miss Schuyler, and stay with her until I come for you."

Hetty trembled visibly, and the moonlight showed the crimson in her cheeks; but she looked up at him bravely. "Larry," she said, "you are sure—quite sure—you want me, and will be kind to me?"

The man bent his head solemnly. "My dear, I have longed for you for eight weary years—and I think you could trust me."

"Then," and Hetty's voice was very uneven, though she still met his eyes. "Larry, you can take me now."

Larry set his lips for a moment and his face showed curiously white. "Think, my dear!" he said hoarsely. "It would not be fair to you. Miss Schuyler will take you away in a week or two, and I will come for you. I dare not do anything you may be sorry for; and they may find you are not in the house. You must go home before my strength gives way."

The emotion she had struggled with swept Hetty away. “Go home!” she said passionately. “They wanted to kill you—and I can never go back now. If I did, they would know I had warned you—and believe—Can’t you understand, Larry?”

Then, the situation flashed upon Grant, and he recognized, as Hetty had done, that she had cast herself adrift when she left the house to warn him. He knew the cattle-baron’s vindictiveness, and that his daughter had committed an offence he could not forgive. That left but one escape from the difficulty, and it was the one his own passions, which he had striven to crush down, urged him to.

“Then,” he said in a strained voice, “you must come with me. We can be married to-morrow.”

Hetty held up her hands to him. “I am ready. Oh, be quick. They may come any minute!”

Larry swept his glance towards the house, and saw a shaft of radiance stream out as the great door opened. Then, he heard Flora Schuyler’s voice, and, leaning downwards from the saddle, grasped both the girl’s hands.

“Yes,” he said, very quietly, “they are coming now. Spring when I lift you. Your foot on my foot—I have you!”

It was done. Hetty was active and slender, the man muscular, and both had been taught, not only to ride, but master the half-wild broncho by a superior daring and an equal agility, in a land where the horse is not infrequently roped and thrown before it is mounted. But Larry breathed hard as, with his arm about her waist, he held the girl in front of him, and felt her cheek hot against his lips. The next moment he pressed his heels home and the big horse swung forward under its double burden.

A shout rang out behind them, and there was a crackling in the bluff. Then, a rifle flashed, and just as a cloud drove across the moon, another cry rose up:

“Quit firing. He has the girl with him!”

Larry fancied he could hear men floundering behind him amidst the trees, and a trampling of hoofs about the house, but as he listened another rifle flashed away to the right of them on the prairie, and a beat of hoofs followed it that for a moment puzzled him. He laughed huskily.

“Breckenridge! He’ll draw them off,” he said. “Hold fast! We have got to face the river.”

It was very evident that he had not a second to lose. Mounted men were crashing recklessly through the bluff and more of them riding at a gallop across the grassy slope; but the darkness hid them as it hid the fugitives, and the big horse held on, until there was a plunge and a splashing, and they were in the river. Larry slipped from the saddle, and Hetty saw him floundering by the horse’s head as she thrust her foot into the stirrup.

“Slack your bridle,” he said sharply. “The beast will bring us through.”

The command came when it was needed, for Hetty was almost dismayed, and its curtness was bracing. There was no moon now, but she could dimly see the white swirling of the flood, and the gurgling roar of it throbbed about her hoarse and threatening, suggesting the perils the darkness hid. Her light skirt trailed in the water, and a shock of icy cold ran through her as one shoe dipped under. Larry was on his feet yet, but there was a fierce white frothing about him, and when in another pace or two he slipped down she broke into a stifled scream. The next moment she saw his face again faintly white beneath her amidst the sliding foam, and fancied that he was swimming or being dragged along. The horse, she felt, had lost its footing, and had its head up stream. How long this lasted she did not know, but it seemed an interminable time, and the dull roar of the water grew louder and deafened her, while the blackness that closed in became insupportable.

“Larry!” she gasped. “Larry, are you there!”

A faintly heard voice made answer, and Grant appeared again, shoulder-deep in the flood, while the dipping and floundering of the beast beneath her showed that the hoofs had found uncertain hold; but that relief only lasted a moment, and they were once more sliding down-stream, until, when they swung round in an eddy, the head that showed now and then dimly beside her stirrup was lost altogether, and in an agony of terror the girl cried aloud.

There was no answer, but after a horrible moment or two had passed a half-seen arm and shoulder rose out of the flood, and the sudden drag on the bridle that slipped from her fingers was very reassuring. The horse plunged and floundered, and once more Hetty felt her dragging skirt was clear of the water.

“Through the worst!” a voice that reached her faintly said, and they were splashing on again, the water growing shallower all the time until they scrambled out upon the opposite bank. Then, the man checking the horse, stood by her

stirrup, pressing the water from the hem of her skirt, rubbing the little open shoe with his handkerchief, which was saturated. Even in that hour of horror Hetty laughed.

“Larry,” she said, “don’t be ridiculous. You couldn’t dry it that way in a week. Lift me down instead.”

Larry held up his hands to her, for on that side of the river the slope to the level was steep, and when he swung her down the girl kissed him lightly on either cheek.

“That was because of what we have been through, dear,” she said. “There was a horrible moment, when I could not see you anywhere.”

She stopped and held up her hand as though listening, and Larry laughed softly as a faint drumming of hoofs came back to them through the roar of the flood.

“Breckenridge! He must have Muller or somebody with him, and they are chasing him,” he said. “I didn’t know he was following me, but he is gaining us valuable time, and we will push on again. Your friends will find out they are following the wrong man very soon, but we should get another horse at Muller’s before they can ride round by the bridge.”

