

A black and white illustration of a cowboy standing with his left hand on his hip and his right hand resting on his hip. He is wearing a wide-brimmed sombrero with a dark band and a large, light-colored poncho with a dark sash. The background is a solid dark color.

THE
BLUE WOLF
W. LACEY AMY

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THE BLUE WOLF

A TALE OF THE CYPRESS HILLS

BY

W. LACEY AMY

TORONTO

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CHAPTER I

THE TRAVELLER IN STATE

All day the sun had shone from an unclouded sky. In the early morning it had been a cheery greeting; by noon it had become an uncompromising brilliance. And now in the afternoon it was a merciless, staring, eye-fatiguing, dazzling glare. Nothing in the pale blue sky, nothing in the clear Western air, nothing across the delicate green tracts that had been plough-broken, or the lifeless grey prairies unmarked as yet by man—nothing anywhere to relieve that unblinking effulgence!

The car itself was sun-drenched, hot, and somnolent with the tiresome brightness and the fatigue of long-travelled passengers. Since lunch most of the occupants of the sleeping-car had been lounging back on the cushions trying to woo Sleep, but the weary sighs and restless movements proved that it was more interested elsewhere. At the moment I think it was concentrating its efforts on me, for my station was only a few miles farther on, and with the perversity of custom my efforts were required in the repulsion of that which the others were seeking.

To one other of those in the car Sleep was offering allurements which he bravely resisted. On the front seat the porter lay outstretched with his head resting on the window-sill, his eyes half-opening every few minutes on the glare outside. Presently, after a look seemingly as careless as the others, he sat up slowly, straightened his official coat with a hitch and lounged into the aisle. I returned his smile as he reached for my hat and began to brush it with that vigour that makes one think there can be nothing in life for a car-porter but the payment for that service. When I had dropped into his hovering hand that portion of his salary unconsidered in the pay-roll, he sauntered up the aisle and knocked at the drawing-room door. After listening a moment he called something close to the frame and strolled on through the passage.

I stretched my arms in anticipation of relief and gazed with more interest through the window. Three days of confinement in a badly ventilated car, even though the scenery that raced past the window had varied from the

chaotic roughness of the north shore of Lake Superior to the monotonous flatness of the Saskatchewan prairies, made me long to escape the grind of the wheels, and to loosen away some of the cramps that had crept into every muscle.

A noise within the car drew my eyes from the passing prairie. The drawing-room door at the end of the car had opened, with none of that hesitation one instinctively feels when suddenly passing into the gaze of many eyes. In the doorway stood a tall, powerful man, coolly gazing into the faces of the awakened passengers, his feet wide apart, his hands hanging unconsciously by his side. He was an incongruous occupant of a sleeping-car drawing-room. His clothes were ill-fitting and coarse, consisting of a loose coat, a black shirt with soft collar attached, and baggy trousers tucked into long boots that had long been ignorant of attention. His unkempt, black hair was uncovered. To all appearances he was a farmer, one of the countless variety that join the everlasting trek westward. From his dress you could imagine a horse waiting for him, hitched to a plough ready to commence its interrupted rounds.

In the unconscious fearlessness of his look, and in his huge frame, there was that which would attract attention anywhere. Above medium height, he held himself in a peculiar, loosely erect attitude, giving the impression of concealing something of his height. At first appearance he was round-shouldered, but at second glance it was not this that made the door seem too small for him, but rather a relaxing of the lower part of the body indicative of great strength and elasticity. The shoulders and chest leaned awkwardly back, adding to the general effect of careless impudence. Across his chin extended a mark that might have been a mole or a birthmark—a flaw in the immobile face that somehow seemed an essential part of the man.

For several seconds he stood thus in motionless silence, his eyes wandering leisurely over the passengers. Gradually they worked up the aisle to me, paused, passed on—and then returned. With something of instinctive protest I rose to gather my parcels. In the steadiness of his gaze there was something so self-confident, something so expectant of servile recognition, that I was impelled to resentment.

Some one came from the back of the car and passed me—another farmer walking steadily forward with his eyes on the man in the doorway. His hat was in his hand, and in his attitude was that servility to which the big stranger appeared to be accustomed. Without a word the two disappeared into the drawing-room and the door closed. A minute afterwards it reopened,

and the second man emerged with two suit-cases and passed back through the car.

I had taken my seat when, to my momentary consternation, the stranger reappeared in the doorway and walked straight down the aisle with his eyes on my face.

“You’re getting off here?” he asked in a tone that needed no confirmation.

I wanted to contradict him; I felt as if he knew my whole history. But before I could analyse the feeling, I had answered.

He seemed to be suddenly conscious of what was in my mind, for he added hastily, “I saw you collecting your traps.” Yet I felt that was not a complete explanation of his knowledge of me. He spoke in a slow, deep-throated tone, that agreed well with the controlled power of his frame. Strength spoke everywhere.

I had not answered his last remark, and he proceeded to elaborate his explanation.

“I’m getting off here, myself. Naturally I’m interested in another passenger for the same station. We don’t have enough of them to get accustomed to it.”

But the more he explained the more singular his interest in me appeared. I could not forget that his eyes had fixed themselves on me before I had made any move that would give any idea of my destination. I was forced to say something in reply.

“It is a small place, I suppose. I have never been West before.”

“You’ll be going to the Cypress Hills?”

Again came a wonder at his information. And yet his next remark should have made it clear.

“That’s the only settlement reached from this station.”

“Yes,” I replied, with a vagueness that left little reason for continuing the conversation. “I am going to visit a friend there.”

“I know every one out there. It’s where I live.”

It was a definite enough request for the name of my friend, but I did not acknowledge it.

“I’ll probably see you again out there,” I said, with a formal smile.

For a moment there was silence. Then:

“If your friend is not there to meet you we could take you with us.”

“Thank you! McTavish will be there to meet me.” I said it coldly, and then it flashed across me with a wave of anger, that he had got the name of my friend after all.

He made no sign that he had learned what he wanted.

“I know McTavish. We pass right by his place.”

I was angry at his persistence. From the first glance of him I had felt an instinctive dislike, and I wanted to be rude.

“There is no danger that he will not be there to meet me.”

To close the conversation I turned my eyes out of the window.

For a moment he looked down on me, and gradually my eyes were drawn back to him. Then I saw why the mark on his chin had seemed so vital. In spite of the expressionless face the mark was a dark red, and a curious muscular twisting was visible underneath.

When he had literally forced my eyes to him he withdrew his hand abruptly from the back of the seat and walked stiffly back to the drawing-room, the arms that had before hung so freely, now tightened in a muscular strain.

Immediately I felt repentant and mean. I was ashamed to look around to read the censure I knew would show in the faces of my fellow-passengers. It was most natural that the man would be interested in me; and it was thoughtful of him to offer his companionship in case McTavish were not there. Why had I been so sensitive? I stole a glance at last around me, and was surprised to find my neighbours smiling with approval.

“Kind of forcing himself on you,” volunteered the man across the aisle, with whom I had talked quite a bit during the trip. “Inquisitive codger. I didn’t like him when I saw him get on at Winnipeg. Wonder what he’s doing in the drawing-room, an old guy like that!”

Then I realised that there lay the main reason for our antagonism—that so rough a farmer should travel with all the luxuries, while the rest of us, well-dressed and prosperous-looking, were content with a berth. The tourist-car was the place for him, where his friend had evidently travelled. I believe there was a shade of resentment that such a man would address me with such confidence; but I had heard of the lack of class-distinction in the West.

I wondered if he were a close neighbour of Jock McTavish's, and if an intimate friend. The thought turned me off to the college mate who would be waiting for me at the station.

From my pocket I drew the last letter I had received from him, and in an instant I forgot the stranger and all the world but Jock. On the letter there was no heading of place or date; I smiled at the recollection of Jock's persistent refusal to waste time on unimportant details. Letter-writing had always been sufficient effort to him without unnecessary formalities.

"My dear Count——" I read no further. The old college name recalled the university days that had passed five years before, ending so abruptly in the scattering of the Quintuplets—the five inseparables of our college course. But there were not five of us now—in which lay one of the deepest sorrows I had ever known.

Not one of us had ever understood Jock, but we loved him none the less for that. Perhaps those five years in the society of Agnes, the girl who had turned the heads of the Quintuplets—of the entire college, for that matter—had made dear old Jock understandable. That he had at last written to invite me most earnestly to spend the summer with him was proof enough of that. It was like Jock that he had not added a word of invitation from Agnes. But then, any of us knew we would be as welcome with her as one of her own family.

My mind slanted off at another tangent. Margaret, Agnes's sister! A great longing to see again the sunny girl who had all these years excluded any other woman from my mind swept over me, and with it self-reproach for having allowed business cares to crowd her out. The letter fluttering from my hand brought me back to Jock.

Lucky Jock! Ever since he had won the hand of the college pet, the oldest daughter of a professor of classics, he had been the envy of the students. Not a youth at the University but would have given a year of his course for an approving smile. But when Jock won out we blessed him, even though we wondered how it happened, with the dashing Dicky, the clever, studious Field, and the handsome Morris as energetic rivals. And Jock had given us little chance to discover the reason for his victory. Immediately after the marriage he had taken her to a ranch in Southern British Columbia, where he had rapidly amassed a small fortune with Scotch prudence and certainty. Four years later the college paper contained the news of his removal to a larger ranch in Southern Alberta, where he was said to be in a fair way to add to his fortune.

It would be like living over the old days to see one of the Quintuplets, to be near him for months, when it had been more than four years since I had shaken the hand of Dicky, the last of the boys to go, before his departure for South America to accept a profitable engineering appointment. A business-like father had settled me down in an office, where the recollection of university days meant so much loss of time and money to the firm; and in the excitement of the Exchange I had found little time to remember the old life. After five holidayless years I had earned a long rest; and that I was to have amid the novelty of ranch life. I could see a happy time ahead of me.

If only Dicky and Field and Morris, the other three, could have been with us! And again I feel under the spell of the broken circle of chums.

CHAPTER II

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE DREAMERS

I was roused from my reverie by the grinding of the brakes and the lurching of the car as the train slowed. Glancing from the window, I was surprised to see nothing but bald, unbroken prairie. Surely this was not the station where Jock was to meet me! However, the train was coming to a dead stop, and I seized my cap and gripsack and started up the aisle. As I did so the big stranger pushed through the drawing-room door and disappeared along the narrow passage.

It was with something akin to consternation that I dropped from the step to the cinders, and saw nothing to break the monotony of the dull, grey prairie but a tiny box of a station, a disjointed-looking switch, two freight cars and three men.

My consternation was complete when I noticed that Jock was not one of the men. No sign of the friend I had travelled two thousand miles to see. My fellow-passenger of the drawing-room, accompanied by the other farmer, was stalking up the cinders towards the freight cars; and now I saw several men emerge from the cars bearing pieces of machinery to a couple of wagons. The third man was the station agent, judging from the bundle of yellow papers he carried in his hand.

Suddenly the loneliness of the prairie, that big, brooding expanse that, I learned later, never loses its spell, passed over me. With no Jock to meet me, to be unexpectedly dropped in the very centre of such vastness was impressing its immensity, its cold indifference, its pitilessness upon me, in sensations that were disagreeably novel. I could not even collect my thoughts to decide upon the next move.

I was not left long alone. The agent had placed his papers within the station and now came quickly towards me.

"You're Mr. Arthurs," he said, with as much assurance as had shown in the words of the stranger on the train, but with a very different effect. He did not wait for me to answer. "Mr. McTavish told me to tell you he could not wait for the train, and how sorry he was—something out at one of the

ranches. But he left a horse for you. It's tied behind the station. Your trunk the Douks up there will take out for you when they go."

As he spoke he pointed up the track to the two cars bustling with unloading operations. My fellow-passenger was just approaching the group of working-men, and while we looked they caught sight of him. With one accord each man removed his hat and bowed humbly.

At the strange greeting the agent laughed.

"Rum crowd, those Douks. Course they're not Doukhobours, really. I don't know what they are, so I just call them Douks for want of something better. They belong to a bunch of North Dakota farmers who have started a settlement out here near the Cypress Hills. By the way, you're going out there, so you'll soon know more about them than I do. The big fellow is some mogul among them. Must be fine to have followers kow-tow to you like that."

The man prattled on, the rapid, inconsequential chatter of a lonesome man with few opportunities of talking. Truth to tell, I was glad to let him monopolise the conversation. It was hard to imagine that I was standing in a new country where I had expected to shake the hand of an old friend, and I tried to keep my eyes from wandering nervously over the great stretch of lifeless prairie. Now that I looked around more carefully I could see far out in the distance a row of hills stretching across the southern horizon, and I knew they must be the Cypress Hills.

"Mr. McTavish was sorry he could not stay to meet you," the voice went on, without its owner seeming to notice my depression, "but your train was reported twelve hours late when he left—and that might mean twenty-four out here." He shuddered as if "out here" meant a great deal more than late trains. "So he left the horse and said you were to start out about five or six to escape the sun. Your train has caught up an hour, so you'll have lots of time to get near enough there before it gets too late. He couldn't—"

The knowledge that I had to get somewhere across that prairie before darkness, and that I *might* do it before it got too late, made me suddenly impatient with the garrulous, kindly man.

"How far is it to McTavish's?" I interrupted brusquely.

"I guess—let's see—by the nearest trail it'll be about—about—mm-mm."

He mumbled away with thoughtfully puckered brow, prolonging my anxiety.

“How far—about how far?” I asked impatiently. “Surely you know *about* how far it is.”

“I should say it would be a matter of—of thirty miles, but if— —”

“Thirty miles!” I gasped.

Thirty miles, and on horseback. To me, fresh from my five years of office confinement, thirty miles seemed a week’s journey. I had not thrown a leg over a horse since I was a boy.

“Thirty miles!” I repeated, a great helplessness sweeping over me. “Isn’t there something I could hire to ride out in, or some one to ride with—a rig of some sort. I couldn’t ride that far on horseback.”

The man grinned sympathetically.

“I’m afraid the liveries are all busy to-day.” He swept his hand vaguely but comprehensively over the horizon, as if liveries abounded everywhere around us. “And they haven’t started a stage here yet—seeing that I’m the only man most of the time, and then only in the spring and fall when the emigrants are coming in and the grain going out. Thank goodness!” he added fervently.

My wandering eyes settled on the strangers up the track.

“Why couldn’t I get out with the Douks? They’re going to take my trunk, you say.” But even as I spoke I remembered my curt refusal of an invitation I would now be glad to receive.

“Have a talk with them if you want to. But I have an idea they won’t be taking off their hats to you. I can’t get them to talk to me. They don’t seem to hanker for any one but their own; they’ve almost converted me by that kind of tactics. They’ve got some funny religion or something. I’d be willing to believe anything to have a friend to talk to here sometimes. But you’ll have a chance to meet the jolly fellows out at Mr. McTavish’s.”

It would have taken more than the memory of my rudeness to deter me from making an attempt to revive the invitation I had refused. Perhaps the man had not noticed my rudeness. But I could not forget the mark. Perhaps he would let it pass and lay it to my inexperience in the country, or to thoughtlessness or anxiety to meet my old friend. If I could only talk to him I would be able to explain it away. At any rate I would try. The chances of company and a seat in a wagon were worth any humility on my part.

The initial stages of my reception were not of a nature to reassure me, nor to inspire disbelief in the agent’s opinion of the strangers. When they

saw me coming they disappeared within the cars, and as I approached I could feel myself the object of many eyes, although I could not locate them. A nervousness came over me that I tried in vain to dispel with the thought that they had a right to look at a stranger if they wished. I did succeed in convincing myself that I had decided to take a holiday none too soon. Such unreasonable sensitiveness could be caused by nothing but "nerves," an ailment for which I had the greatest contempt.

When at last I came to the open door of the nearest car, my late fellow-passenger came slowly forward and stood looking at me without a word, as he had done from the doorway of the drawing-room section. But there was a difference that added to my discomfort. There he had given the impression of great strength with some consciousness of it. Here the knowledge of his power and right to command were overwhelming. In spite of myself I could not help a strange feeling of presumption in talking to him as an equal. His dignity was penetrating, pungent.

"I'm afraid," I began with an apologetic laugh, "that I'll have to take advantage of your kind offer in the train. My friend is not here."