They scrambled up the slope, and after Hetty mounted Larry ran with his hand on the stirrup for a while, until once more he made the staunch beast carry a double load. He was running again when they came clattering up to Muller’s homestead and the fräulein, who was apparently alone, stared at them in astonishment when she opened the door. The water still dripped from Larry, and Hetty’s light, bedraggled dress clung about her, while the moisture trickled from her little open-fronted shoes. She was hatless, and loosened wisps of dusky hair hung low about her face, which turned faintly crimson under the fräulein’s gaze.

“Miss Torrance!” exclaimed the girl.

“Well,” said Larry quietly, “she will be Mrs. Grant to-morrow if you will lend me a horse and not mention the fact that you have seen us when Torrance’s boys come round. Where is your father?”

Miss Muller nodded with comprehending sympathy. “He two hours since with Mr. Breckenridge go,” she said. “There is new horse in the stable, and you on the rack a saddle for lady find.”

Larry was outside in a moment, and a smile crept into the fräulein’s blue eyes. “He is of the one thing at the time alone enabled to think,” she said. “It is so with the man, but a dress with the water soaked is not convenient to ride at night in.”

She led Hetty into her own room, and when Larry, who had spent some time changing one of the saddles, came back, he stared in astonishment at Hetty, who sat at the table. She now wore, among other garments that were too big for her, a fur cap and coarse, serge skirt. There was a steaming cup of coffee in front of her.

“Now, that shows how foolish one can be,” he said. “I was clean forgetting about the clothes; but we must start again.”

Hetty rose up, and with a little blush held out the cup. “You are wet to the neck, Larry, and it will do you good,” she said. “If you don’t mind—we needn’t wait until Miss Muller gets another cup.”

Larry’s eyes gleamed. “I have run over most of Europe, but they grow no wine there that was half as nice as the tea we made in the black can back there in the bluff. Quite often in those days we hadn’t a cup at all.”

He drank, and forthwith turned his head away, while a quiver seemed to run through him; but when Hetty moved towards him the fräulein laughed.

“It nothing is,” she said. “It is, perhaps, the effect tobacco have, but the mouth is soft in a man.”

Then, as Larry turned towards them she laid her hands on Hetty’s shoulders, and kissed her gravely. “You have trust in him,” she said. “It is of no use afraid to be. I quick take a man like Mr. Grant when he ask me.”

The next moment they were outside, and when he helped her to the saddle, Hetty glanced shyly at her companion. “The fräulein is right,” she said. “But, Larry, will you tell me—where we are going?”

“To Windsor. I have still good friends there. That is the prosaic fact, but there is ever so much behind it. We can’t see the trail just now, dear, but we are riding out into the future that has all kinds of brightness in store.”

A silvery gleam fell on the girl as a billow of cloud rolled slowly from a rift of blue, and she laughed almost exultantly.

“Larry,” she said, “it is coming true. Of course, it’s a portent. There’s the darkness going and the moon shining through.

Oh, I have done with misgiving now!”

She shook the bridle, and swept from him at a gallop, and the thaw-softened sod was whirling in clods behind them when Larry drew level with her. He knew it was not prudent, but the fever in his blood mastered his reason, and he sent the stockrider’s cry ringing across the levels as they sped on through the night. The damp wind screamed by them, lashing their hot cheeks, the beat of hoofs swelled into a roar as they swept through a shadowy bluff, and driving cloud and rift of indigo flitted past above. Beneath, the long, frost-bleached levels, gleaming silvery grey now under the moon, flitted back to the drumming hoofs, while willow clump and straggling birches rose up, and rushed by, blurred and shadowy.

They were young, and the cares that must be faced again on the morrow had, for a brief space, fallen from them. They had bent to the strain to the breaking point, and now it had gone, everything was forgotten but the love each bore the other. All senses were merged in it, and while the exaltation lasted there was no room for thought or fear. It was, however, the man who remembered first, for a few dark patches caught his eye when they went at a headlong gallop down the slope.

“Pull him!” he cried hoarsely. “’Ware badger holes! Swing to the right-wide!”

The girl swerved, but she still held on with loose bridle, until Larry, swaying in his saddle, clutched at it. Then, as he swung upright, half a length ahead, with empty hands, she flung herself a trifle backwards and there was a brief struggle; but it was at a trot they climbed the opposite slope.

“Now,” she said, with a happy little laugh, “we are sensible once more; but, while I knew it couldn’t last, I wanted to gallop on for ever. Larry, I wonder if we will ever feel just the same again? There are enjoyments that can’t come to anyone more than once.”

“There are others one can have all the time, and we’ll think of them to-night,” said the man. “There are bright days before us, and we can wait until they come.”

Hetty smiled, almost sadly. “Of course!” she said, “but no bright day can be quite the same as this moonlight to me. It shone down on us when I rode out into the night and darkness without knowing where I was going, and only that you were beside me. You will stay there always now.”

They held on across the empty waste while the hours of darkness slipped by, and the sun was rising red above the great levels’ rim when the roofs of a wooden town rose in front of them. As the frame houses slowly grew into form, Hetty painfully straightened herself. Her face was white and weary and it was by a strenuous effort she held herself upright, the big horse limped a little, and the mire was spattered thick upon her; but she met the man’s eyes, and, though her lips trembled, smiled bravely.

Larry saw and understood, and his face grew grave. “I have a good deal to make up to you, Hetty, and I will try to do it faithfully,” he said. “Still, we will look forward with hope and courage now—it is our wedding day.”

Hetty glanced away from him across the prairie, and the man fancied he saw her fingers tremble on the bridle.

“It is hard to ask you, Larry—though I know it shouldn’t be—but have you a few dollars that you could give me?”

The man smiled happily. “All that is mine is yours, and, as it happens, I have two or three bills in my wallet. Is there anything you wish to buy?”

Hetty glanced down, flushing, at the bedraggled dress. “Larry,” she said softly. “I couldn’t marry you like this. I haven’t one dollar in my pocket—and I am coming to you with nothing, dear.”

The smile faded out of Larry’s eyes. “I scarcely dare remember all that you have given up for me! And if you had taken Clavering or one of the others you would have ridden to your wedding with a hundred men behind you, as rich as a princess.”

Hetty, sitting, jaded and bespattered, on the limping horse, flashed a swift glance at him, and smiled out of slightly misty eyes.

“It happened,” she said, “that I was particular, or fanciful, and there was only one man—the one that would take me without a dollar, in borrowed clothes—who seemed good enough for me.”

They rode on past a stockyard, and into a rutted street of bare frame houses, and Hetty was glad they scarcely met anybody. Then, Larry helped her down, and, thrusting a wallet into her hands, knocked at the door of a house beside a

store. The man who opened it stared at them, and when Larry had drawn him aside called his wife. She took Hetty's chilled hand in both her own, and the storekeeper smiled at Larry.

"You come right along and put some of my things on," he said. "Then, you are going with me to have breakfast at the hotel, and talk to the judge. I guess the women aren't going to have any use for us."

It was some time later when they came back to the store, and for just a minute Grant saw Hetty alone. She was dressed very plainly in new garments, and blushed when he looked gravely down on her.

"That dress is not good enough for you," he said. "It is very different from what you have been accustomed to."

Hetty glanced at him shyly. "You will have very few dollars to spare, Larry, until the trouble's through," she said, "and you will be my husband in an hour or two."

XXX

LARRY'S WEDDING DAY

Hetty was married in haste, without benefit of clergy, while several men, with resolute faces, kept watch outside the judge's door, and two who were mounted sat gazing across the prairie on a rise outside the town. After the declarations were made and signed, the judge turned to Hetty, who stood smiling bravely, though her eyes were a trifle misty, by Larry's side.

"Now I have something to tell your husband, Mrs. Grant," he said. "You will have to spare him for about five minutes."

Hetty's lips quivered, for she recognized the gravity of his tone, and it was not astonishing that for a moment or two she turned her face aside. She had endeavoured to look forward hopefully and banish regrets; but the prosaic sordidness of the little dusty office, and the absence of anything that might have imparted significance or dignity to the hurried ceremony, had not been without their effect. She had seen other weddings in New York as well as in the cattle country, and knew what pomp and festivities would have attended hers had she married with her father's goodwill. After all, it was the greatest day in most women's lives, and she felt the unseemliness of the rite that had made her and Larry man and wife. Still, the fact remained, and, brushing her misgivings away, she glanced up at her husband.

"It must concern us both now," she said. "May I hear?"

"Well," said the judge, who looked a trifle embarrassed, "I guess you are right, and Larry would have to tell you; but it's not a pleasant task to me. It is just this—we can't keep you and your husband any longer in this town."

"Are you against us, too?" Hetty asked, with a flash in her eyes. "I am not afraid."

The judge made her a little respectful inclination. "You are Torrance of Cedar's daughter, and everyone knows the kind of grit there is in that family. While I knew the cattle-men would raise a good deal of unpleasantness when I married you, I did it out of friendliness for Larry; but it is my duty to uphold the law, and I can't have your husband's friends and your father's cow-boys making trouble here."

"Larry," said the girl tremulously, "we must go on again."

Grant's face grew stern. "No," he said. "You shall stay here in spite of them until you feel fit to ride for the railroad."

Just then a man came in. "Battersly saw Torrance with the Sheriff and Clavering and quite a band of cow-boys ride by the trail forks an hour ago," he said. "They were heading for Hamlin's, but they'd make this place in two hours when they didn't find Larry there."

There was an impressive silence. Hetty shuddered, and the fear in her eyes was unmistakable when she laid her hand on her husband's arm.

"We must go," she said. "It would be too horrible if you should meet him."

"Mrs. Grant is right," said the storekeeper. "We know Torrance of Cedar, and if you stayed here, Larry, you and she might be sorry all your lives. Now, you could, by riding hard, make Canada to-morrow."

Grant stifled a groan, and though his face was grim his voice was compassionate as he turned to Hetty.

"Are you very tired?" he said gently. "It must be the saddle again."

Hetty said nothing, but she pressed his arm, and her eyes shone mistily when they went out together. Half an hour later they rode out of the town, and Grant turned to her when the clustering houses dipped behind a billowy rise, and they were once more alone in the empty prairie, with their faces towards Canada.

"I am 'most ashamed to look at you, but you will forgive me, little girl," he said. "There are brighter days before us than your wedding one, and by and by I hope you will not be sorry you have borne so much for me."

Hetty's lips quivered a little, but the pride of the cattle-barons shone in her eyes. "I have nothing to forgive and am only very tired," she said. "I shall never be sorry while you are kind to me, and I would have ridden to Canada if I had known that it would have killed me. The one thing I am afraid of is that you and he should meet."

They rode on, speaking but seldom as the leagues went by, for Grant had much to think of and Hetty was very weary. Indeed, she swayed unevenly in her saddle, while the long, billowy levels shining in the sunlight rolled back, as it were, interminably to them, and now and then only saved herself from a fall by a clutch at the bridle. There were times when a drowsiness that would scarcely be shaken off crept upon her, and she roused herself with a strenuous effort and a horrible fear at her heart, knowing that if her strength failed her the blood of husband or father might be upon her head.