The man continued to look at me steadily, but without acknowledging my remark. I felt as if I had said something too frivolous for his notice.

"I hear that my friend McTavish has made arrangements with you to take out my trunk for me," I continued hastily. "Are you going to-night, may I ask? If you are, I would consider it a favour if I might travel with you. I'm not used to the prairie, nor the riding either, and company would be most acceptable—with a wagon-seat, if possible. I imagine I will find my riding rather out of practice."

I knew I was talking fast and disconnectedly, but there was no evidence that the man was prepared to answer, and I dared not face the silent examination which would follow the end of my speech. The man had stood motionless throughout, and when I had finished he did not hasten to reply.

Then he spoke in the same slow, deep-throated voice.

"We are not going until to-morrow morning."

While I had been speaking I had time to examine more closely the men who were clustered behind him. They were dressed in the roughest of farmers' costumes, with nothing to distinguish them from any other of their class, save their air of restraint and aloofness, and a dignity that savoured of sulkiness. The one before me was the tallest, and apparently the leader.

“If there is any place I could stay,” I answered hesitatingly, “I would not mind waiting.” I was not inclined to take easy offence at the moroseness on every face.

“You can see that there is no place for you to stay here, and our wagons will be full.”

There could be no doubt of my dismissal. He would not even deign to acknowledge our train conversation. I felt the blood rush to my face at the discourtesy, and my unsettled nerves got the better of me.

“You’re a damned lot of boors,” I almost shouted, whirling on my heel, but not too quickly to catch a glimpse of that tell-tale darkening of the mark on his chin.

My anger lasted until I was astride the horse, headed towards those distant hills. The directions the agent had given me were simple enough to prevent any difficulty in finding my way, so long as I could see the range in front of me.

For the first few minutes I worked off some of my overcharged feelings by riding hard, as hard as my inexperience would allow. But the jolting of the horse and the unaccustomed strain quickly brought me back to a vivid consciousness of my surroundings. And with that all the anger left me suddenly.

Around me there seemed to be nothing but a great void, an overpowering stillness. It struck me like a blow, with an impact that made me look around instinctively for relief. Ahead and on both sides lay that oppressive flatness and silence, and I eagerly turned in my saddle to look back upon the only life within view.

The little station stood beside the rows of steel, an abrupt break in the dead grass stretches; but its blind side turned to me gave no relief. The cars were lifeless at first glance. But no! Near one of them, his feet wide apart and his arms folded, stood a tall, motionless figure. In the clear western air I could almost see those deep eyes watching me as I rode away. And the sight of him was more disquieting than the brooding prairie before me. I turned and rode quickly into it.

CHAPTER III

THE CRY ON THE MOUNTAIN

If you pick up a recent map of Saskatchewan, one large enough to give attention to detail, and look away down in the south-west corner, you will find a line of those peculiar little dashes that are used by geographers the world over to denote mountains. In the map of the adjoining Province of Alberta you will notice the dashes continued into the south-east corner and extending for about twenty miles. Until a very few years ago even the Government maps failed to record this range of hills, but of late the opening of the surrounding country to the ubiquitous farmer has forced some recognition of what is almost a freak of nature. For forty miles around it is the landmark by which all direction is judged, and to the citizen of the nearest town, Medicine Hat, thirty-five miles to the north-west, as well as to the rancher in the more immediate neighbourhood, the Cypress Hills form just as important a part of the landscape as the railway itself. They are the only break in a vast area of prairie that is marked only by the coulées of ancient streams, and by an occasional slight roll that is a forerunner of the foothills two hundred miles farther west.

It is as if the gods, wearied, or ashamed of the monotonous reaches of flatness, brought one huge load of fertile earth and dumped it there, a ridge one hundred miles long and eight or ten wide, and left it to bring forth the wildest tangle of trees and rocks and lakes. For hundreds of miles to the north there is nothing more precipitous than the banks of the South Saskatchewan. To the west the Rockies first break the level. Eastward the nearest hills are far out of sight, but nearer than elsewhere save to the south, across the border of the United States.

To me, riding forward with them as my goal, they were the country itself. The prairie intervening was but an approach, a convenience that was to be considered only for the direction in which it pointed. It was the front court of a palace, the lobby of a theatre.

It was shortly after six, and the early May day showed a reluctance to give way to darkness, or even dusk. I was surprised to find my horse not

uncomfortable, and in spite of the awe and isolation which I could not throw off, I began to think how foolish it would have been to have waited until morning.

Pleasurable anticipations of the three months' holiday ahead of me with my eccentric college chum, took the place of some of the resentment I was inclined to feel at his having left me to the long ride alone. He had always been the odd one of the quintuplets, had Jock, and yet his eccentricities and Scotch cunning and carefulness had made him the most interesting of us all. Many a time he had refused to tear himself from his studies to join in our pranks, but again he had led the Quintuplets into daring adventures that gave him a steady claim to leadership whenever he cared to assume it.

Just as of old, I found it hard to cherish anger against one of the college group, especially now when there were but three of us left—only three of the five staunch friends who had fought and loved and studied together! Ever since the news came of Field's violent death—the first break in the chumship—followed closely by that of Morris, when he gave in for the first time in his life, I had trembled for the next to go. I could find it in me to wish that it might be myself. There wasn't much to live for in my life without the Quintuplets—since my letters to Margaret, when she had left Toronto after her father's death, had been returned from the Dead Letter Office. It was almost a year since I had heard vaguely that Field had gone. He had been visiting Jock at the time, and I could not summon courage to ask the latter for particulars. He would have given them at first if he could have found heart to do so. And the same with Morris! He, too, had stumbled against Fate in this western country. My suffering could be nothing to Jock's, the Quintuplet friend who had been at hand at the end of each.

For four years we had each known that somewhere in the world were four friends who could be relied upon to respond to any call, just as eager as in the college days to aid and befriend, just as anxious for the feel of the pressing hand and the steady gaze of the solicitous eye. Then there were but three friends to each; then two. Jock's suffering must have been terrible when he was forced to stand by and see the two missing friends withdraw from the list. It was echoed in the letter that had brought me here.

"You may be loath to visit the spot where the Quintuplet circle was broken," he had written. "I can only say I want you to come and help us forget it."

When I had read these words I felt no reluctance to come because of the two friends who had never returned. I was not superstitious. But now,

reviewing it all in the midst of very different surroundings, I began to find it impossible to revive my enthusiasm for the holiday ahead. An uncomfortable feeling was growing on me. I found myself wondering why I had anticipated such a pleasant time. I had not seen Jock for five years, and I knew nothing of how he might have changed away out here in this lonely land.

The thought aroused me to a consciousness of my surroundings. As I looked around I was made aware, by the position of the setting sun, that I had spent much time in going over the old days. I had come nearer to the Hills and saw that they were now sweeping around me on the west. In a few minutes the ruddy ball in the cloudless sky would disappear behind them.

With my discomfort growing at the sight, I increased my speed. I felt an unaccountable disinclination to be alone on that prairie after nightfall. The vastness, which was rather augmented by the hills standing out so clearly ahead of me, the deep silence, the utter absence of anything with life, renewed with greater intensity the awe I had felt when I alighted at the station. The Cypress Hills were lying right before me, but I knew I had not come thirty miles. I saw them now for the first time, a range of wooded hills, stretching far to the east and circling around to the west, where they ended abruptly in level prairie. One peak broke the ragged range, towering straight ahead of me. In the clear atmosphere the rocky sides, the clusters of trees, the little dark spots that marked the grottoes and hollows, stood out with startling distinctness over the thick woods at its base.

I urged my horse to a more rapid gait, but the hills seemed to recede before me. Over the crest the sun cast its long rays, and as it sank from sight I found myself riding frantically as if racing it.

With a nervous laugh I slowed up. Already the quick darkness of the west was settling around me, although farther back the prairie lay out from under the shadow of the Hills in bright sunshine, throwing an unnatural radiance over me.

The terrible silence was almost a tangible thing. It was like a nightmare I knew to be unreal and yet was powerless to break. Some mighty force was holding me down with grim relentlessness.

With childish resentment I clenched my fist and looked up at the peak—and started.

High up on the rocky side, far above the dense bush that hid the road ahead, a figure moved rapidly upward, leaping from rock to rock at a speed that appeared supernatural. The presence of that one human figure, whose

every movement I could see so plainly without hearing a sound, made the silence more awful. For one moment it stopped as if looking out over the prairie. I waved my arms wildly, but no sound came to my lips. All nature would have resented such an outbreak.

The figure made no response, but hastened on in the growing gloom faster than ever.

Then the brooding quiet was broken. A horrible, laughing “yip-yap-yip-ya-a-a-ap” burst the bonds that were stifling me. But it did not come from the thing up the mountain side. I felt the blood rush to my scalp as I whirled in my saddle. Behind me out on the prairie I could dimly see two sneaking animals. They were not even coming towards me, and I had heard enough of the cowardly coyote to know that I had nothing to fear from them. But their weird yapping had fitted in so well with my feelings that I could think of it but as the beginning—a warning, if you will.

With my horse on the run I entered the trees at the foot of the Hills. It was very dark there, but the horse found little difficulty in following the track. My nerves were in such a condition by this time that I imagined every tree concealed something terrifying—something entirely strange to me. The whole world since I had left the train had been full of mysterious people and things. I closed my eyes and thought of Yonge Street, the lights of the theatres, the street-cars, the press of the crowds, and the calls of the newsboys. Surely I would soon waken up and find them all just outside my window!

I was surprised when I emerged from the thickest trees and wound up a well-defined, but narrow, trail, with trees on one side and the prairie rapidly falling beneath me on the other. There was a luminous tinge here reflected from the sky and the prairie, far out on whose bosom still lingered the last touches of the setting sun. As I proceeded, the drop on my right, which had started gradually, developed into a precipice. Although my horse was quiet enough, I could not endure to look down into the blackness of those unknown depths. I dismounted on the side away from the precipice and tried to loosen up some of the cramp that had got into my thighs. I could scarcely walk after my long ride, and partially for the help it gave me, as well as for the comfort of companionship, I clung closely to the saddle.

Wherever my thoughts turned I could not drive out the memory of that silent figure on the mountain side, a black leaping spot against the yellow rock. I was listening intently, almost painfully, for some sound from the heights above. Again and again I heard the uncanny yapping of the coyotes

coming from all parts of the prairie as the darkness grew. It kept my blood in a tingle, and I crowded closer to my horse from the blackness of the woods a few yards away. Even now, after I have heard it many a time, I know of nothing wilder, more weird, more ominous to the novice, than that semi-human, maniacal laughing of the western coyote—unless it be the howl of the timber wolf.

I was destined early in my visit to know the sound of both.

From the explicit directions given me by the station agent I remembered that the trail led for a mile or so along the face of these hills, and then sank to a lower level, where a small lake lay in the slope from prairie to hill. On the banks of this lake Jock had built his house; so that I must be nearly there.

I tried to throw off the fear that gripped me, that I might greet my friends with composure; but try as I would to fight it my ears were ever straining upwards towards the mountain which I knew must be right above me, even while I listened to the intermittent yapping below. My horse seemed to share my fear, arching away from me and straining at the reins.

For a moment a great stillness came. The coyotes were quiet—waiting, it suddenly struck me, for something more terrible, something which they feared themselves. I stopped instinctively and leaned against my trembling horse.

Then without warning there arose close beside me a blood-curdling howl. My horse shrieked in terror, leaped wildly into the air and plunged out of sight over the cliff. I drew away just in time to save myself from following it, and whirled towards the cry.

Instinctively I knew it to be from some fierce, untamed creature. I threw out my arms and crouched in terror. That such an animal could have approached within two yards of me without my hearing it was almost as terrifying as the howl itself.

I looked shudderingly towards it. With what little light remained I could see that nothing was between me and the trees, six or seven yards away.

As I gazed in horror, the hideous howl came again from the same spot, and this time there was in it the note of death, of tortured, terrifying death.

CHAPTER IV

UNEXPECTED FRIENDS

I must have lost consciousness momentarily, for when my wits returned I was lying with my face over the precipice, gazing in horror into the black depths where my horse had disappeared. That I had not followed it was a miracle. My narrow escape from the cruel death on the rocks below, the knowledge that down there my horse must be a shapeless mass, as well as the quickly returning fear of the Thing I knew must be behind me somewhere, unnerved me so completely that I could not move. I feared to look behind, and yet the unknown void into which I vainly peered until dizziness made me close my eyes was just as terrifying. I tried in vain to reason that the Thing could be no more dangerous to look on than to leave there unseen. Then I remembered that I had looked and could see nothing, and the thought was still more unsettling to my shattered nerves.

I had given up hope. Only a slight move would be sufficient to send me down with my horse, and that I saw would happen sooner or later. That blackness below was exerting a fascination over me; it terrified me less than what was behind me.

Through my fear came the sound of running feet on a rocky road. I forced myself to raise my head a little at the new sound, and the movement brought back some self-control. As my head rose slowly I saw below me to my left a light moving upwards and coming nearer. A voice shouted a “halloo,” and again the runner passed over a rocky surface that made the sound of his running audible.

With sudden determination I pulled my body from the edge of the rock and looked behind me. There was nothing; and I knew now that that was what I had suspected. I was alone but for those running feet.

I was still looking blankly around towards the trees, not certain whether I had recovered my senses, when the ground around me grew lighter and a hand was laid on my shoulder. I looked up, and there above me, looking anxiously into my face and calling me by the old college name I loved, was Dicky—Dicky, the third of the Quintuplets alive—Dicky who had gone to

South America immediately after Jock and Aggie had been married, stricken, as some of us thought with a broken heart—Dick, the daring, generous, quick-tempered, dashing Dick Tatham.

I knew I must be dreaming then, and I was loath to wake. Dick and Jock and myself, the last of the quintuplets—we three—it made a pleasant dream. I would waken soon to find Jock far away in the West and Dick in strange lands I knew not of.

But there was no mistaking the vigorous shaking Dick's hand gave mine, nor the "thank God!" that came to his lips as I rose unsteadily to my feet.

A nervous glance around was my first care, even though my active thoughts were more of the man beside me still holding to my arm and peering into my face. Dick noted the movement.

"Don't be afraid, Count," he said cheerily. "A timber wolf will not attack the two of us. And I'm armed."

The light of the lantern he carried flashed on the automatic pistol in his hand. It was the same old, reassuring Dick. I would have felt safe with him anywhere. As we walked he told me how he came to be there.

After a couple of years in South America he had accepted a position as engineer with a large irrigation company in Colorado. In some way Jock had traced him, and after a year's insistence had prevailed upon him to take a holiday and spend it on the Alberta ranch. I concluded that Jock had not invited me until he knew of Dick's coming, and had then kept it as a surprise. Dick had arrived two days before, leaving the train at Medicine Hat, the nearest town.

Jock had returned from the station, where he had gone to meet me, being unable, on account of some pressing affair at one of his ranches, to remain through the day until my train arrived. He had not yet returned, although he had expected to be back in time to receive me, and Dick and the women had watched for me as the darkness had come on, knowing well the lonesomeness of the prairie to the newcomer.

"The women?" I asked. "What women?"

Dick hesitated a moment before answering, but at the time it was too unimportant to trouble me.

"Agnes—and—and the girl she has working for her," he finally replied.

I concluded that it was characteristic of the West to make more of the hired help than I had been accustomed to.

“We were standing on the porch watching the prairie trail, because we thought you would come that way rather than through the woods and over the hill-road, even though it is the longer trail.”

I told him that Jock had left word with the station agent that I had better come by the hill-road because it was shorter.

“We heard the cry of the timber wolf up here, and then the terrified shriek of your horse. I knew you were here and I came to you,” he concluded. How quickly he had come I well knew.

“But where’s your horse?” he asked of a sudden.

I pointed over the cliff beside me and shuddered.

“Gad!” was all he said, but the tone betrayed his feeling.

Aggie met me at the door with a welcome that could not have been more cordial had I returned from the dead. Back of her few quiet words of greeting, as she clasped my hand in both her own, was a sob that brought a tremor to her voice and, I think, led Dicky to introduce another subject with almost unseemly haste.

The room into which she led me, still holding my hand, was a revelation in the adaptation of western conveniences to personal comfort and artistic instincts. My first thought of it, as I glanced at the piano in the corner nearest the windows, the couch with Oriental throw carelessly folded over its foot, the easy wicker chairs and comfortable Morris chair, was that, after all, home was where the one woman made it, irrespective of location and natural conveniences. The partially set table in the centre, with its cloth gleaming under the two lamps, and its silver shining in spots of brightness on the duller white, completed a picture of physical comfort and satisfaction. But I soon noticed under the first impression a shabbiness that told of forgotten ideals in patterned cushion-cover and varnish. In any other place I would have described it as shabby gentility, but here it became rather a neglected desire for good effect, the remnants of what had once been a pleasant care. Aggie had started out bravely to make this room a home indeed. Something else had crept into her thoughts as of more importance. Even that first night such an idea came into my mind.

Dicky was left to continue the conversation alone, for neither Agnes nor I could control ourselves well enough to hide our feelings. For the moment I thought it most natural after my narrow escape that she should be overcome.

It did not occur to me that she could know nothing of it except what she guessed from the cry of the wolf. We were still joining in Dicky's casual talk, perfunctorily only, when I heard a swish of skirts from a room off the sitting-room, and a door opened. I took no notice of the sound, for I concluded that it was the maid Dicky had spoken of, coming in to complete the setting of the table. However, Dicky had suddenly stopped his talk, and Agnes was watching me with an amused look I could not understand. The steps had come in only a short distance and stopped. I half turned in my chair to see why Dicky had interrupted his talk, when my eyes alighted on a pair of small, shapely, patent-leather shoes that concealed a high-arched instep. And I recognised the expression of those feet—or else I was again dreaming.

You may smile at the idea of expression in feet, but I am of the opinion that, next to the hands, there is more in the feet that reveals the owner than in any other part of the body. I know that I was most distinctly impressed with this fact when I stood, five years before, some three steps below these same feet on the stairway leading to a side entrance of the gymnasium annex at the university, and faced seventy-five students bent on mischief and emboldened with success.

We—the owner of those little, high-instepped shoes and myself—had been, as we thought at the time, the fortunate recipients of a much-coveted invitation to the Rugby dance of that year. This dance was the only exclusive function in the university life, and therefore unpopular with those who had been omitted from the list of guests. By means of it the Rugby club had drawn a line in student life which was carefully ignored at any other time. For many years there had been grumbling and criticism, which had been kept from breaking into open opposition only by the fact that the student who rebelled would advertise his standing with the committee of selection. But five years before—the period which came into my mind like a flash as I gazed on the feet in the sitting-room of this far-away Alberta ranch—the uninvited students, led by a husky School of Science senior, had broken all restraint. Masked, attired in old clothes, and armed with pots of paint and ink, they had waylaid the departing student-guests and had succeeded in assuring themselves that certain dress-suits would never again appear in public. Fired by this, some of the wilder spirits had even extended their attentions to the dresses of the ladies; and by the time I was cornered on the steps of the annex, with the young lady whose acceptance of my escort had made me a prouder young man than the medal I had won as half-back on the champion Rugby team—when I had succeeded in holding the masked rioters off until I felt the wall behind us—they had become fired with the

destruction they had worked and presented something more dangerous than a mere student frolic.

For a moment as I stood at bay on the third step, the girl quiet on the top step behind me, my heavy-headed umbrella raised in my hands ready to give the first who advanced the full weight of it wherever I could strike, the mob had halted. Seventy or eighty masks of all descriptions looked up at us until the word should be spoken, or the move made, that would precipitate them on me.

“Pull him down! Pull the toff down!” called some voices from the back of the crowd.

I glanced over my shoulder nervously to see how Margaret was taking it, and from where I stood below her, my eyes lit on her feet, those same small, high-instepped feet. It was then I felt their expression. One was slightly advanced until the toe hung over the step, but both were firmly standing without a tremor, neatly bound up in shining patent-leather. To me they told of courage, strength, and perfect confidence, as plainly as if I had looked into her face and heard her assurances. The sight gave me strength, and I turned more fearlessly to the mob before us, those two firmly planted shoes ever in my eye.

A piece of mud came whizzing through the air. Although I could see it distinctly in the bright glare of the lights, I dare not dodge it. One such move of deference to the mob sentiment would mean the advance of its members. I received it full in the chest. A shout of derision went up.

I heard a move behind me, and the next instant the girl stood on the step beside me, with flashing eyes and pointing hand.

“It was that—fellow there threw it,” she said, as if speaking to the crowd as well as to me, and pointing straight at a masked face that tried to duck out of sight.

I was too late to catch more than a glimpse of the hair.

“One shoulder is lower than the other and he throws with his left hand,” she continued.

I had seen the hair and the rest was sufficient for me to recognise him.

“Sid Raymond, to-morrow I imagine you’ll know the disgrace of expulsion,” I said, pointing at him, as he crouched behind his fellows. “And you, George Stayner”—I pointed at the one nearest to me, whom I had been

studying—"and you, Porteous—you'll answer to me for this the first time I meet you; I don't care if it is on Yonge Street."

A voice whispered in the crowd:

"It's Starchy's daughter."

The calling of their names had effectively dampened their ardour for further publicity, and the recognition of the girl as the youngest daughter of "Starchy"—as the boys called one of the Greek professors, on account of the high collars he wore—completed their discomfort. Margaret did the rest.

"We'll go home now," she said, coolly stepping down to the side-walk, where I was forced to follow. The boys slunk away before her for a few steps and then turned and ran.

When I called a couple of days later, bearing only a black eye as the result of two stiff fights I had had, my first glance was at those expressive feet. I could trust myself to know them anywhere now.

And yet Dicky's presence was sufficient surprise without Margaret, although there should have been nothing unexpected in her presence with her sister. I continued to look at the shining shoes, thinking that here was the explanation of my returned letters from the maritime town to which her mother had removed at her husband's death.

Dicky's laugh broke the silence, and I raised my eyes to her face to find a small hand extended in smiling welcome.

"Things are happening too rapidly for me to grasp them," I laughed, in excuse for my embarrassment as I shook her hand.

"I wouldn't worry too much about that, Count," Dicky threw at me pointedly. "You're grasping some things fairly well yet."

I dropped her hand in some confusion at the slight flush that crept across Margaret's face, and called myself and Dicky names.

"Call it eastern stupidity," I suggested to turn the point. "We're so used to the ordinary down there that we think slowly when we meet the unusual as you seem to have it out here."

No one answered. For some reason my fright was a tabooed subject. And the conversation that filled the time, until a noise at the stable announced Jock's return, was awkwardly carried on by the four of us. Not one of us could hide the consciousness that we were deliberately avoiding a subject that was in our minds.

CHAPTER V

A DISQUIETING EVENING

The entrance of Jock was a relief to the tension. The longer we had talked of what we were least interested in the more full of unfounded significance became our conduct. Jock opened the door and closed it again before he saw me, and I had a chance to see his face before he knew I was in the room. At that moment it was morose and stern, with something of a wild unrest that changed into discomfort the relief I had felt when the knob first turned.

Then he faced the room and saw me sitting on the couch. One would think that he had entirely forgotten my expected visit, for across his face there came a look that seemed to be one of surprise, almost of shock. I suppose I still looked white and frightened. I know I felt ridiculously unsteady as I rose to take his hand. After the first moment he rushed impetuously forward and threw his arm across my shoulder in the old way, grasping my hand with his free one. It was the old Jock at that moment, and I was more pleased than I had ever hoped to be that I had come—yes, even with the wolf-cry in my memory. I glanced around at Margaret. I was quite sure I was glad I had come, wolf or no wolf.

Still my host was changed. Around his forehead the hair hung long and unkempt, and in his eyes was a sensitiveness that seemed to hold in it something of wildness and dread. His movements were quicker than of old, brimming over with wasted energy like those of a high-strung man. The change was what might be expected after his wild, lonely life of the past few years. I had frequently heard that western life affected men in this way.

“It’s good to see you, old man,” he said, looking in my eyes affectionately. “It’ll make life a little different in this far country. If we can only make it pleasant enough for you—as pleasant as it will be for us!”

I tried to express to him my great gladness at being there, and the necessity I had felt for a year for some such outing.

“And there’s Dicky—you did not expect to see him, did you? And I suppose Margaret will be able to help out a little for us all. How do you

like”—he dropped his arm from my shoulder and his eyes left mine—“how do you like the entertainment we have provided?”

“As far as the personnel of it goes, I can commend it heartily; but I could get along without a number or two on the programme.”

He looked quickly at me.

“You heard the Blue Wolf, did you?” he asked. “Did it scare you? The Indians will be telling us some more yarns to-morrow,” he added with a harsh laugh.

“I not only heard it,” I replied, with some resentment at his flippancy, “but it came near to being the last thing I heard in life.” Then I had to tell him of my experience on the cliff.

He sat at the supper table listening without a word until I had finished, his chin sunken in his hand and his eyes fixed on the end of a fork he held in his other hand.

“Lucky thing for you that you were not on the horse!” he remarked. “Someone must get that wolf.”

“What and where is this Blue Wolf?” I asked, for the name and the mystery that seemed to surround it made it all the more absorbing to me.

“The Blue Wolf is an institution around here. The Indians will tell you of his terrible deeds at irregular periods for the last fifty years or more. There are wolves in the Hills—that we all know. But this one seems to have a howl more terrible than any other. As a matter of fact it is the only one that ever comes to this end of the Hills, except in the winter, when the cold and snow force them to forage in wider circles. But the Blue Wolf may come at any time. The last time we heard him was——” he hesitated and bit his lip. “Poor Field!” he ended abruptly.

Field was one of the Quintuplets, he whose death had been the first break in the fraternity. Of how he died I had received no particulars. Apparently the Blue Wolf that had missed me had been more successful with Field. But I had no desire to discuss such a subject on this, my first night. I could find out all I wanted to know later.

I saw Aggie look anxiously at Jock, and it struck me that that look had been on her face ever since he had entered. When she caught my gaze she rose hastily and went to a cupboard behind me. But there came to me a feeling that the fine lines that ran between her eyes, and the little parting of

her lips, as if always ready to speak, fitted well with such a look. She spoke up now with a haste that was almost startling.

“I was afraid you would not be able to stand such a long ride,” she said to me.

But none of us were thinking of that, and there was no answer. Instead, Jock frowned impatiently and interrupted with a harsh voice.

“Why are you so frightened of a few aching muscles in the Count’s body?” he demanded.

I saw Dicky wince. Then Jock realised the abruptness of his remark and changed the subject back to the Blue Wolf.

“Nobody seems to have seen the Blue Wolf. I’ve heard many a big fellow in the east, when I’ve been riding over on the Lane Deer. But that’s twenty-five miles away, and a wolf’s howl will carry ten miles in this clear air. The Indians think it is a spirit wolf that prophesies a violent death. They claim that it has always been followed by some such occurrence.”

He stopped and sat silently looking at the fork in his hand. Aggie moved around the room rather noisily, and I noticed that Margaret’s eyes were following her in wonder.

But Jock could not be turned from the subject. Again and again Aggie threw in a remark that would have been of sufficient interest at any other time to have started a long discussion; but Jock would not listen. At last he swung in his chair angrily and faced her.

“It’s time you were in bed, I think.” He drew out his watch and consulted it as if to corroborate his decision.

It was a signal for bed for all of us, and I was soon in my room, thankful to rest my aching legs and to ponder more at my leisure over the events of the evening. The rooms of Dicky and myself were on the side of the house facing the Hills, the hill trail, and the lake, while across the lake the prairie stretched away, visible from this elevation for many miles in daylight.

As I sat at the window looking out into the darkness, sleepless and bewildered, Dicky came unannounced into the room. He was not undressed, and I knew from the way he held his hands pressed into his pockets that something had disturbed him. Neither spoke for some time, Dicky walking fiercely up and down the room, while I sat watching him with half-closed eyes.

“Count,” he burst forth suddenly, “he’s a damn whelp. That’s the way he’s always treating her—just like he pulled her up every time she tried to get the subject away from poor Field’s death. That’s mild to what I’ve heard him say to her since I’ve been here; and I’ve had to endure it. Some day I’ll break loose. I’ll strike him, just once—but that will be enough. And she worships the ground he walks on.”

He sat down with his face in his hands.

“God! Why was it, why was it?”

I turned on him harshly. My nerves were sufficiently unstrung without this, and Dicky’s sudden outburst warned me of the possibilities of future tragedies. It was proof that he had not forgotten his old love.

“Dicky Tatham!” I exclaimed, searching for the harshest words I could find. “You’re a noble guest. You’re an honour to the old Quintuplets! Surely you are forgetting that Jock’s your host—Aggie’s husband.”

He looked up wildly over his clenched hands.

“I’m afraid I am, Count. I deserve all you can say. Sometimes when I hear him speak to her as he did to-night, I can hardly keep my hands from his throat. Pray God I may not yield! I can’t stand it, old boy. I’ve had two days of it. Some day I’ll pull out without a word, and you will know it’s because I’ve reached my limit.”

I let him talk. There was a lot of suppressed anger that had to find an outlet somewhere, and I preferred to be his safety valve.

“Something in the air has got into me, Count. In these two days I have lived a lifetime squeezed down until I must do something—something big, something that will relieve this pressure. Try to keep my mind off it, Count, please do. Do something ordinary. I haven’t seen anything since I came that connects me with life as I knew it; and I’m used to a wild life. Whistle, or laugh—do anything that will make me forget those anxious looks, those mysterious happenings, those heartless snubs—that terrible howl to-night.”

I had never seen Dicky give way before, and it made me calmer. I tried to talk reason into him, in spite of the fact that he expressed exactly what I felt after only a few hours in the country. I think I succeeded better with him than I did with myself.

“Dicky,” I whispered after him as he was leaving the room in a calmer frame of mind, “if you ever hear the Blue Wolf again, see him, Dicky, see him—if you can. I swear to you I was close to him to-night up there on the

cliff—closer than I am to you—and I could not see him. There was nothing—to see!”

Tired as I was I could not go to bed. There was a fascination in the new life around me, the clear air, the rising moon that was already casting a dim light out on the prairie and throwing deepest shadows among the trees closer to me. Steadily the light grew, but the moon was so new that everything remained in semi-darkness and tantalised my vision. For minutes there would be nothing but absolute silence, such silence as is possible only on the prairie. Then the far-distant cry of some denizen of the Hills would break in sharply, too far away to permit me even to guess whence it came. Once a faint yapping came from the prairie, and I shuddered as I thought of the last time I had heard it.

And as I gazed with my elbows leaning on the window-sill, with the cool night-air crying to me to creep between the blankets, a figure floated silently around the corner of the house, turned, and disappeared again. It was a woman. A moment later she reappeared, turned as before when she had passed the corner but a few feet and walked back, her footsteps making no noise on the thick, dead grass.

This time I recognised Margaret. She was bareheaded, and over her shoulders she had thrown a heavy wrap to keep out the cool of the western night. Slowly she walked with hands clasped behind her back and head lowered. Something was troubling her, for the attitude was that of thoughtful concern, as if she had crept from the house to think out alone some deep mystery of worry. And the whole thing fitted in with my own feelings so well that for a moment I was panic-stricken to think that the tension on my nerves was not merely the result of my hard work for the past five years and the newness of my surroundings, but was reflected in the looks of those around me who were not handicapped as I was. I found myself reverting to Jock's letter, and certain sentences ran through my mind that had scarcely attracted my attention as I had read them.

“The misfortunes of the Quintuplets began here, Count, but I do not think you are superstitious. I can count on your visit this spring, can I not?”

I had laughed at that time at the thought of superstition. I wondered now why I had done so. And Dicky was just as strongly affected as I was.

The young woman came to the corner again and stopped as if listening. I could hear nothing, but she quickly swung to one side and disappeared in the trees.

And as I crept shivering into bed that weird yap-yapping broke on the still air far out on the prairie, rushed nearer and nearer, swept past the house and abruptly ceased.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEXT MORNING

In the broad light of the next morning the events of the night seemed to have been part of a dream. The beauty of the scenery, the substantial hills and lake and prairie, ridiculed the legend of the Blue Wolf, the trouble in Margaret's face, and the terror struck by the yapping of the cowardly coyotes. When we sat down to breakfast the air of restraint that had oppressed us the previous evening had disappeared. Jock and Aggie sat at the ends of the table dispensing cheer and coffee; beside me Dicky was the Dicky I remembered, who had borrowed the policeman's uniform one night to serve the rest of us with bogus summons for disorderly conduct after a mild college fracas. Margaret sat opposite, looking as fresh as if she had gone straight to sleep when we had left the sitting-room. But I could not free myself from some of the memories, and my efforts were more uncertain when I caught now and then those fine lines around Aggie's eyes and the quick glances she sometimes cast almost instinctively at the other end of the table.