The sky was blue above them, the white sod warm below, and already chequered here and there with green; and, advancing in long battalion, crane and goose and mallard came up from the south to follow the sun towards the Pole. The iron winter had fled before it, and all nature smiled; but Hetty, who had often swept the prairie at a wild gallop, with her blood responding to the thrill of reawakening life that was in everything, rode with a set white face and drooping head, and Larry groaned as he glanced at her.

Late in the afternoon they dismounted, and Hetty lay with her head upon his shoulder while they rested amidst the grass. The provisions the storekeeper had given them were scattered about, but Hetty had tasted nothing, and Grant had only forced himself to swallow a few mouthfuls with difficulty. He had thrown an arm about her, and she lay with eyes closed, motionless.

Suddenly he raised his head and looked about him. Save for the sighing of the warm wind, the prairie was very still, and a low, white rise cut off from sight the leagues they had left behind, but, though a man from the cities would have heard nothing at all, Larry, straining his ears to listen, heard a sound just audible creep out of the silence. For a moment he sat rigid and intent, wondering if it was made by a flight of cranes; but he could see no dusky stain on the blue beyond the rise, and his fingers closed upon the rifle as the sound grew plainer. It rose and fell with a staccato rhythm in it, and he recognized the beat of hoofs. Turning, he gently touched the girl.

“Hetty, you must rouse yourself,” he said, with a pitiful quiver in his voice.

The girl slowly lifted her head, and glanced about her in a half-dazed fashion. Then, with an effort, she drew one foot under her, and again the fear shadowed her face.

“Oh,” she said, “they’re coming! Lift me, dear.”

Larry gently raised her to her feet, but it was a minute or two before she could stand upright, and the man’s face was haggard when he lifted her to the saddle.

“I think the end has come,” he said. “You can ride no farther.”

Hetty swayed a little; but she clutched the bridle, and a faint sparkle showed in her half-closed eyes.

“They want to take you from me. We will go on until we drop,” she said.

Larry got into the saddle, though he did not know how he accomplished it, and looked ahead anxiously as he shook the bridle. Away on the rim of the prairie there was a dusky smear, and he knew it was a birch-bluff, which would, if they could reach it, afford them shelter. In the open he would be at the cow-boys’ mercy; but a desperate man might at least check some of the pursuers among the trees, and he was not sure that Torrance, whose years must tell, would be among them. There was a very faint hope yet.

They went on at a gallop, though the horses obtained at Windsor were already jaded, and very slowly the bluff grew higher. Glancing over his shoulder, Grant saw a few moving objects straggle across the crest of the rise. They seemed to grow plainer while he watched them, and more appeared behind.

“We will make the bluff before them,” he said hoarsely. “Ride!”

He drove his heels home; but the beast he rode was flagging fast when, knowing how Torrance’s cow-boys were mounted, he glanced behind again. He could see them distinctly now, straggling, with wide hats bent by the wind and jackets fluttering, across the prairie. Here and there a rifle-barrel glinted, and the beat of their horses’ hoofs reached him plainly. One, riding furiously a few lengths ahead of the foremost, he guessed was Clavering, and he fancied he recognized the Sheriff in another; but he could not discern Torrance anywhere. He turned his eyes ahead and watched the bluff rise higher, though the white levels seemed to flit back to him with an exasperating slowness. Beyond it a faint grey smear rose towards the blue; but the jaded horse demanded most of his attention, for the sod was slippery here and there where the snow had lain in a hollow, and the beast stumbled now and then.

Still, the birches were drawing nearer, and Hetty holding ahead of him, though the roar of hoofs behind him told that the pursuers were coming up fast. He was not certain yet that he could reach the trees before they came upon him, and was

clawing with one hand at his rifle when Hetty cried out faintly:

“There are more of them in front.”

Grant set his lips as a band of horsemen swung out of the shadows of the bluff. His eyes caught and recognized the glint of sunlight on metal; but in another moment his heart leaped, for through the drumming of their hoofs there came the musical jingle of steel, and he saw the men were dressed in blue uniform. He swung up his hat exultantly, and his voice reached the girl, hoarse and strained with relief.

“We are through. They are United States cavalry!”

The horsemen came on at a trot, until Grant and the girl rode up to them. Then, they pulled up, and when Grant had helped Hetty down their officer, who wheeled his horse, sat gazing at them curiously. Grant did not at once recognize him, but Hetty gasped.

“Larry,” she said faintly, “it’s Jack Cheyne.”

Grant drew her hand within his arm, and walked slowly forward past the wondering troopers. Then he raised his broad hat.

“I claim your protection for my wife, Captain Cheyne,” he said.

Cheyne sat very still a moment, looking down on him with a strained expression in his face; and Grant, who saw it, glanced at Hetty. She was leaning heavily upon him, her garments spattered with mire, but he could not see her eyes. Then Cheyne nodded gravely.

“Mrs. Grant can count upon it,” he said. “Those men were chasing you?”

“Yes,” said Grant. “One of them is the Sheriff. I believe he intends to arrest me.”

“Sheriff Slocane?”

“Yes. I shall resist capture by him; but I heard that the civil law would be suspended in this district, and if that has been done, I will give myself up to you.”

Cheyne nodded again. “Give one of the boys your rifle, and step back with Mrs. Grant in the meanwhile. You are on parole.”

He said something sharply, and there was a trample of hoofs and jingle of steel as the troopers swung into changed formation. They sat still as the cattle-men rode up, and when Clavering reined his horse in a few lengths away from them Cheyne acknowledged his salute.

“We have come after a notorious disturber of this district who has, I notice, taken refuge with you,” he said. “I must ask you to give him up.”

“I’m sorry,” said Cheyne firmly. “It can’t be done just yet.”

Clavering glanced at the men behind him—and there were a good many of them, all without fear, and irresponsible; then he looked at the little handful of troopers, and Cheyne’s face hardened as he saw the insolent significance of his glance.