Each of us had a pleasing reminiscence of the college days to relate. Aggie had gone through the college with us, and her sister, although not in the college life itself, since she had preferred a musical education, could still join in the incidents and supply details the rest of us had forgotten. Gradually the strained look in Aggie's face cleared and gave place to the flush of excited pleasure. It was a joyous meal, such a one as I had pictured ever since I had promised to come. Many jokes were recalled at the expense of some one of us, and Margaret laughingly related how I had proudly exhibited a blackened eye when I called on her after the Rugby dance, as sufficient evidence of what Stayner had got when I caught him on the campus; and a week later I had called at rather an unseemly hour of the night to assure her that Porteous had just apologised as he lay on his back with my fingers almost cutting off the power of speech.

"I never told you," I laughed, "what won the fight for us that night."

"No," she answered; "but I thought it was because we were not afraid. They ran like sheep when we stepped down to them."

"Not a bit of it. It was your shoes."

Margaret looked at me in surprise, and after a moment the rest broke into laughter, in which the girl opposite me joined hesitatingly.

"I've heard of shoes being wonderfully effective in such cases," volunteered Dicky, "but I did not think Margaret was skilled in their use. You might have done something in that line yourself, Count. You were in pretty good shape after the football season."

"You can laugh all you like," I maintained doggedly. "It was Margaret's shoes—the same ones she had on yesterday—that won the day."

The women laughed gaily.

"How long ago do you think that was, Count?" asked Margaret. "Pretty long for me to keep one pair of shoes, is it not? But why did my shoes do it?"

I explained as best I could, and found it hard in the telling. "I'd know those shoes again anywhere. That is what startled me when I looked around last night and saw your feet before I saw you."

"Do you remember the time you donned your Rugby shoes and went with the rest of us to raid Jock's room?" broke in Dicky. "We had to break down his door to put a stop to the unearthly noises he was making up there with a lot of pieces of tin and mirror and gut. Jock was convinced," he explained, turning to the women, "that some contrivance he was working on was to be a ladder to fame and wealth. Kind of a broken ladder by the time we got through with it, eh, Jock? You did not know, Aggie, that this stolid old rancher of yours had a lot of crazy ideas when he was at college that required a stack of old rubbish in his room, and at all hours of the night he would disturb the peace with such infractions of a boarding-house rules that the landlady threatened to call the police."

Was Jock's sudden change of subject accidental or intentional, and did I just imagine the return of the worried look to Aggie's eyes? At any rate neither of them seemed to be sufficiently interested to continue the talk.

"What are your plans for this morning, Count?" Jock asked. "I suppose you feel like a Freshman after his first hustle. Perhaps you would like to join a broncho-busting outfit to-day."

I laughed and stretched myself experimentally.

“No; I think the first exercise I take will be the exploration of the mountain. I have a hankering to find out why any one should select it as a training-ground.”

“A training-ground? What do you mean?” Jock and the two women had spoken together.

“Well, if you can imagine any other reason for running up the face of that wall just as darkness was coming on—why, there must be something peculiar about this country. That’s what I’d say.”

Jock turned anxiously toward me. “You don’t mean that you saw any one up there last night, do you? Pshaw, Count! The prairie got into you. It always does with the tenderfoot.”

“I guess I can trust my eyes yet, Jock.”

I was not speaking as seriously as I felt. I was thinking of the Blue Wolf, invisible to me although close beside me. Were my nerves responsible for everything?

“All the same,” I continued, “I’m going to negotiate that mountain—‘negotiate’ is the word, is it not? I’m going to do that, anyway, before I’m many days older. I need the exercise.”

Jock leaned forward on the table and spoke with slow deliberation.

“Do you know how high Abbot’s is?”

“No.”

“Do you know the way there and up?”

“No.”

“Do you know anything at all about mountain-climbing?”

“No, no, no! And what’s more I don’t care.”

“Count”—Jock was speaking still more seriously—“you are my guest now, and to a certain extent I’m responsible for your safety. I must ask you never to climb Abbot’s without me.”

He stopped, embarrassed at his own seriousness. I suppose thoughts of the two dead Quintuplets came to us all. They had been his guests when they met death. No wonder he was serious about it.

“I’ll promise you that some day I’ll take you up,” he continued. “Now I want you to promise me that you will not go up without me.”

There was something so impressively serious in his tone that I promised before I thought. And as I did so I wondered that such a trivial subject was receiving so much consideration. At the same time I became conscious that Margaret was watching Jock from beneath her eyebrows with a scrutiny that further mystified me. I was beginning to take my cues of thought from her rather than from Aggie. Both women were disturbed about something, but Margaret was freed from the personal element in her attention to whatever was troubling her, while Aggie appeared only to give value where Jock was concerned.

The remainder of the meal was uncomfortably quiet, and we were not long in leaving the table. I stepped out to the verandah to look at the view again, and a moment later Margaret joined me and stood looking across the lake without saying a word. I left it to her to break the silence.

“Big and wide, is it not?” she asked, waving her arm across the prairie horizon. “And lonesome and unfeeling; pitiless and resentful at man’s inroads. A thing that man must kill to overcome. As long as there is a mile of prairie left there will be—mystery and fear and the weight of the inevitable.”

“That is about how it struck me last night,” I replied, “but in this sunlight it is much modified. And yet I remember I felt that way after I left the station, although it was just as bright as now. I guess it must be the different surroundings.”

I glanced at her from the side of my eye, but she did not seem to notice my awkward compliment.

“It is very hard on the tenderfoot at first,” she said. “You will imagine anything, everything, from what you see and hear. And what you imagine may be the opposite to what really is. You may feel oppressed with misgivings when there is nothing to dread, and you may be gayest when there is danger. You will know what I mean when you’ve been here longer. The prairie mocks us with its power to deceive, and our impotence.”

I laughed. “One would think there were dire perils overhanging the tenderfoot in this country. Must I go armed and ready to shoot?”

She looked at me seriously.

“You should go armed, by all means, but not too ready to shoot.”

Then to lighten the over-seriousness of her words she smiled reassuringly.

"I'm not trying to frighten you, but just to start you out with the knowledge that you know nothing of this country, that you will have to be here a long time before you can go around alone, so to speak."

"My greatest pleasure will be if I do not have to go around alone."

This time she looked at me and laughed.

"I am an insatiable rider," she said. "You will have to get your riding-muscles in shape if you want my company. I'm ready to go out with you any time. I have to go so often alone that it will be an agreeable change not to be forced to study the prairie from lonesome horseback. So don't dare go without company. If you can't ride I can walk—or Dicky will need the exercise, too. At any rate there's no need to travel alone from this house."

Was she trying to warn me against going out alone, or was it only her desire for company and to please me?

The rumble of wheels came down from the hill trail, and two wagons emerged from the trees. At sight of us on the verandah the leading wagon stopped and the driver sat so still looking in our direction that I grew fidgety under the scrutiny. Then he got down from his seat to fix something on the harness, and I saw it was my recent fellow-passenger.

Margaret stepped back to the door.

"It's Mr. Maskin. He'll be wanting to see Jock."

Having no desire to meet him I followed her in. At the door we met Jock coming out in answer to Margaret's call. By the haste with which she disappeared I judged that she did not like the man who was approaching any better than I did.

The head wagon, in which the leader sat, drew up before the house, and I was surprised to see that Jock's hat was in his hand as he talked. My trunk was thrown off and the two men immediately engaged in earnest conversation, frequent looks toward the house showing that some of us were the topics discussed. Probably Maskin was describing my conduct on the previous day. I looked at Margaret as she sat back in a corner out of sight of the window, and in her face was trouble and worry again. Could it be that that big rough outside was discussing her—Margaret, the dainty, healthy, sensitive woman before me? Evidently she thought so.

The procession was commencing to move on when I bethought myself that at least I owed the man my thanks for bringing out my trunk. I went to the door hastily, trying to muster the proper thankfulness. As I stepped

outside I heard the leader say to Jock, “twelve o’clock, then,” and before I could approach close enough to speak he had gathered up the reins and started the horses, deliberately turning his back on me.

“The worst lot of boors and kill-joys I ever saw,” I blurted out when we had re-entered the house. “I hope you have not many of them around here. I feel a knife in me every time I look at them.”

Margaret looked at Jock nervously, who answered: “Oh, they’re not such a bad set of fellows at all when you know them. They have a settlement near here. There is one thing about them—they can raise crops where no one else ever did. I’m naturally not very fond of the farmer, because he means the end of the rancher; but if I had my choice I’d prefer one of these fellows with his peculiar beliefs to your fussy, interfering, hard-to-satisfy Central Stateser who comes up here with the idea that the country was made for him from the beginning and owes him a living.”

“I think I’d rather be swindled with a laugh than smothered with a frown,” I answered.

“You needn’t be afraid that they’ll do either to you.”

There was a tone of controlled annoyance in what he said, and Aggie hastened to my defence.

“You can’t blame Count for thinking as he does. They certainly are not prepossessing.”

I saw Margaret’s hand close tightly as Jock turned on his wife with anger in his eyes and voice.

“There’s no need for you to give them a bad reputation. They haven’t earned what they have. I’ve told you that before. You know nothing about the Dreamers—neither you nor Margaret.”

I could see no reason for bringing the latter into the conversation, for she had not said a word.

“Just because they do not suit your priggish eastern fancies you set them down as villains. It’s not neighbourly of you, to say the least.”

The outburst of temper surprised me. Margaret bit her lips in resentment, and Aggie’s eyes filled with tears. Dicky thrust his hands hard into his pockets and left the room abruptly.

“The Dreamers? How do they get that name?” I asked hurriedly, to turn the subject.

“They profess to do nothing that is not first revealed to them in a dream. No move of any importance is undertaken without a revelation to some one of their number through a dream. And once the dream comes, nothing will turn them from the course revealed. They have run foul of the law once or twice on account of that, but if the Mounted Police had no more to do than look after the Dreamers they would not require a very large force.”

It was an interesting subject to me and I would like to have heard more of it, but I could see Dicky walking fiercely up and down outside and I hastened out to quiet him.

CHAPTER VII

CORPORAL HUMBY OF THE R.N.W.M.P.

Man is inclined to take his play more seriously than his toil. He can throw enough energy into playing the fool to have made his fortune had the same amount of force been properly directed. This is the one great common talent. It is the one we use most frequently and cultivate most zealously, and think least of acknowledging. Many, in whom it is best developed, repudiate it, until it has come to be an established fact that the perfection of this talent and its repudiation are married. Sometimes, usually long afterwards, I realise my own achievements in this line when it is too late to do more than philosophise on it. I suppose it was something in the uninterrupted communion with the girl I had feared to love in the old days that urged me to one of these demonstrations of the talent only two days after my arrival.

During those two days it had been a favourite pastime of Margaret and Dicky to propose a gallop, merely to witness the twinges of memory that would wrinkle my face as I thought of the aches in my back and thighs if I even moved quickly. On the second day I had brought myself to suggest to Margaret a walk. Even in her acquiescence there was laid the foundation for the folly that came from a feeling of ownership, because I was not held down to reason out here by the demands of competition. I can only fortify myself behind the statement that any man might make a fool of himself with Margaret unshared.

I led the way towards the trees among the hills, but Margaret ignored my wishes and turned down to the prairie.

"You never see sun like this in Toronto," she said. "It would be a shame to lose it among the trees."

"The sun can wait, I suppose," I protested. "I'd like first of all to go in among the trees and rocks. The view from the hill-road must be grand."

"But I prefer the prairie," she insisted with a smile.

"That settles it. But next time you'll come with me, won't you?"

She hesitated a moment before answering, and when she spoke it was with a serious slowness that made her words appear to be carefully chosen.

“I don’t think it is wise for you to go up there. It is surprisingly easy to lose your way in the Cypress Hills. There is not an old-timer would trust himself in certain parts of them. It’s a wild waste of trees and rocks. Many a rancher has been lost where you are longing to rush the first day you can move. Once or twice in the rainy season, when the sun fails as a guide, men have been lost for days, living only on what they could shoot. There are wild animals, too, although they do not come to this end much. Jock saw several wolves last winter, however, and we heard them howling around the stable one night. You’d better keep to the prairie, where there’s no temptation to wander too far.”

We strolled down the hill slowly, passing around the end of the beautiful lake fed from the Hills and emptying no one knew where. I was as happy as I ever hoped to be on earth. I suppose it has been decreed that my common sense is not proof against happiness such as I felt there alone with her, thousands of miles from any rival, and with the prospect of weeks of it ahead of me. I remembered, too, that she had offered to be my companion on my trips, and I suppose I was proud as well as happy. And the combination was too much for me.

“This *is* great,” I exclaimed in the exuberance of the moment. “There’s nothing like this in the East—the view, the air, the freedom, the — —”

“It’s too bad you couldn’t have been here earlier in the season,” she interrupted. “It would have been more interesting for you, with the spring round-up and the branding. That’s the big event of ranch life, you know. Of course there’ll be a little of it yet to do, because the herds were badly scattered last winter with the severe storms. But it isn’t — —”

I took my turn at interrupting.

“You didn’t let me finish my remark. There are other things more interesting to me than roundups and branding.” I looked at her from under my eyelids, but she was not noticing.

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Didn’t you finish? You were just saying how pleasant it was. I suppose I’m used to hearing the same things admired by every one who visits this country. You see you haven’t air like this in Toronto, of course; and the prairie is ours. And this is rather a fine view from here.” She stopped in her walk as if to give me more opportunity for admiring it.

“But I was going to add something more. I was going to say ‘the company’ had something to do with it. Do you hear every one saying *that* out here?”

“Oh no,” she laughed. “That particular brand of broad compliment is reserved for the East—where it is as easily handed out to every one, and—and as easily forgotten.”

There came to my mind that the estimate applied to myself with particular strength. I felt on my defence.

“No, not forgotten,” I answered. “But when one has to keep his mind on interest rates and commissions and discounts and stock values that are his bread-and-butter, he must needs leave to a time of greater freedom the things that show he has not forgotten.” I hesitated, in doubt as to whether to come more closely to the seeming delinquency I was attempting to explain or to leave it at generalities.

“That’s a specially fine view,” she said, pointing through the last of the trees to where a lone ranch building peeped over a far distant roll in the prairie.

That settled it. I could not permit indifference.

“It wasn’t forgetfulness,” I burst out. “Two of my letters were returned through the Dead Letter Office four months after I sent them to the last address I had. It didn’t mean that I had forgotten when I refused to carry on a correspondence with the Dead Letter Office.”

“Two letters in four months!” she mocked. “No wonder your correspondence had to slacken when they lost the address I gave the post office in that tiny Nova Scotia village. There were several people who came to know the Dead Letter Office for that little bit of carelessness. . . . I have heard from most of them years since.”

I was silent, convicted of carelessness and forgetfulness that had not troubled her correspondence with “several—people.”

“They found out Aggie’s address and wrote to her for mine,” she went on. “I did not hear from them for four months—and that was all. I had thought that perhaps the price of stocks and the fight for bread-and-butter had forced other things into my place in their memories. But there are many eastern friends who do not forget. How different the light is out there in the open. It almost blinds one, doesn’t it?”

But the light meant nothing to me then.

“It wasn’t forgetfulness, Margaret,” I said doggedly. “I know it looks like that, but I didn’t think—I thought I’d find out your address somehow; but at the moment when the letters returned I was in the midst of a financial tightness in the market that kept me awake at nights. I would have traced you soon.” It sounded very weak even to myself. And in the silence with which she greeted my defence it became so frail that it could not stand alone. “You will find, now that I am here, that it was *not* forgetfulness; it was — —”

“‘Financial tightness in the market,’ *not* forgetfulness. I was taking your word for it—now that you are out here.” It was a delicate hint to me that telling it was all that was to be expected.

“But I can scarcely expect you to take my word for it,” I persisted. “Perhaps out in this lonesome country, where I can forget office and stocks, I can act as I wish, not as I have to.”

She made no answer.

“It must be lonesome out here for you,” I said as we neared the trees again.

“Yes,” with a rising inflection as if it were open to discussion.

“Nobody to talk to, no one to meet you on common ground—with the cowboys and the crude farmers and ranchers.”

“There’s Aggie and Jock, you know.”

“Yes, yes,” I agreed, with some irritation that she was not falling in with my mood. “But relatives—they aren’t what I mean. They can’t supply the company one needs; they can’t take the place of friends.”

“You haven’t met the Mathers—the dearest family in the world—nor the Mounted Police. Some of them would satisfy even an easterner.”

“But don’t you often long to meet some one from the East—some one with whom you can discuss books and plays and—the latest theories of life—some one — —”

“Some one, for instance,” she interrupted, “who has graduated from Toronto University, and played on the football team, and has never been out before in this degrading country.”

She turned her face toward me, and I saw to my dismay that she was laughing, that there were tears in her eyes from a long struggle.

“Count,” she said, raising a little white finger chidingly, “your ideas of theories of life, and plays—yes, and even of books—will alter wonderfully after you have been here a few weeks. After all, most of those things are unimportant in life when you get away from them. Like you, I must have them in the East, but out here—well, it’s different.”

I could find nothing to answer in face of those smiling eyes.

“One thing you will learn here, Count,” she continued with the laugh in her eyes taking away the sting of her words, “and that is that no one man is just as important a detail as he was inclined to think. It does one good to get that firmly planted in his mind. Don’t you think so? You see things change out here so fast—faces and the landscape and the bank account, and even sentiment—that you come to know that nothing is essential. If one did not acquire that feeling he’d—be—just like you are now—pessimistic and—morbidity sentimental.”

She was trying hard to let me down easy. Wisely, I made no answer whatever, and it was like her to relent still further at my humility.

“Mind you,” she said, “that does not mean that Aggie and myself have not looked forward for a long time to your visit—you and Dicky.”

I resented the interference of Aggie and Dicky. They had nothing to do with the present case. If she had only left them out it would have given me a chance of confining the talk to personal subjects; I think I could then have paraded my humility.

“Aggie and I would welcome you if it were for nothing else than the company you would be to us in our rides or walks. It gets a little lonesome when your nearest neighbours are miles away.”

I flushed guiltily. She was answering my thoughts. I had not taken my lesson from what had been intended to dispel certain unhealthy and inconvenient ideas from my mind.

“I can imagine how lonesome it must be to ride alone after my experience the other night,” I said humbly. “Things are so different here that I expect all my ideas of life will change before I return to my desk.”

She laughed quietly at my acceptance of her rebuke.

“You must meet the Mathers soon. You’ll know then something of the kind of people that can live out here. Rosa will furnish you with some new theories of life, as you call them, in spite of our distance from the railway and the theatres and the libraries.”

“Who are the Mathers?” I asked, glad to change the subject.

“They are really the only people in the neighbourhood I know at all well. They have been so very good to Aggie ever since she moved here; and since I came they have been just as good to me. Rosa Mathers is the dearest little harum-scarum. She’s prairie all over—that is, all that’s best of the prairie. And her mother is so sweet that there’s enough for all. She has given up her life for her husband, a life that would adorn—and has done so, for that matter—the best society in England. Mr. Mathers’ lungs are weak, and the doctors have forbidden him to live anywhere else. They came here six or seven years ago, when Rosa was a young girl, and they have never been able to return to their old life since. They’re English; Mr. Mathers is such a rabid Englishman yet that he refuses to buy even a cap in this country, and an English house sends him a suit regularly twice a year, spring and fall. They have tried to live in England twice since they came here, but the doctors have always ordered him back. You’ll meet them, and you’ll like them as well as we do. They live around the end of the Hills on the slope facing the south-west, where Mr. Mathers gets all the sun and none of the cold north winds. It’s just like their delicacy not to come to see us until we invite them purposely to meet the strangers.”

We had commenced the easy grade that led up past the lake to the house as she finished, and were sauntering very slowly, when the clatter of horses’ feet among the trees drew us to a stop. A horseman dashed out from a narrow path and almost ran us down before he could rein in. When he did, with a superb strength that commanded admiration, I was annoyed to see that it was the leader of the Dreamers.

For a moment he was just as disturbed as I was. But even before the horse’s front feet had dropped to earth he had taken off his hat and bowed low to Margaret, ignoring me entirely.

With surprise I felt the girl press close to my side, and in a flash I drew conclusions that brought an angry flush to my face. This big fellow, as I had lightly suspected when he was talking to Jock in front of the house, presumed to make himself disagreeable to Margaret. And there was only the one way of doing that, so that open resentment could not be shown. He was another admirer, and had made his attentions so open that she shrank at the sight of him.

But there was nothing for me to do. He chose to ignore me—I could not deny that I deserved it—and his greeting for the girl beside me had been full of deference. Had it been otherwise I would have felt less embarrassed than

I did, for I would have had no doubt as to what I should do. Under the circumstances the thing to do was for Margaret to acknowledge his greeting and to pass on. But her evident discomfort under his gaze forced me to take an active part in bringing the sudden meeting to an end. I took her arm and tried to turn her away up the trail before he would notice her confusion. Then the Dreamer spoke.

“I see you have taken a sudden liking to a new form of exercise, Miss Crawford. I thought you scorned anything less exciting than a horse.”

At the first sound of his voice Margaret regained complete control of herself, and now stood looking up into his face in the most matter-of-fact way.

“I don’t remember having said that, so your conclusions may be wrong. You see I walked a great many years before I learned to ride.”

By the time she finished there was a slight smile on her face. Her coolness filled me with admiration. She was master of the situation now. She turned to one side to pass around the horse, but the animal suddenly swung across the trail, although from no visible direction of its rider. The result was that we were both forced to stop at the edge of the trail or stoop to pass under the horse’s head. The situation was strained to a point where I saw I would have to interfere.

But even as I stepped back to the centre of the trail and faced the Dreamer with a command on my lips, the bushes beside us opened, and a tall figure in a khaki uniform stepped out and seized the bridle before the astonished rider could move.

“You’re blocking the road, Maskin,” a quiet but firm voice said. And the next moment the stranger jerked the horse to one side and struck it a smart blow on the hindquarters. The animal sprang forward, but the Dreamer brought it to a stop in a few bounds and whirled it toward us.

The policeman looked up calmly as the horse came around, and with the utmost assurance merely waved his hand for the Dreamer to ride on. Then he turned to Margaret and me.

For the first time I noticed that Margaret had left me and was standing close to him with a hand outstretched to his arm and glad welcome in her eyes. And I suddenly remembered the stifled cry of relief she had given when he appeared from the trees. He was no stranger to her, and I felt a weight at my heart that told me he was much more to her than an

acquaintance. I had never seen her greet the coming of any one else with such evident pleasure.

The big Stetson came off, not with a sweep or formal show, but with that silent, unobtrusive acknowledgment of the girl's presence that was far more complimentary and expressive. In spite of the protests of my heart I liked the sun-burnt face that looked down at the girl beside him.

"Did he worry you?" he asked, half-laughing, as if to make light of the occurrence. "I saw it all. And I'm a trifle sorry I had no cause to do more. But I guess I'm prejudiced against Maskin."

That was my introduction to this fine specimen of the Mounted Police, a fearless, honest, human man, whom I was to know a great deal better before my visit was over.

"You have not introduced me to your friend yet, Miss Crawford."

Even his use of the surname seemed to place him in more intimate touch with her than my freedom with her christened name. It strikes me now as a peculiar reversal of the usual order, but the rest of us had all called her "Margaret," except Maskin, and anything from his tongue would sound harsh. The sounding of the two "s's" as if they were "z" made the stranger's words a caress.

"Corporal Humby, this is Mr. Arthurs, a Toronto friend of mine of long standing. Count, we call him, because he isn't one, I suppose. Corporal Humby, Count, is one of my oldest western friends. It's well to know the police in this country," she added laughing.

Humby took my hand in a grasp that made me wince, looked squarely in my eyes and smiled as bright a welcome as I ever want to receive.

"Two such old friends of Miss Crawford's must be friends of each other," he smiled, and I found myself returning his pressure with all my heart.

"Miss Crawford's recommendation is enough for me," I replied. "To be an old friend of hers is my greatest conceit."

She laughed merrily.

"I introduced you two so that you might know each other, not to give you an opportunity for saying silly things like that."

We joined in the laugh, and although it did not lighten the load at my heart, I felt that with it went all resentment that this man had forestalled me.

I had not the bitterness of knowing that the girl whose face had never been entirely absent from my mind these five years was in love with a man unworthy of her.

CHAPTER VIII

WILD THINGS OF THE PRAIRIE

While we were sitting at breakfast there came a rush of hoofs outside, a sudden stop, and the next moment a rattle of spurs clanked toward the door. Without looking up Jock informed us who it was.

“That’s Armstrong. Guess that means they’ve got another bunch rounded up.”

No one moved to open the door, but apparently no one needed to, for it was pushed open from the outside, and a young fellow in dress more or less familiar to me from pictures, stood on the threshold, hat in hand.

He was a short, thick-set fellow, with an indescribably mild face, so mild that it was almost ludicrous above the fittings of the cowboy. He wore no coat, but a vest was buttoned at the top only, covering a clean white shirt, evidently donned for the occasion. His trousers consisted for the most part, judging from where I sat, of white sheepskin, which I later saw to be but leggings, leather on the inside of the leg and sheepskin outside, and held up by a strap at the waist. Below the trousers were a pair of neatly blackened long boots with heels three inches high. Around his neck was a blue silk handkerchief, tied in a loose knot, the ends hanging free over the front of his vest.

But the most conspicuous features of this striking figure were the row of solid gold teeth across the front of his mouth, the hair parted in the centre and oiled down until it shone, and the hugest pair of spurs I ever saw. No wonder Jock knew who was coming from the jangle of those spurs.

He stood there without a word, straight and quiet, looking full at us, but without any semblance of boldness, and waiting to be addressed.

“Hello, Squart,” Jock called, without looking up from his plate.

The cowboy did not answer the greeting, but plunged directly into his errand:

“We’ve got that Bulberry bunch. The new corral isn’t big enough.”

There was not a word wasted, but Jock knew what was wanted. He looked from one to the other of us before he gave his answer. He had not yet left us alone at the ranch, and was evidently reluctant to do so now. Margaret saw his dilemma and spoke first.

“We’ll go with you, Jock—Count and Dicky and I. Count will be able to stand it now. Won’t you, Count? If you don’t get some exercise soon you’ll be permanently stiffened.”

As there were no protesting twinges I expressed my pleasure at the prospect of getting out on the range, and the decision brought a look of relief to Jock’s face.

“All right,” he said, reaching for another piece of bread. “Sit down, Squart, and we’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

But Squart did not wait.

“I guess I’ll be going—now,” was all he said before disappearing through the door, his spurs clanking loudly behind him as he strode down the steps. And with the last sound of the spurs came the swift galloping of his horse.

Jock laughed.

“That’s because you proposed going with us, Margaret. Squart would rather be thrown by his broncho than ride with a woman; and when you add a couple of strangers—well, you heard how fast he decamped. I wouldn’t dare insist on his waiting, either. If I had, the boys would have had a new boss cowboy before night, that’s all. I don’t know what they’d call the next one—Squint, I suppose. ‘Squart’ is a corruption for quartus, meaning the fourth boss on the ranch. One of the outfit has had a Latin education, and they look to him for the proper foundation upon which to build a nickname.”

“He beats the wildest pictures I’ve seen of wild and woolly cowboys,” I remarked, “with his gold teeth, his big spurs, and his high heels.”

“The teeth are his pride. His own were broken off by hitting the prairie rather hard from a wild broncho. Then he got those. Cost him all he had at the time, but, I think, if he had known what a swell thing the gold ones would be he would have broken off his own teeth long ago. If you had looked in his vest pocket you would have seen an expensive tooth-brush. He never goes out without it. His heels are just cowboy heels, higher than the average a little—but they’re all high. The spurs I have never understood. He says they’re to balance him; his gold teeth make a weight in front that has to be counterbalanced behind somewhere. He has never used them—never

struck spur to a horse in his life—and I don't think he ever will. The horse he can't manage without spurs has not been built yet. Perhaps he makes a parade of not using them by wearing such monstrous ones."

"If he ever did use them the horse wouldn't last long, I'm thinking," commented Dicky.

"Perhaps the oddest thing about Squart," continued Jock, "is that he neither smokes, drinks, swears, nor chews, and the cowboy who doesn't do all those is something of a freak. He can go to Medicine Hat and come home without getting foul of the police. He watches every match and cigarette butt thrown down to see that it does not start a prairie fire. The toughest outlaw in the business has failed to make him cuss. He's a jewel—but I don't understand him."

Margaret was ready for the ride first and was already in the saddle when Dicky and I went out. It was the first time I had seen a woman riding astride outside of shows, and the sight of this dignified girl thus mounted was something of a shock to my prejudices. She sat her horse upright and confidently, with a carriage that would rouse anyone's admiration, but for the moment I could see nothing save the mannish style of seat. I suppose my face, or my sudden stop in the middle of something I was saying to Dicky, left no doubt of my surprise.

Margaret looked at me, unconscious for a moment of the cause of my silence. Then a blush suffused her face and she reached her hand down instinctively to spread the loose skirts more widely.

Jock and Dicky laughed uproariously at my staring eyes and half-open mouth. I had entirely forgotten what I was talking about.

"Another novelty, eh, Count?" Dicky chuckled. "This life promises to be a liberal education for you. Only you must learn to expect the unexpected and not show it so plainly in your face."

"You don't think, surely, that women out here would risk a broncho on a side-saddle, do you, Count?" asked Jock in a tone that nettled me. "That's only eastern prudery. Women in the West ride for pleasure, not to show their costume; and they are women still."

Margaret had said nothing, but after her first flush had ridden on and was now waiting fifty yards away with her horse across the road. At that distance and angle the effect of the divided skirt was not so bad, and I was able to join in the laugh of the other two.

“Oh, I’m a tenderfoot, I know,” I agreed, as I climbed stiffly into the saddle, wondering what kind of a horse I had this time. “Even these pommelled saddles are new to me. I don’t think it agreed with my anatomy the other night. If you’ll only promise not to laugh if I take hold of the pommel with both hands I can see more prospect of enjoyment ahead of me.”

I had succeeded in changing the subject, so that we joined Margaret without further mention of the divided skirt. She drew her horse to one side as we approached and allowed Jock and me to ride past, addressing a remark to Dicky that singled him out to ride behind with her.

Our route lay along the base of the Hills for some miles and then we struck out into the prairie toward a cluster of small shacks which seemed to have dropped there without plan or purpose. For miles around the land was partially cultivated, and large tracts of green were showing, thirsting for the June rains, which would give them their year’s moisture. This settlement, Jock informed me, belonged to the Dreamers, and the information made me take a greater interest in the village. They farmed on the community principle, the houses being arranged in the most suitable place near the centre of their lands, and the work being done in gangs.

A deep coulée ran along the far side of the cluster of houses, and as we approached a horseman rode slowly up from this and in among the houses, his horse walking along as if its rider were without purpose or work to hurry him. It was not hard to see, even from this distance, that it was a Mounted Policeman.

“Wonder what Humby is after now,” muttered Jock half-aloud. “It seems to me he spends a lot of his time among the Dreamers. I never come this way that I do not meet him somewhere hereabouts. One would think the Dreamers were a desperate band of criminals the way he keeps around them. Some day they will show their resentment with a bit of lead. They’re peaceable enough until they are roused.”

Humby saw us and rode leisurely up, turning his horse to ride beside Margaret and Dicky. In a few minutes, as I expected, Dicky rode forward and joined Jock and me, and thus we rode through the village, across the coulée, and out on the rolling prairie beyond.

We had not gone far when a shrill warble from a rise at our left turned every one in that direction, and riding at full gallop down the slope, came a girl in her teens, hatless, astride, of course, and waving her free hand toward

us. Her horse came wildly on and was pulled back on its haunches within a few feet of Margaret.

“Have you any news, Margy?” she called excitedly, while her horse was still running. “If any one has got ahead of me I’ll just cry. Now there!”