“Hadn’t you better think it over? The boys are a little difficult to hold in hand, and we can’t go back without our man,” he said.

Cheyne eyed him steadily. “Mr. Grant has given himself up to me. If there is any charge against him it shall be gone into. In the meanwhile, draw your men off and dismount if you wish to talk to me.”

Clavering sat perfectly still, with an ironical smile on his lips. “Be wise, and don’t thrust yourself into this affair, which does not concern you, or you may regret it,” he said. “Here is a gentleman who will convince you.”

He backed his horse as another man rode forward and with an assumption of importance addressed Cheyne. “Now,” he said, “we don’t want any unpleasantness, but I have come for the person of Larry Grant, and I mean to take him.”

“Will you tell me who I have the honour of addressing?” said Cheyne.

“Sheriff Slocane. I have a warrant for Larry Grant, and you will put me to any inconvenience in carrying it out at your peril.”

Cheyne smiled drily. “Then, as it is evidently some days since you left home, I am afraid I have bad news for you. You

are superseded, Mr. Slocane."

The Sheriff's face flushed darkly, Clavering's grew set, and there was an angry murmur from the men behind them.

"Boys," said Clavering, "are you going to be beaten by Larry again?"

There was a trampling of hoofs as some of the cow-boys edged their horses closer, and the murmurs grew louder; but Cheyne flung up one hand.

"Another word, and I'll arrest you, Mr. Clavering," he said. "Sling those rifles, all of you! I have another troop with horses picketed behind the bluff."

There was sudden silence until the Sheriff spoke. "Boys," he said, "don't be blamed fools when it isn't any use. Larry has come out on top again. But I don't know that I am sorry I have done with him and the cattle-men."

The men made no further sign of hostility, and Cheyne turned to the Sheriff. "Thank you," he said. "Now, I have to inform you that this district is under martial law, and I have been entrusted, within limits, with jurisdiction. If you and Mr. Clavering have any offences to urge against Grant, I shall be pleased to hear you. In that case you can tell your men to picket their horses, and follow me to our bivouac."

The two men dismounted, and while Hetty sat trembling amidst the birches talked for half an hour in Cheyne's tent. Then, Clavering, who saw that they were gaining little, lost his head, and stood up white with anger.

"We are wasting time," he said. "Still, I warn you that the State will hold you responsible if you turn that man loose again. Our wishes can still command a certain attention in high places."

Cheyne smiled coldly. "I shall be quite prepared to account for whatever I do. The State, I fancy, is not to be dictated to by the cattle-men's committees. It is, of course, no affair of mine, but I can't help thinking that it will prove a trifle unfortunate for one or two of you that, when you asked for more cavalry, you were listened to."

"Well," said the Sheriff dejectedly, "I quite fancy it will be; but I'm not going to worry. The cattle-men made it blamed unpleasant for me. What was I superseded for, any way?"

"Incapacity and corruption, I believe," Cheyne said drily.

Clavering stood still a moment, with an unpleasant look in his eyes, but the Sheriff, who seemed the least disconcerted, touched his arm.

"You come along before you do something you will be sorry for," he said. "I'm not anxious for any unnecessary trouble, and it would have been considerably more sensible if I had stood in with the homestead-boys."

They went away, and Cheyne led Larry, who had been confronted with them, back to where Hetty was sitting.

"I understand the men left your father behind, some distance back," he said. "He was more fatigued than the rest and his horse went lame. Your husband's case will have consideration, but I scarcely fancy he need have any great apprehension, and I must try to make you comfortable in the meanwhile."

Hetty glanced up at him with her eyes shining and quivering lips. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Larry, I am so tired."

Cheyne called an orderly, and ten minutes later led her to a tent. "Your husband placed you in my charge, and I must ask for obedience," he said. "You will eat and drink what you see there, and then go to sleep. I will take good care of Mr. Grant."

He drew Larry away and sat talking with him for a while, then bade an orderly find him a waterproof sheet and rug. Larry was asleep within ten minutes, and the moon was shining above the bluff when he awakened and moved to the tent where Hetty lay. Drawing back the canvas, he crept in softly and dropped almost reverently on one knee beside her. He could hear her faint, restful breathing, and the little hand he felt for was pleasantly cool. As he stooped and touched her forehead with his lips, the fingers closed a trifle on his own, and the girl moved in her sleep. "Larry," she said drowsily, "Larry, dear!"

Grant drew his hand away very softly, and went out with his heart throbbing furiously, to find Cheyne waiting in the vicinity. His face showed plain in the moonlight, and it was quietly grave; but Grant once more saw the expression in it that had astonished him. Now, however, he understood it, and Cheyne knew that he did so. They stood quite still a moment, looking into each other's eyes.

“Mrs. Grant is resting well?” Cheyne asked.

“Yes,” said Larry. “I owe a good deal to you.”

It did not express what they felt, but they understood each other, and Cheyne smiled a little. “You need not thank me yet. Your case will require consideration, and if the new Sheriff urges his predecessor’s charge, I shall pass it on. In the meantime I have sent to Windsor for a buggy, in which you can take Mrs. Grant away to-morrow.”

It was early next morning when the buggy arrived, and Cheyne, who ordered two troopers to lead the hired horses, had a hasty breakfast served. When the plates had been removed he turned to Hetty with a smile.

“I have decided to release your husband—on condition that he drives straight back to his homestead and stays there with you,” he said. “The State has undertaken to keep order and give every man what he is entitled to now; and if we find Mr. Grant has a finger in any further trouble, I shall blame you.”