Then, appearing to be satisfied from Margaret’s smile that she was not forestalled, she leaned forward in her saddle with her free hand on her chest and said in a loud whisper of impressive importance:

“Sarah Morton’s engaged to ‘Chuck’ Taylor.”

Margaret laughed merrily, and was joined by Jock. The Corporal’s laugh was quieter, almost fatherly; only the fact that we were strangers prevented Dicky and myself from enjoying the news aloud.

“Well,” she said, looking around with the merriest twinkle in her eyes, “I’m not disappointed in the effect of my news.”

Then she stopped and looked Dicky and me over for a moment.

“These are the two friends you expected, Margy? That’s Count and that’s Dicky,” she affirmed, pointing at us in turn. “Nobody’s going to introduce us, so I’ll do it myself. I’m Rosa Mathers, from around the end of the Hills.”

Margaret was still laughing, but she found her tongue at last.

“You gave no one a chance to introduce you, Rosa. You take the breath away from us first of all by informing us of the vital news that your maid is engaged to a cowboy, and before we have recovered you give us an exhibition of mind-reading by naming our friends yourself.”

“Pooh! You didn’t want to introduce me. You’re afraid they might like me, and there are not enough of us out here to go round.”

It was somewhat embarrassing for Margaret, in spite of the amusement the young girl caused, and she bit her lip in confusion.

“You know it’s true,” went on the girl. “And it was not my mind-reading that enabled me to tell Count from Dicky. Goodness knows, you’ve talked enough about them to make a mistake impossible. I could tell Count by the — —”

But Margaret would not wait for her to finish.

“Rosa, if you don’t stop I’ll tell some other news to them.”

The girl blushed scarlet and dug the spurs into her horse, which leaped close to Margaret’s, and a small hand was pressed hard over the latter’s

mouth.

“Don’t you dare, Margy Crawford. You’d say some nasty thing that wasn’t true, just to get even with me. If you didn’t want me to say anything why didn’t you stop me sooner? I gave you lots of chance.”

I felt that I was on the edge of another love secret, but I had enough of them on my mind to forgo worrying about the unaccountable likes and dislikes of this wild young thing.

Margaret’s voice broke in on my thoughts:

“I’m going home with you, Rosa, to see your mother. I haven’t had a word with her for a week or more.” She turned to Jock. “I’ll meet you here an hour before sundown to-night, Jock. If you are not here then I won’t wait, and don’t wait for me. Come on, Rosa.”

It was no surprise to me when the Corporal remarked that he was riding that direction himself to-day and would go part of the way with them. The last I saw of the three riders was when they topped the slope, Margaret almost invisible on the other side of Rosa and Humby. She was determined that I would not be overshocked with her divided skirt at the commencement of my visit.

CHAPTER IX

A NARROW ESCAPE

We came upon the herds in a slight dip in the prairie—hundreds of the picturesque steers, some of them with the long, rangy horns that showed, I learned later, a mixture of Texan blood. The sight of them lazily feeding on the dry grass, grown especially long in the depression, drew Dicky and me to a halt, while Jock sat impatiently waiting for us. Scattered in irregular groups of varying size, the dark red sides of the animals stood out strikingly distinct against the dull grey grass on which they were feeding. They looked so innocent and harmless that I longed to go down and wander among them, patting their rough flanks and looking into the dreamy eyes I had learned to associate with cattle.

Attending them were three cowboys, evidently on the lookout for us, for there was a change in the attitude of each one of them when we appeared. Strangely enough, the change was not one of increased attention to business or renewed life, but rather the opposite. Each was stationed at a different point in the valley around the herd, sitting stiff and quiet on his horse; but after they had watched us a moment they dismounted and lay lazily on the grass as if there was nothing else in life to do.

“Thought the women would be with us,” was Jock’s explanation.

As we approached them, one after the other around the herd, Jock gave them instructions to go to the camp and assist with the new corral. We would attend to the herding in the meantime. So Dicky was stationed at one end, and Jock and I started across the valley to the other. As we wound carelessly through the herds, few of them raising their heads past the legs of the horses we rode, Jock drew my attention to a large, shallow hollow scooped out of the dry ground. He explained that it was a buffalo-wallow, perhaps fifty or a hundred years old. It was by these, he said, that the Indians had been accustomed to judge the size of a bull in their hunting expeditions.

“A mighty old bull, that,” he said, running his extended arm around the circle. “Must have been a ten-footer.”

“Not an inch over nine,” I corrected, “if you go by the diameter of the wallow.”

“If there was anything to bet I’d bet you.”

“I’ll go you a box at the Alexandra when you come to Toronto to a climb up Abbot’s,” I wagered.

He took a steel measure from his pocket and handed it to me.

“I’ll hold your horse while you measure.”

I dismounted. As I stooped over the wallow my horse snorted suddenly, plunged to one side, and I looked up just in time to see it break from Jock’s hold and gallop wildly away. Jock started in pursuit and I returned to my measuring.

The rush of the horse had disturbed the cattle, some of which were moving uneasily around, sniffing loudly. Dicky laughingly waved his hand at me when I happened to glance in his direction, and as I waved in answer I saw another rider come into view, moving slowly along the ridge some distance away. Jock was nowhere in sight, the chase having continued over the rise.

I had finished the measuring and was rising with the satisfaction of having the laugh on Jock, when I heard a sniff within a few feet of me. Looking around, I was surprised to see that the cattle had taken a sudden interest in me and were crowding around on all sides. It was a beautiful sight, the row of heads circling me, the long horns waving back from the foreheads, white against the ruddy backs of the crowding animals. As the mass behind closed in there seemed to be nothing but a line of lowered heads, with a succession of white streaks above, tier upon tier, and a steady stare of eyes that were not at all like what I expected.

I felt not the least anxiety, however, although the circle in which I was standing was growing gradually smaller. But a sudden shout drew my attention to the rider I had seen along the ridge, and now I saw it was Corporal Humby, and that he was riding down the slope toward me at a breakneck speed, at the same time yelling something which I could not make out. But his actions made me aware that I was in danger of some kind.

I looked again at the rows of heads facing me within a few yards now, and it struck me that there was more than curiosity in the stare of those eyes. I shouted and waved my arms, expecting them to break away in fright, but the mass of cattle moved not an inch, except that the heads of those on the inside of the circle raised a little. Indeed, I knew that the pressure of those

behind would have prevented flight. Humby was now on the outskirts of the herd, and the bright letters on his shoulder gave me some assurance of what protection I might need. But I soon saw that, try as he would, he could make no headway to reach me. Fiercely he threw his horse among the looser bands on the outside of the circle, but each time he was brought to a stop by the unconscious backs of the solid mass.

Then on the rise above me at the other side appeared Jock. For several moments he looked down on me, and I began to feel that I was unnecessarily alarmed. Suddenly he plunged spurs into his horse and rode straight at the cattle. For a few feet he plunged through by main force. Forced to draw up by the impassable mass in front, he began lashing viciously around him with his quirt, shouting at the top of his voice.

His efforts were but forcing the cattle closer upon me, until the small space in which I stood was filled with the suffocating breath of the animals. I knew now that I was in deadly peril, but I still found it hard to realise that cattle as I knew them could turn to the relentless, stubborn things that faced me. Yet relief seemed hopeless. Not a foot farther could Humby or Jock approach me, and I was wondering how many seconds it would be before the lowered heads met over me, when I saw Jock throw his leg over his horse. Stepping on the back of the nearest steer he jumped across a couple, and, leaping from back to back, came on, and threw himself into the narrow space where I stood.

Jerking a match safe from his pocket, while I looked on helpless and wondering, he struck a match on his boot and stooped in the grass. The flame caught the dry grass immediately, and in the twinkling of an eye was among the cattle. With the smoke rolling over their heads and the flames running among their legs, they pushed frantically back, until, with space enough to turn, they wheeled and tore madly over the ridge in a wild stampede.

Before the last one had disappeared Jock had taken off his coat and was beating the flames nearest him, and Humby was doing the same without a word. In a few minutes a dozen cowboys joined us and worked along the edge of the fire to narrow it.

Four hours later the policeman and I lay down to rest on the windward side of the burnt tract. Jock and the cowboys had ridden off to round up the stampeded cattle, and Dicky was at the camp with the horses.

“Pretty close shave for you,” remarked Humby, as he lay stretched on his back, every muscle relaxed.

“I suppose it was. I can’t realise yet any danger from cattle.”

“Danger! Why, every one of those steers would have had a hoof on you in three minutes if McTavish had not got in to you. I only wonder they closed in on you so slowly. You’ll know now that you daren’t trust these cattle on foot. Mounted, it’s different. Pretty heady move that of McTavish’s setting the grass on fire. Nothing else on earth would have turned that bunch in time. How in thunder did you get there like that? Did your horse buck you off?”

I explained my bet with Jock, and the escape of my horse as I was measuring the wallow.

I could see Humby’s muscles harden as he raised himself on his elbow to look intently at me. Then he threw himself on his back again without a word, his clear, blue eyes turned reflectively on the sky. For several minutes no word was said. Then:

“Know McTavish pretty well, I suppose?” he asked, carelessly, turning on his side so that he could see my face.

“I should. Went to college with him for four years. Roomed in the same house, ate at the same table, got into the same scrapes, loved the same girl. There were five of us—the old Quintuplets—mixed up in everything, in joy and grief—and love. Dicky Tatham is one of them. Poor Morris and Field—they were the other two!”

The policeman raised himself on his elbow with a suddenness that startled me.

“Field? Wasn’t that the young fellow who fell over the cliff last fall?” His eyes blazed with interest. “And Morris? That was the name of the tenderfoot they allowed to ride an outlaw—to his death. Was it not?”

“I suppose so,” I agreed. “I don’t know how they died, but it was out here. Jock never told me what happened. We have not spoken of it.”

He looked wide-eyed at me.

“And you now!” he muttered irrelevantly. “Dicky Tatham—he’s the other one of the Quintuplets, eh?”

He was talking more to himself than to me, as he leaned forward with his hands clasped around his knees and his chin resting on them.

“I saw Morris killed. I was with Field—McTavish and I were—when he died. You—escaped.”

I was too tired to follow his line of thought. But that old sense of discomfort, almost of danger, that had partially left me during the last couple of days—the same feeling I had had on the prairie on my first day—came back to me with increased force.

“Poor Field! He lived five hours with scarcely a whole bone in his body. McTavish climbed down that cliff, that I don’t think has been scaled by living man before or since, and carried the broken chap up on his shoulders. . . . All I could do was to grasp him when he came to the top. . . . It was a one-man job—a McTavish job—that carrying up of Field.”

He stopped and looked absently over the prairie. The smoke still rose in spots from the blackened grass, and the odour of it filled the air. The twitter of one lonely bird came to us from a hidden coulée. Far away we could hear the shout of a cowboy in his chase. But for that we were two men alone in the world of dead grass and living memories.

Then he went on slowly, his voice low and pensive:

“If human effort could have saved Morris, McTavish would have done it, after— —” He did not finish the sentence. “They had let the young fellow mount an outlaw—Rooster, the worst outlaw in the country. It was sure death to a tenderfoot. . . . Some one has murder on his soul for that. . . . Anyway, when Rooster started off over the prairie, instead of bucking his rider off at the start, McTavish realised the danger and tore after him. Morris was hanging on as well as any one but a cowboy could. . . . He’d have been all right if Rooster had done nothing but run. But that horse has not earned its reputation by that.”

He sat quiet for a minute, seeming to live over the scene again.

“I was not far away. I tried to help. But McTavish swished past me white as a sheet. He threw his rope on a long chance. . . . I can see him yet as he rose in the saddle, his teeth clinched until his jaws stood out at the sides, and a look on his face like a man with a lost soul.” His hands were rubbing softly one over the other, and one foot brushed back and forward on the grass. “Then he let the rope go. . . . It was the prettiest throw I ever saw—and I’ve seen a few. Straight out it went, the coil keeping full and round, past Morris’s head; and when it settled around Rooster’s neck I shouted with relief and admiration. . . . But Rooster knew the rope too well for poor Morris. He stopped like a flash. . . . Nobody but a cowboy could have been prepared for it.”

His eyes fell wonderingly to his hands, rubbing, rubbing back and forth.

“He never spoke,” he concluded in a whisper. . . . “And now—McTavish saved you—from a worse death than either. . . . Where’s Tatham?” he asked suddenly, rising and looking anxiously toward the camp.

A snatch of song came to us from that direction. Dicky was returning, leading his horse. As we looked his full voice rose in one of the old college songs.

Humby sank to the grass with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER X

THE EXPRESSION OF A WOMAN'S FOOT

It was a silent party that rode back over the prairie just before sundown. The Corporal and Squart came with us, but they were no more disposed to talk than were the rest of us. Only Dicky spoke occasionally, until even he was weighed down by our silence.

"One would think we were the chief mourners returning from a funeral," he remarked at last.

Jock looked quickly across Dicky at me.

"It might have been," he muttered, and I saw drops of perspiration standing on his face. Time and again I caught his glances in my direction, until at last I could not bear to look at that damp brow. Dicky noticed it and chided him.

"Look here, old man," he protested. "I'm not a doctor by profession, but I've had enough experience in the wilds of South America to qualify, and I know what those signs mean." He pointed at the perspiration. "Your heart's bad, Jock. You're allowing your nerves to worry you into a condition you'll be sorry for some day. I've got some stuff at the house. Let me give you some when we get there."

But Jock declared it was only his weariness and hunger. He had been unable to eat at the camp before we left. Then I became aware that Humby had not spoken, and that he was watching Jock from behind with a keenness that brought sudden embarrassment to him when he caught my eye.

When we drew nearer the place where we were to pick Margaret up the policeman grew more talkative. I smiled inwardly, even if somewhat sadly, at the increasing speed of his horse, until Dicky protested quietly on Jock's account.

But when we arrived at the spot only one figure was in sight. Rosa sat there on her horse, such a different girl from the one we had met in the morning that I scarcely recognised her. I expected to see disappointment written plainly on the Corporal's face, but I concluded that under my gaze he

forcibly controlled himself. Squart, as I had anticipated, hung back. When he had first seen Rosa he had mumbled: "I guess I'll go now." But he had not gone, and not until Rosa had greeted him with the rest of us did he make the remark that was final before his disappearance: "I guess I'll be going now." I came to know the difference between "I'll go," and "I'll be going" with Squart. The last was final; nothing could keep him after that. The first was but the sign of the fight between his natural modesty and his desire to remain, the latter winning.

And I learned something else at that time. Here was another series of cross-purposes in the machinations of Cupid. Squart loved Rosa. He could not tear himself away until she had spoken to him, however uncomfortable the presence of a woman made him. I smiled grimly at the unaccountable vagaries of the little boy with the arrows. Squart loved Rosa; Rosa loved the Corporal; the Corporal loved Margaret. It was almost as bad as that other twist—I loved Margaret, and she loved the Corporal. Truly I had become involved in the meshes of a wide, wildly-thrown net when I came West. There was no comfort in the thought. Instead, I found a great sadness settling over me at the awakening of these others. I knew I had lost, but it was well to have loved. I hoped the other three would find solace in that—more than I was finding.

Rosa greeted us so quietly that the Corporal rode close to her and spoke in some anxiety.

"What's the matter, Rosa? Is your father worse? Where is Miss Crawford?" Like a woman's letter the important part was at the last.

"No; father's as well as usual. Margy's gone home. I waited to tell you."

Strangely enough, she was looking at me all the time she spoke.

"She thought she would not wait," the girl went on. "We reached here earlier than we expected."

"I suppose she could have waited as well as you," Jock grumbled. "She wanted to come, and then would not wait to return with us."

"Oh, I did not mind waiting," the girl hastened to say in defence of her friend.

"But she did, eh?"

Rosa reddened without replying. The Corporal relieved the situation.

"You're riding back now, are you not, Rosa?" he asked in a kindly tone.

“Yes,” she answered eagerly.

“May I ride with you?”

It was one of those delicate kindnesses of which the Corporal was capable. He must have known the girl loved him; it was not difficult to guess that she had waited there on the chance of seeing him. His consideration deprived him of the opportunity of seeing Margaret, and it was owing to such magnanimity that I explained to her his absence.

Margaret met us on the front verandah with a hasty explanation of her failure to wait for us, and I gave Dicky my horse to stable in order to defend the Corporal’s absence before Jock would have a chance to tease her about the policeman’s preference for Rosa. My desire to defend the man who had forestalled me was fast evaporating, so I lost no time in commencing.

“The—the Corporal started home with us,” I began; and a sudden conviction came to me that I was throwing myself into the affair with uncalled-for enthusiasm. Somehow there seemed at the moment to be little to explain.

“Indeed?” she replied, with that rising inflection that demanded more.

I looked nervously down at her feet as the simplest method of following her thoughts. She stood with one hand lightly touching a post of the verandah, every muscle of her at rest.

“Yes,” I stumbled on. “He intended to come with us, but he took pity on Miss Mathers’ loneliness and turned off with her. It was awfully decent of him to do that when he’d rather have come along with us. He’s a good fellow.”

“Indeed?” was her only comment. It threw the whole responsibility on me of proceeding or stopping there.

“Margaret,” I began afresh, “I’ve found out many things since I came. You told me the other day I would. I read between the lines at my first meeting with the Corporal.”

I stopped for the exclamation that appeared natural, a cry of surprise at my astuteness, or of protest that would but verify my words. But I heard neither. Instead, my eyes fell on her feet with a panic. One of them was rubbing slowly back and forward over the edge of the verandah. It did not seem to fit in with what I had expected. Her silence increased my responsibility for further explanation.

“And I found out a couple of things to-day.” . . . I hesitated to speak of what was on my mind, but there appeared nothing else to say at the moment. “Rosa’s in love with—Corporal Humby.” As I spoke his name I glanced at her with a sudden desire that she should experience some of the pangs I had been feeling.

She did not even start. Her face was turned from me looking out over the prairie, and that enigmatic shoe continued to rub across the edge of the boards. In admiration of her self-control I hastened to dispel the suffering I must have caused her.

“But—but he’s in love with—” A cold perspiration broke out on me at the daring indiscretion I had almost committed. “He’s not in love with her,” I completed lamely, praying that a kind Providence would send Dicky or Jock out right away. I felt like a monologue artist who had forgotten his part, with the audience enjoying his embarrassment more than his witticisms.

“You know,” I began once more, wishing the perspiration would form anywhere but on my face, “you know—well, you aren’t misunderstanding me, Margaret, are you? . . . Darn it, why don’t you say something? I’m through, anyway.” I recklessly mopped my forehead.

Then Margaret’s foot ceased its rubbing, and she turned to look straight into my eyes. In her own was brimming laughter.

“Count,” she said, as she moved around me towards the door, “if you’re here much longer you’ll begin to know quite a lot—more than you do now.”

At any rate I would know what that slow, methodical rubbing back and forward of a woman’s foot meant.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAUGH OF A LUNATIC

Dicky and I came to know Corporal Humby a great deal better during the next few days. Each day must have its gallop, and often these extended from morning to evening. Jock encouraged us to ride around the country, telling us of the best views and the interesting sights in the district. We would have accompanied him more often on his ranch duties, but for some reason not clear to us he seemed to prefer that we take our enjoyment without him, probably because it left him a freer hand to come and go among the wide ranges over which his cattle grazed. One of his fixed rules was to see us off in the morning before he set out, and both Dicky and myself felt that there was much time lost to him through over-sensitive ideas of the duties of his position as host.

Frequently, too, we would have preferred staying at home, but Jock positively refused to leave the house unless we were out enjoying ourselves on the prairie or among the foothills. It was characteristic of his Scotch stubbornness that we found it unwise to try to convince him of our independence, for a time at least, in the matter of enjoyment. Almost always at our return in the evening we would find him awaiting us; and the few occasions on which we cut short our intended excursions and arrived home ahead of him would give us a bad-tempered host for the rest of the evening.

On these trips of ours we nearly always met the Corporal, whose district appeared to be pretty well confined to the country for a dozen miles around. Sometimes we came upon him close to the house; again he would unexpectedly emerge from a coulée or a bluff of trees many miles distant. Dicky and I would usually hear a sound of hoofs somewhere near no matter how far we might be from yesterday's haunts.

"The Corporal is looking us up again," Dicky would say with a laugh of welcome. And the policeman's sorrel would be in sight a few seconds later making straight to us. No matter where he came upon us he seemed not at all surprised.

“Better take us on the force,” suggested Dicky one day. “We cover the ground about as well as you do, and most of the same ground. Have you got a good-paying job for a medico-engineer? I could pass in either of those professions, I think. Put Count on to watch the Dreamers. He just loves them.”

The Corporal did not smile.

“One never knows when he may be called on out here to do temporary police duty. If Count can watch the Dreamers he can do more than I can. I’ve been trying it for six months and I have a lot to find out yet.”

Further conversation showed that Humby had no better opinion of them than I had. Like Jock, he could not say that they had been guilty of more frequent infractions of the law than any other settlement of like size might have been, but their reticence and mystery aroused his suspicions. Besides, the events of the past year in the neighbourhood, although not definitely traceable to the Dreamers, had so alarmed those ranchers and farmers who lived near that the Inspector in Medicine Hat had given him orders to keep a close eye on them, and to find out all he could about their religion and rites. A couple of stables had been burned in the vicinity, and a farmer had been shot at from a bluff; and these crimes had been openly attributed to the Dreamers by the other farmers.

“Judging from the frequency with which you meet us the farmers might think you were watching us instead of the Dreamers,” laughed Dicky. “If you really want to watch a Dreamer you should go where Count isn’t.”

The Corporal flushed.

“Don’t you want me to watch you?” he asked, too seriously for Dicky to laugh it off.

“Oh, look here, Humby, you don’t think I meant that. If you gave us the chance we’d join you in all your rides. I can’t imagine anything more pleasant for a week or two than covering your beat—with you.”

As he said the last words Dicky was not smiling. He liked the Corporal just as well as I did.

“Thanks, Tatham! I may want you both some day; you never know. At present I’m most anxious to find out the place of meeting of the Dreamers, but I have very little clue. I have had to work so quietly, because we really have no reason for making ourselves obnoxious to them by spying. I know their meetings are held in the fastnesses of the Hills. I have frequently seen

them going there in the evening, but I have never dared follow. They have spies everywhere, and I can find out more by not rousing their suspicions.”

Dicky looked longingly towards the Hills. The spirit of adventure appealed to him.

“We may be able to help you; they wouldn’t spy on us,” he observed.

“Don’t wager on anything they might do,” said Humby. Then he laughed. “Some day we’ll ferret it out together.”

“Jock seems to be on good standing with them,” I volunteered. “Why don’t you get him to help?”

Humby sobered instantly, but did not answer for a moment. When he did:

“McTavish is about the only one in these parts who’ll speak to them except of necessity. I never saw Maskin talk to any one not a Dreamer save McTavish. Perhaps that’s because your friend will not see harm in them. I have talked to him—some time ago—but he has no complaint, he says, and he cannot see why the police are suspicious.”

“Jock always had ideas peculiarly his own,” observed Dicky. “Come up to the house sometime when we’re there; we might get him to talk as he did the other day. You never come there, do you? I should think you’d be glad to drop in for something hot—and to talk to the women.” He grinned as he spoke, for I had told him of the love scenes I had witnessed.

I was not surprised when the Corporal stammered an embarrassed reply.

“I—I don’t call at many of the houses. That’s not a part of our duties, you know.”

Dicky persisted.

“But I should think that anything that would give you more information about the Dreamers would be your duty.”

“Up to a point. I can’t go about it openly—force it from a Dreamer, for instance. At any rate, I think I have all McTavish is likely to tell me. We get our information in many ways.”

“I suppose you know the history of every one in the district,” said Dicky.

“Pretty much—except the Dreamers.”

“And the visitors?—me, for instance?”

The Corporal smiled.

"I guess I know enough to do me. You're one of the Quintuplets of Toronto University. Count, here, McTavish, Morris, and Field were the others. You got into the same rows, loved the same girl; but McTavish married her . . . And that's only part of what I know already."

Dicky's eyes opened in surprise, and a tinge of anger came into his face.

"It was scarcely necessary to find out all about us, was it? But who in thunder told you?"

The Corporal broke in on a tune he was humming, rapping the pommel of his saddle at the same time.

"Count told me," he replied with a laugh.

Dicky turned on me angrily. I forestalled his rebuke.

"I was just as much in love with her as the rest. Everybody loved her, so there really wasn't much in what I told you, after all," I said, looking at Humby.

"I said it was all I wanted to know," he answered, and Dicky's anger vanished at the explanation. "I suppose you were no different from me," he went on with a twinkle in his eyes. "When I went to college everybody knew every time I was in love; and they always remembered the last time better than I did—that was the worst of it. I suppose my wide experience enables me to tell when a man's in love."

As he finished he looked at me, and before I thought I had swung my horse around with the pressure of my spurs. Hang the man! He was treading on ticklish ground to-day. He knew too much.

This time Dicky laughed.

Whenever I suggested to Margaret that she join us in our ride, I met with the same refusal that had greeted my requests ever since the day she had first ridden with us. I could not understand what had come over her. It was her own suggestion in the first place that I take some one with me whenever I went out riding, and she had made me promise that I would never go out alone, chiefly because she had so long wished for company in her lonesome rides. Now her horse was never out of the stable, but all day long she remained around the house making believe to help Aggie and the maid. Each evening she did consent to take a short walk down towards the prairie, but it never lasted long enough for me, and I could never induce her to take advantage of the lovely bright nights.

And yet she would listen attentively to our arrangements for the day, and assist in planning our entertainment; and she would be the last to wave a hand to us from the verandah as we rode away. I felt sure that her eyes filled with longing to join in the wild gallop she knew Dicky and I would have as soon as we reached the prairie. Her attitude bothered me.

“Why is it Margaret will not ride with us these days?” I asked Aggie one day when I had cornered her on the verandah for the purpose of getting to the bottom of the mystery.

I had taken her unawares and she hesitated before replying. At last she said:

“Oh, out here, you know, one gets tired of doing nothing but ride all the time.”

“But she was wild for it the first few days, when I could not ride for stiffness. She told me that herself.”

“You know you should never ask a woman why,” she hedged. “Probably she has no idea herself why she refuses. I don’t ride, and it’s just because I do not want to. I couldn’t give you any other reason.”

I was not satisfied with the answer, but I knew well it was all I would get in that quarter. And that day I rode away more filled with the mysteries that were surrounding me than I had been since the Corporal had talked to me after the prairie fire.

In the evening we were returning to the house, a silent pair, when, chancing to look up, I saw far out on the prairie the khaki uniform of the Corporal. We swerved in his direction, but he did not appear to have noticed us. His horse was facing the Hills, and as we approached he did not lower his eyes from the side of Abbot’s. He must have sat there like a statue for ten minutes by the time we were near enough to speak, and when we did he simply grunted an answer to our greeting.

We pulled up beside him and turned to look up at the mountain. Then he dropped his eyes and frowned at the ground.

“Strange,” he said ruminatively. “Thought I saw something flash up there, but it was gone before I could place it. I don’t think the rocks would reflect light like that, and I have not seen a second flash. Must have been mistaken, I guess.”

Still he continued to examine the mountain side. The same old uncanny feeling was coming over me with the approaching darkness. I thought of the

Blue Wolf.

“Did you ever hear the Blue Wolf?” I asked.

He bent a searching look on me.

“What about it?” he countered. “Have you heard it more than the once?”

“How did you know I had heard it the once?” I asked in surprise.

He hesitated a moment before replying. “It was McTavish told me,” he said.

I told him I had heard it but the once and had no desire to hear it again. He plied me with questions about my experience until I felt that he knew a great deal more about the mystery than I did. When I turned the questions to him he answered absentmindedly and I could get nothing from him. Instead, to change the subject, I thought, he asked about Jock, how he had come to allow me to ride from the station alone, whether he was at home when I arrived, how much he was away now and where his trips took him, and a lot more irrelevant questions that I thought were merely to take my mind from the Blue Wolf—why, I could not guess.

It was growing dark when we turned to leave him. As we bade him good night he scarcely seemed to hear us. Something was on his mind; so that I was not surprised when he suddenly leaned forward in his saddle and spoke.

“Don’t be afraid of the Blue Wolf. If you hear it again, follow it up. Do you carry a revolver?”

We touched our hip pockets.

“It isn’t safe to travel without one—around the Hills just now. Keep them loaded.”

Then leaning toward us as he pointed up at Abbot’s where it glimmered in the late rays of the setting sun, he announced solemnly: “I’m after that Blue Wolf. I heard it last fall under circumstances I’ll never forget. It was when Field went over the cliff. There’s something I have yet to— —”

He had no time to finish the sentence.

An insane laugh, low at first, and clear, came to our ears. For a full half minute it rippled and swelled, and died away in a chuckle. We looked around us in dread. Nothing was to be seen.

Again the laugh came.

The policeman whirled his horse on its hind legs and dashed back a few yards, where he raised himself in his saddle and gazed stupidly into the air straight above him. As he did so the laugh ceased again in a strangled gasp. Through it all there was a tantalising familiarity that kept us silent in wonder long after it had died away.

The Corporal was the first to move. He dropped his eyes and swept Abbot's, where it was still light, as if to pierce its darkest grotto. With the spurs digging cruelly into its side his horse dashed toward the mountain for half a mile, circled around by a zigzag course and returned to where we sat watching, silent and dazed. Restlessly he ranged around over the prairie like a setter, before he finally drew up beside us.

"More mystery!" was all he said, and it was pleasant to note that there was none of the terror in his voice that held me spellbound.

Dicky suggested ventriloquism, but the policeman simply swept his arm around to demonstrate the folly of that where there was not even a sage bush within sight behind which a man could hide.

"That was the laugh of a lunatic. I've heard it before. The loneliness of the prairie has sent many a man mad. When I find that one I'll have the explanation of much that has happened here within the last year."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he interrupted.

"There's no use talking about it now. I don't understand it yet, and I don't want to form any conclusions that may lead me astray." He looked off toward the last bright shades of the sun in the western sky, as if to get his mind on something unchangeable and steady. "But it's explainable. If I allowed a thing like that to frighten me—if I believed in the supernatural—I'd have to leave this country."

CHAPTER XII

THE BLUE WOLF AGAIN

It was a quiet pair that rode back over the dark prairie towards the ranch-house. The Corporal had ridden off to the east, although it had been his intention to go straight to the Post, ten miles to the north-west, for the night. Apparently he had changed his mind and was out for an all-night patrol.

Dicky rode ahead, scanning the ground as if there were still a chance to discover something. I found myself looking around just as eagerly, although anything might by this time pass within ten yards of us without our noticing it. A bluff loomed up in front of us, one of those small clusters of trees that stand out upon the prairie where water is near for even part of the year, the only bit of shelter from the bleak inhospitality of the naked land. Here, in the rise towards the Hills, there were many of them.

We pulled to one side to skirt the bluff, Dicky a few yards ahead but within sight in the growing blackness. I think both of us had a premonition that more was going to happen before the night was over, and my nerves were all a-tingle. My thoughts returned to those awful cries on the cliff road, and I was wondering how I had saved myself from going over the cliff, when away back on the prairie rose an appalling cry—the howl of the Blue Wolf.

Twice it came, just as it had done when I heard it first, the last cry ending in the death gasp that sent the blood pounding back to my heart. Then a pause.

Again and again the double cry came, each exactly like the last, but nearer and nearer to where we sat transfixed on our horses. I could hear Dicky's breath coming in sharp hisses close beside me. Then he hastily wheeled toward the bluff. But before we could more than turn the Wolf was on us—on us—at Dicky's very stirrup—past us! And a moment later all was quiet.

As we struggled to quiet our terrified horses another sound came to us from the prairie. It was the thunder of a horse's hoofs at a frantic gallop. Closer and closer it came. This time we gained the trees and waited.

Close past us dashed a horse stretched close to the ground as it ran, its breath coming deep and fast. And on its back its rider sat, slightly raised in the saddle, leaning forward and talking quietly to the horse.

“We’ve got to do it, Kitty, we’ve got to do it! Good old girl, Kitty!” the voice was pleading.

It was Corporal Humby.

“Gad!” gasped Dicky, drawing a long breath as the hoof beats grew fainter. “Much more of this and I’ll go mad myself!” I could not even talk.

We reached the ranch-house, and around at the stable we found the Corporal talking carelessly with Jock, who had just taken the saddle off his horse.