He handed Hetty into the buggy, passed the reins to Larry, and stood alone looking after them as they drove away. Hetty turned to her husband, with a blush in her cheek.

“Larry,” she said softly, “I have something to tell you.”

Grant checked her with a smile. “I have guessed it already; and it means a new responsibility.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hetty.

Again the little twinkle showed in Larry’s eyes. “Well,” he said quietly, “that you should have taken me when you had men of his kind to choose from means a good deal. I wouldn’t like you to find out that you had been mistaken, Hetty.”

XXXI

TORRANCE RIDES AWAY

It was late at night, and Miss Schuyler, sitting alone in Hetty's room, found the time pass very heavily. She had raised her voice in warning when the cow-boys mounted the night Grant had ridden away with Hetty, and had seen the fugitives vanish into the darkness, but since then she had had no news of them, for while Breckenridge had arrived at Cedar the next day, in custody of two mounted men, nobody would tell him what had really happened. Her first impulse had been to ask for an escort to the depot and take the cars for New York, but she was intensely anxious to discover whether Hetty had evaded pursuit, and her pride forbade her slipping away without announcing her intention to Torrance, who had not yet come back to the Range. She felt that something was due to him, especially as she had not regained the house unnoticed when the pursuit commenced.

Rising, she moved restlessly up and down the room; but that in no way lessened the suspense, and sitting down again she resolutely took up a book, but she listened instead of reading it. There was, however, no sound from the prairie, and the house seemed exasperatingly still.

"You will have to shake this nervousness off or you will make a fool of yourself before that man," she muttered.

She felt that she had sat there a very long while, though the clock showed that scarcely an hour had passed, when at last there was a rattle of wheels and a trampling of hoofs outside. The great door opened, and after that there was an apparently interminable silence, until Hetty's maid came in.

"If it is convenient, Mr. Torrance would like to speak to you," she said.

Flora Schuyler rose and followed the girl down the corridor; but her heart beat faster than usual when the door of Torrance's room closed behind her. The stove was no longer lighted, and Torrance stood beside the hearth, which was littered with half-consumed papers, and Miss Schuyler, who knew his precision in dress, noticed that he still wore the bespattered garments he had ridden in. But it was the grimness of his face, and the weariness in his pose, which seized her attention and aroused a curious sympathy for him. He glanced at her sharply, with stern, dark eyes.

"I have to thank you for coming, but I am going to talk plainly," he said. "You connived at the meetings between my daughter and the rascally adventurer who has married her?"

"They are married?" exclaimed Miss Schuyler in her eagerness, and the next moment felt the blood rise to her face as she realized that she had blundered in admitting any doubt upon the subject. "I mean, of course, that I wondered whether Mr. Grant could have arranged it so soon."

"You seem to attach a good deal of importance to the ceremony," Torrance said, with a bitter smile. "Marriage is quite easy in this country."

Miss Schuyler was not deficient in courage of one kind, and she looked at him steadily. "I came down to speak to you because it seemed your due," she said, "but I have no intention of listening to any jibes at my friends."

Torrance made her a little half-respectful and half-ironical inclination. "Then will you be good enough to answer my question?"

"Though most of the few meetings were accidental, I went with Hetty intentionally on two occasions because it seemed fitting."

"It seemed fitting that a girl should betray her father to the man who wanted to ruin him, supply him with the dollars that helped him in his scheme, and, more than all, warn him of each move we made! Well, my standard is not very high, but the most cruel blow I have had to bear was the discovery that my daughter had fallen so far."

The hoarseness of his voice, and the sight of the damp upon his forehead, had a calming effect upon Miss Schuyler. Her anger against the old man had given place to pity, for she decided that what had passed would have excited most men's suspicions, and it was not in Hetty's defence alone she made an effort to undeceive him.

"I am going to answer you plainly, and I think an examination of Hetty's cheque-book and the money she left behind will bear me out," she said. "Once only did Hetty give Mr. Grant any dollars—fifty of them, I think, to feed some hungry

children. He would not take them until she assured him that they were a part of a small annuity left her by her mother, and that not one of them came from you. I also know that Mr. Grant allowed his friends to suspect him of being bribed by you sooner than tell them where he obtained the dollars in question. The adventurer dealt most honourably with you. Your daughter twice disclosed your plans, once when Clavering had plotted Grant's arrest, and again when had she not done so it would most assuredly have led to the destruction of the cattle-train. Mr. Clavering came near making a horrible blunder on that occasion, and but for Hetty's warning not a head of your stock would have reached Omaha."

Her tone carried conviction with it, as did the flash in her eyes, but Torrance's smile was sardonic. "You would try to persuade me Larry saved the train out of goodwill to us?"

"He did it, knowing what it was going to cost him, to prevent the men he led starting on a course of outrage and lawlessness."

"And they have paid him for it!"

"I fancy that is outside the question," said Miss Schuyler. "Twice, when every good impulse that is in our kind laid her under compulsion, Hetty warned the man she loved, but at no other time did a word to your prejudice pass her lips; and if she had spoken it Grant would not have listened. Hetty was loyal, and he treated you with a fairness that none of you merited. You sent the Sheriff a bribe and an order for his arrest, and by inadvertence it fell into his hands. He brought it back here unopened at his peril."

Torrance looked at her in astonishment. "He brought back my letter to the Sheriff?"

"Yes. There was nothing else a man of that kind could have done."

Torrance stood silent for a space, and then, stooping, picked up a half-burnt paper from the hearth, glanced at it with a curious expression, and flung it into the embers. When it had charred away he turned to Miss Schuyler.

"You have shown yourself a good friend," he said gravely. "Still, you may understand the other side of the question if you listen to me."

He turned and pointed to an empty tin case, and the charred papers in the hearth. "That is the end of the plans of half a lifetime—and they were all for Hetty. I had no one else after her mother was taken from me, and I scraped the dollars together for her, that she should have what her heart could wish for, and the enjoyments her parents had never known; and while I did so I and the others built up the prosperity of the cattle country. We fed the railroads and built the towns, and when we would have rested, Larry and his friends took hold. You see what they have made of it—a great industry ruined, the country under martial law, its commerce crippled, and the proclamation that can only mean disaster to us hung out everywhere. My daughter turned against me—and nothing left me but to go out, a wanderer! Larry has done his work thoroughly, and you would have me make friends with him?"

Miss Schuyler made a little sympathetic gesture, for he seemed very jaded and weary. "No," she said. "One could not expect too much, but Hetty is your daughter, the only one you have, and for her mother's sake you will at least do nothing that would embitter her life."

Torrance looked at her with a curious smile. "There is nothing I could do. Larry and the rabble are our masters now; but I will see her once before I go away. Is there any other thing—that would be a little easier—I could do to please you?"

"Yes. You could release Mr. Breckenridge."

Torrance turned and struck a bell. "I had almost forgotten him. Will you wait and see me do what you have asked me?"

In a few minutes more Breckenridge was ushered in. He smiled at Miss Schuyler, and made Torrance a slight, dignified salutation. Torrance acknowledged it courteously.

"You have yourself to blame for any inconvenience you have been put to, Mr. Breckenridge," he said. "You conspired to assist your partner in an undertaking you could not expect me to forgive."

"No," said Breckenridge. "I offered to ride with Larry, and he would not have me. I went without him knowing it and made my plans myself?"

"This is the truth?"

Breckenridge straightened himself and looked at Torrance with a little flash in his eye. "You must take my word—I shall not substantiate it. If you had had an army corps of cut-throats ready to do what you told them that night, Larry would

have gone alone."

Torrance nodded gravely. "It is taken. At least, you bluffed us into following you."

"Yes," and Breckenridge smiled, "I did. I also prevented my companion shooting one of your friends, as he seemed quite anxious to do. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, sir, but I have not the least regret for anything I did that night."

"Then, you are still very bitter against me?"

Breckenridge considered. "No, sir. The one man I am bitter against is Clavering. Now, it may sound presumptuous, and not come very well from me, but I believe that Clavering, for his own purposes, forced your hand, and I had a certain respect for you, if only because of your thoroughness. You see, one can't help realizing that you can look at every question quite differently."

Torrance smiled drily. "Then if you are not too proud to be my guest to-night, I should be glad of your company and will find you a horse to take you back to Fremont when it suits you."

Breckenridge, for some reason that was not very apparent, seemed pleased to agree, but a faint smile just showed in Torrance's eyes when he went out again. Then, he turned to Miss Schuyler.

"I wonder what Mr. Clavering has done to win everybody's dislike," he said. "You do not seem anxious to plead for him."

Flora Schuyler's face grew almost vindictive. "No," she said, "I don't. I can, however, mention one thing I find it difficult to forgive him. When you promised him Hetty he had found favour with her maid, and made the most of the fact. It was not flattering to your daughter or my friend. He may not have told you that he promised to marry her."

Torrance stared at her a moment, a dark flush rising to his forehead. "You are quite sure?"

"Ask the girl," said Flora Schuyler.

Torrance struck the bell again, and waited until the maid came in. "I understand Mr. Clavering promised to marry you," he said very quietly. "You would be willing to take him?"

The girl's face grew a trifle pale, and she glanced at Miss Schuyler who nodded encouragingly.

"Yes," she said.

Torrance smiled, but Miss Schuyler did not like the glint in his eyes. "Then," he said with incisive distinctness, "if you are in the same mind in another week, he shall."

The girl went out, and Torrance, who had watched her face, turned to Miss Schuyler. "I guess that young woman will be quite equal to him," he said. "Well, I am putting my house in order, and I will ride over once and see Hetty before I leave Cedar. You will stay here until she comes back to Fremont, any way."

Miss Schuyler promised to do so, and stayed two days, as did Breckenridge, who eventually rode to Fremont with her. He was very quiet during the journey, and somewhat astonished his companion by gravely swinging off his broad hat when they pulled upon the crest of a rise.

"I wonder if you would listen to something I wish to tell you," he said. "The trouble is that it requires an explanation."

Flora Schuyler glanced at him thoughtfully, for she recognized the symptoms now. Breckenridge appeared unusually grave, and there was a little flush on his forehead, and a diffidence she had not hitherto seen there, in his eyes.

"I can decide about the rest when I have heard the explanation," she answered.

"Well," said Breckenridge slowly, "I came out West, so to speak, because I was under a cloud. Now, I had never done anything distinctly bad, but my one ability seemed to consist in spending money, and when I had got through a good deal of it my friends sent me here, which was perhaps a little rough on your country. Well, as it happened, I fell in with men and women of the right kind—Larry, and somebody else who did more for me. That made a difference; and while I was realizing how very little I had got for the time and dollars I had wasted, affairs began to happen in the old country, and I should have the responsibility of handling a good many of them if I went back there now. It sounds abominably egotistical, but you see what it is leading to?"

Miss Schuyler, who had no difficulty on that point, regarded him thoughtfully. Breckenridge was a handsome young Englishman and she had liked him from the first. Larry had fallen to another, and that perhaps counted for more than a

little to Breckenridge; but she had seen more than one friend of hers contented with the second best. Still, she sighed before she met his gaze.

“I think you must make it a little plainer,” she said.

“Well,” said Breckenridge quietly, “it is just this. You have done a good deal for me already, and I almost dare to fancy I could be a credit to you if you would do a little more, while it would carry conviction to my most doubting relatives if you went back to the old country with me. They would only have to see you.”

Flora Schuyler smiled. “This is serious, Mr. Breckenridge?”

Breckenridge made her a little inclination, and while in a curious fashion it increased Flora Schuyler’s liking for him she recognized that he was no longer the light-hearted and irresponsible young Englishman she had met a few months ago. He, too, had borne the burden, and there was a gravity in his eyes and a slight hardening of his lips that had its meaning.

“I never was more serious in my life, madam,” he said. “I know that I might have spoken—not more respectfully, but differently—but when I am too solemn everybody laughs at me.”

“Does it not strike you that you have only regarded the affair from one point of view so far?”

Breckenridge nodded. “I understand. But one feels very diffident when he knows the slight value of what he has to offer. I should always love you, whether you say yes or no. For the rest, there is a little land in the old country, and an income which I believe should be enough for two. It seems more becoming to throw myself on your charity.”

“And what would Larry do without you?” asked Miss Schuyler.

The quick enthusiasm in Breckenridge’s face pleased her. “Larry’s work is splendidly done already,” he said. “He asked nothing for himself—and got no more; but now the State is offering every man the rights he fought for. The proclamations are out, and any citizen who wants it can take up his homestead grant. It will be something to remember that I carried his shield; but Larry has no more need of an armour-bearer.”

“I am older than you are.”

“Ten years in wisdom, and fifty in goodness, but I scarcely fancy that more than six months separate our birthdays. Now, I know I am not expressing myself very nicely, but, you see, we can’t all be eloquent, and perhaps it should count for a little when I tell you that I never made an attempt of the kind before. I am, however, most painfully anxious to convince you.”

Miss Schuyler recognized it, and liked him the more for the diffidence which he wrapped in hasty speech. “Then,” she said softly, “if in six months from now——”

Breckenridge swayed in his saddle; but the girl’s heel was quicker, and as her horse plunged the hand he would have laid on her bridle fell to his side.

“No!” she said. “If in six months you are still in the same mind, you can come to Hastings-on-the-Hudson, and speak to me again. Then, you may find me disposed to listen; but we will go on to Fremont in the meanwhile.”

Breckenridge’s response was unpremeditated, but the half-broken horse, provoked by his sudden movement, rose with fore hoofs in the air, and then whirled round in a circle. Its rider laughed exultantly, swaying lithely, with the big hat still in one hand that disdained the bridle; but his face grew grave when there was quietness again, and he turned towards the girl.

“I shall be in the same mind,” he said, “for ever and ever.”

They rode on to Fremont, and the next day Breckenridge drove Miss Schuyler, who was going back to New York, the first stage of her journey to the depot. A month had passed when one evening Torrance rode that way. The prairie, lying still and silent with a flush of saffron upon its western rim, was tinged with softest green, but broad across the foreground stretched the broken, chocolate-tinted clods of the ploughing, and the man’s face grew grimmer as he glanced at them. He turned and watched the long lines of crawling cattle that stretched half-way across the vast sweep of green; and Larry and his wife, who stood waiting him outside the homestead, understood his feelings. Raw soil, rent by the harrows and seamed by the seeder, and creeping bands of stock, were tokens of the downfall of the old régime. Then Torrance, drawing bridle, sat still in his saddle while Hetty and her husband stood by his stirrup.

“I promised your friend, Hetty, that I would see you before I went away,” he said. “I left Cedar for the last time a few

hours ago, and I am riding in to the railroad now. The stock you see there are mine and Allonby's, and the cars are waiting to take them to Omaha. I shall spend the years that may be left me on the Pacific slope."

Hetty's lips quivered, and it was Larry who spoke.

"Was it necessary, sir?"

Torrance smiled grimly. "Yes. The State offered me a few paltry concessions, and a little of what was all mine by right. It didn't seem a fit thing to accept their charity. Well, you have beaten us, Larry."

Grant's face flushed a little. "Only that the rest will gain more than the few will lose I could almost be sorry, sir."

Torrance swung himself down from the saddle and laid his hand on Hetty's shoulder.

"You have chosen your husband among the men who pulled us down, and nothing can be quite the same between you and me," he said. "But I am getting an old man, and may never see you again."

Hetty looked up at him with a faint trace of pride in her misty eyes. "There was nobody among our friends fit to stand beside him," she said. "If you kiss me you will shake hands with Larry."

"I can do both," and Torrance held out his hand when he turned to Grant. "Larry, I believe now you tried to do the square thing, and there might have been less trouble between us but for Clavering. I hope you will bear me no ill will, and while we can't quite wipe out the bitterness yet, by and by we may be friends again."

"I hope so, sir," said Larry.

Torrance said nothing further, but, moving stiffly, swung himself into the saddle and slowly rode away. Hetty watched him with a curious wistfulness in her eyes until he wheeled his horse on the crest of the rise, and sat still a moment looking back on them, a lonely, dusky object silhouetted against the paling sky. Then he turned again, and sank into the shadowy prairie. Hetty clung a little more tightly to her husband's arm, and for a time they stood watching the crawling cattle and dim shapes of the stockriders slowly fade, until the last pale flicker of saffron died out and man and beast sank into the night. A little cold wind came sighing out of the emptiness and emphasized its silence.

Hetty shivered. "Larry," she said, "they will never come back."

Grant drew her closer to him. "It had to be, my dear," he said. "They blocked the way, and nothing can stop the people you and I—and they—belong to, moving on. Well, we will look forward and do what we can, for we must be ready to step out when our turn comes and watch the rest go by."

THE END

[End of *The Cattle-Baron's Daughter* by Harold Bindloss]