“I was just telling McTavish,” said the policeman, including us in the conversation as soon as we came within hearing, “that he should take you over to Mathers’ some day. It’s one of the finest views in these parts from his front door.”

Jock signified his intention of doing so before long, and we had time to arrive at the conclusion without apparent embarrassment that we were intended to say nothing about our experiences. It was with thumping hearts that we joined in a general discussion of the delayed rains, of the chances of the crops of the Dreamers being better than those of the other farmers, as they had been last year, and of some of the news that had come in the latest paper.

When the horses were attended to for the night Jock hospitably invited Humby in to have something to eat, to remain all night if he would. The policeman said that he had to get back to the Post.

“But you can have a bite before you go, can’t you? You’re used to riding at all hours.”

The policeman looked closely at Jock, but there was evidently nothing of special import in the words.

“No, thanks,” Humby said. “Sorry I can’t.”

“But the women will be expecting you. They have to get supper for us.”

But Humby persisted in his refusal.

As he passed me he whispered in my ear: “I got here first, anyway. It’s getting warmer, Arthurs, getting warmer.”

And Jock stood on the verandah watching the upright figure on horseback disappear into the starlight. "Why?" I heard him mutter as he turned to the house.

CHAPTER XIII

ROSA ENTERTAINS US

Once again I tried to induce Margaret to ride. It was a lovely morning. The early summer sun was gilding the evergreen trees stretched below us on the border of the lake, and pouring a golden flood over the distant prairie. Nearer us on the first rises of the Hills the new green of the spring's mantle glossed and flickered in the slight wind. Shadows crept from the tree-trunks down the slopes. It was a morning of contrasts, of light and shadow; and over all was the clearness of the Western air, making the black blacker, the light more vivid.

"Margaret," I said seriously, when she had made the usual excuses, "why is it you never ride now? I want to know."

"Count," she answered lightly, "why do you continue to ask? I want to know."

"I *want* you to ride; that's why."

"Well, I *don't* want to ride; that's why."

I bit my lip helplessly. I think I could have sworn.

"But, Margaret— —" I commenced, determined to keep my temper. Then I looked at her laughing eyes and stopped, wondering what I was going to say.

"But, Count— —" she mocked.

"Oh, da-ash," I stuttered, thrusting my hands fiercely into my pockets and striding away. Her merry laugh followed me.

I was still in sight of the road when the gallop of a horse announced a visitor, and Rosa Mathers dashed up to the verandah, threw her reins to the ground and embraced Margaret tempestuously.

"Count!" called Margaret.

I did not answer.

“Count!” she called again.

I lounged sulkily around the corner of the house.

“Will you please put Rosa’s horse in the stable?” She did not wait for me to answer, but disappeared with Rosa into the house.

She was still laughing at me, for Dicky had been closer to her at the time than I was, lying lazily in the shade of a tree; and Jock was reading just inside the doorway.

“And, Count!” grinned Dicky, without raising his head from his closed hands. “Bring me a glass of water and keep these pesky flies away.”

I had no scruples about completing with Dicky the word I had wisely checked a moment before. But I was forced to stable the horse. Then I spilled a dipper of water on Dicky’s shirt, so that he had to retire; and I felt better, a feeling which Dicky partially spoiled by calling back as he went inside, “But you can’t punish by proxy, Count, you know.”

I lay back in the place Dicky had vacated, the more angry that I did not know the reason for it. The hum of the girls’ voices came to me through the door.

“Count!” came a voice.

I rose hastily and tried to sneak behind the house. A golden head appeared through the door.

“Why, Count, didn’t you hear Margaret calling?” asked Rosa.

“Ah—yes. I—I was just going to see what the thermometer registered,” I answered, walking briskly to the corner of the house and looking up at the glass.

“That one is broken, Count,” called Margaret. “This one near the door is all right.” Her eyes were laughing from a sober face as I appeared before her.

“Rosa wants to know something about Toronto,” said Margaret.

I knew that it was but a continuation of my torment, but there was nothing to do but sit down and appear interested. Rosa asked but two or three questions—which were much longer than the answers—and then she monopolised the conversation, with Margaret interrupting only when she saw a chance of forcing me to talk.

Rosa looked on life with the simple, frank eyes of the girl who has had few youthful companions. Her life with her parents and away from the influences of spoiled childhood had but made more attractive her childishness. There was no self-consciousness, no attempt at effect—just the unrestrained utterances of an unsullied mind that has not known evil. Her love for her parents came out with every mention of them; and she seemed delighted to turn everything back to what her mother and father had done or said.

She was deploring the kindnesses of some of their friends in England, in that it entailed many hours of apparent neglect to her sick father. “You know there are a dozen women write to mother from the same village in England. They always write about the same things, but mother has to send something different to each one of them, because they compare notes. They show what they receive but not what they send. I suggested a mimeograph to mother, but she won’t hear of it. Father has to do without her two nights a week so that the English news can be told her a dozen times. It’s hard on both of them. I have a theory”—a “theory” was Rosa’s specialty—“that there’s a lot we send out with the stamp of ‘kindness’ that should have had ‘selfishness’ instead. That’s nasty, I know, but I hate seeing father left without mother.”

“They don’t realise the work it means to your mother,” pleaded Margaret. “They think your parents must be lonesome out here.”

“That’s what mother says. They really are good to us. One of them sent a Stilton cheese a year ago. None of us can eat Stilton, but, of course, mother had to thank her as best she could. The worst of it is that she did it so well a whole cheese has come every month since. We can’t give it away. I have a theory that we’d be able to make money if we had started to charge for it from the first. We hate even the smell of it.”

“You see your giving it away is an example of the mismarking of selfishness, Miss Mathers,” I laughed.

“Miss Mathers!” she reproved. “If you think I’m going to call you Mr. Arthurs, you’ve got another — But Margaret doesn’t like me to use slang. I’ve a theory that the man who doesn’t let loose in slang occasionally has some thoughts that wouldn’t bear repeating, or does worse things. There’s Squart. He doesn’t swear, but he often has to wear his vest buttoned tight and pinned to his trousers to hide that he has gambled away his shirt.”

“But I don’t use slang,” protested Margaret, laughing.

“Another proof of what I say. If you wouldn’t let that pride of yours make you and a lot others unhappy——” Margaret’s hand over Rosa’s

mouth had cut off the last of the sentence, and the owner of the hand was blushing furiously.

“And what about me?” I broke in to draw the attention from Margaret’s cheeks.

Rosa looked at me with a supercilious smile. “Oh, you! If you had a few more real cuss words and—and things like that it’d help you wonderfully. Isn’t that so, Marge?” But Margaret was not talking. “There’s Dicky. You could tell by the look of him that he can swear. Swear for the ladies, Dicky.”

Dicky moved his lips rapidly in mumbles.

“That’s right, Dicky. Your versatility is marvellous, but you lack the proper tone. I once heard father use all that language when mother was busy at her letters. Both of us fairly ran to play cribbage with him. Now he just opens his mouth and commences to mumble when he wants cribbage.”

Aggie called from the kitchen for Margaret. I rose to see if it was anything I could do in her place.

“Let Dicky go,” protested Rosa. “He’s not interested in me, and you are. Anyway, I have a theory that the man who spends his energy peeling potatoes doesn’t use enough of it in his work to pay for a maid.”

Dicky was just as glad to go to Aggie as I was to stay with the girls, and when he left the room Jock threw down his paper and followed. Rosa listened a moment to the sounds of the two men assisting in the preparation of lunch.

“There’s the value of example,” she laughed. “I’ll bet Jock never touched his hand to a dish before. I thought he was too wrapped up in his cattle to stay at home a day like to-day, anyway. You have a lot to answer for,” she said, shaking her head at me. “But he was just the same when your other two friends were here. He wouldn’t leave them at home for a moment. I think he overdoes the host’s part. He must be afraid you will get lost, or eat Aggie, if he doesn’t keep tab on you.”

Was it just imagination on my part that I thought a fleeting frown passed across Margaret’s brow?

Late in the afternoon the girl, who had even induced Jock to forgo his paper and join in the conversation, prepared to leave.

“I’ll ride with you part of the way,” I offered.

“And Dicky needs the exercise, too,” suggested Margaret.

But Dicky positively refused to go. Any girl who hinted that he could not support a maid, just because he could peel potatoes, could not hope to be forgiven for a day, at least.

“Don’t be lazy,” insisted Margaret. “If one leaves you around the house for a day you never want to leave it again.”

I noticed Jock look intently at Dicky.

“Go yourself,” Dicky answered Margaret. “You haven’t been out for a week. What’s the matter? I never attempted to conceal my laziness. Rosa will be asking my forgiveness some day soon if I am cool with her. That’s the accepted opinion, you know.”

“Rosa asks your forgiveness now——” the young girl commenced. Dicky rose humbly to his feet.—“so long as you don’t ride with me,” she completed. “Margaret is coming now—Margaret and Count.”

Margaret hastened to say that she did not feel like a ride. Her head was aching. Rosa watched her before she answered.

“All right. Count and I can manage, thank you.” I thought that her acceptance of Margaret’s refusal was strange. Usually she insisted until she had her way in everything.

But Margaret had changed her mind. “Perhaps the ride would do my head good. I’ll only be a couple of minutes. Wait for me.” She ran to her room, while Dicky and I went to the stables to bring the horses.

As we passed before her window she called to us and handed out a side-saddle which she asked us to put on her horse instead of the one in the stable. We thought nothing of it, except that I was pleased that I was not to see her astride again. We soon had the horses at the front, and were waiting for Margaret, when she ran quickly across the sitting-room and stepped into the stirrup. I heard Rosa call excitedly, and the next instant they were all on the verandah.

“Margaret Crawford,” exclaimed Rosa, “you’re not going to try to ride Ginger in a habit!”

“You’re crazy, girl,” added Jock, reaching for the animal’s head.

But Margaret had wheeled the horse and cantered away.

“What in the world has got into her?” Jock growled fearfully, as the horse commenced to pitch at the strange arrangement of the load. “She can’t

wear that dress on these bronchos. Who put her up to it?" He looked sternly around at us as if some one of us was guilty.

Aggie was standing speechless with her hands clasped. The horse had quieted a little under Margaret's skilful management. Jock looked at Aggie as if seeing the cause in her, and she answered his look timidly.

"She has never really liked the divided skirt," she said. "She was always used to the side-saddle, and I suppose—I suppose she thinks she ought to be able to use it here."

A sudden puff of wind blew the long skirt out and the horse plunged to one side. Then it sprang straight into the air and came down with stiffened legs, its back arched and head down between its front legs.

"Keep its head up, Margaret," yelled Jock, running toward her. "Jerk, jerk."

I was already on my horse, dashing to her assistance. I had never before seen a horse buck, but it seemed impossible that any one could keep a seat on such an animal. I passed Jock at a bound, and riding beside the pitching animal reached across to lift her from her saddle. But even as I did so the brute jumped and came down on his front feet, as unyielding as a rock. I had a fleeting glimpse of her smile, and then her hands dropped the reins and went to her skirts to free them from the horn as she shot forward. My own horse commenced to make strange movements beneath me, but I threw it violently against Margaret's horse, which, now that it was free, was about to leap forward where the girl had fallen. As I struck it I snatched the rein and jerked as hard as I could. The bumping broke the gait of both horses, and before they could break away I was out of the saddle, pulling back on them with all my strength to keep them from Margaret, lying in front where I could not see her.

At that instant Jock passed me, closely followed by Dicky. A rather forced laugh told me that Margaret was not badly hurt. I stepped to the front, and in my relief gave her horse a vicious kick. Dicky was anxiously examining Margaret for broken bones, while Jock, now that the danger was over, was soundly lecturing her for her daring.

"I don't like divided skirts," she said stubbornly. "I'm not hurt. I hadn't time to get a good hold on the horn when I rode away. That is why he threw me. I'm all right. Let me get settled this time, and I'm not afraid."

She surprised us all by reaching for the horse. I recovered in time to step in front of her.

“Indeed, you’re not going to try it again,” I said.

“Why, Count!” she said in surprise. Then she straightened up and said: “Please give me my horse, Count.”

But I was just as stubborn as she. Instead of yielding, I turned Ginger around and walked it back to the stable.

“Mr. Arthurs!” I heard her call once, in a tone that would have made me shudder at any other time. Then a moment of intense silence was followed by a burst of gay laughter. Some humour in the situation had suddenly come to her; and I went on to the stable feeling as if it were my first appearance in public. When I came out they were all laughing on the verandah, although Jock could not prevent a word or two of protest at the risk she had taken.

“Well,” interrupted Rosa, “this is not getting me home. Now, who’s going with me?”

As if in answer to her inquiry, a gaily-dressed cowboy rode out upon the tree-enclosed road and a flash of gold in the front of his mouth told us it was Squart.

Margaret pointed to him. “There’s your company, Rosa,” she said, and I thought there was more relief in her tone than there had been when she laughed at finding herself whole after her fall.

“What in the world is the matter, Squart?” called Jock anxiously, before Squart’s horse had reached the verandah. “Cattle stampeded, or any one sick?”

The cowboy twisted uncomfortably in his saddle before he answered, and took off his Stetson.

“Nothin’ wrong. Just out for a—a ride. Lovely evening, isn’t it?”

Jock opened his mouth in amazement. Then he closed it without saying anything.

“If you are just out for a ride, I suppose you would not mind riding back, part of the way, anyway, with Rosa, would you?” asked Margaret.

The cowboy’s face flushed with pleasure, and he looked at Rosa before answering, as if seeking her consent. Seeing nothing that looked like refusal, he said he’d be glad to “see Miss Mathers home.”

“There it goes again,” said Rosa impatiently. “Miss Mathers! Is that the penalty of being grown up. You never called me Miss Mathers before, Squart.”

“No, Miss Mathers,” he assented timidly, twisting his hat in his hand.

“Rosa, Rosa, Rosa! When I’m engaged it’s time enough to call me Miss Mathers, Squart. Then I’ll be really old.”

His face lit up with a bright smile. “Would you like to be really old?” he asked.

We laughed, and after a moment’s bewilderment, Squart joined in.

“I’ll let you ride with me, Squart, if you’ll give me a post-graduate course in roping.”

“All right, Miss—Rosa, I mean. Do you want to begin now, right away?” he asked eagerly, starting to unwind his rope from the pommel of his saddle and looking around for something to rope.

The girl laughed. “No; I’ve got to go home now. You can teach me some other time.”

They rode away, Squart as happy as a schoolboy on a holiday, and Rosa waving her hand and blowing kisses back. Dicky held out his cupped hands, and then made the motion of pouring something in his pockets. She laughed merrily. Then she threw some more.

“Those must be for you, Count, I guess,” Margaret laughed.

I gathered a handful and put them inside my vest on the left side.

“No, no, Count,” she called back. “There’ll be others you’ll want to put there—if you’ll only fight for them.”

Margaret turned away and went inside.

Just before they disappeared behind the trees Rosa dashed back and called for Margaret. The latter came out and stood on the edge of the verandah. Rosa leaned over in the saddle and spoke in a loud whisper.

“I’m going to have Corporal Humby over for supper next week. Will you come too?” I laughed to myself to think of Margaret hesitating. “I can’t ask Barbara Spencer, because she hates him.”

A sudden thought came to her. “No; I can’t ask you either, because—you like him too well.”

She wheeled her horse and dashed away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGURE ON THE MOUNTAIN SIDE

For days we saw nothing of the Corporal. Dicky and I rode out every day, sometimes with Jock and more frequently by ourselves, but the policeman appeared to have found something elsewhere to engage his attention. As usual, Jock waited until we had gone before he set out, and at night he either reached the house ahead of us, or the condition of his horse upon his return showed how hard he had ridden to be there to greet us.

I saw quite a bit of Margaret in the evenings, as Dicky and Jock seemed to prefer the sitting-room. Aggie was always with them, but so silent that she seldom joined in the desultory conversation they maintained. Frequently such long silences came to us from within that Margaret nervously proposed joining them, and when we did she talked with a strange excitement, and invariably at Jock. He was moody, tired with the hard work the spring brought, and worried about the late branding, fewer than usual of his strayed cattle having been rounded up. Aggie hovered near him solicitously, watching for a chance to interest him or wait on him.

Dicky was growing more silent; by his glances he was thinking of Jock. As the latter continued to treat Aggie thoughtlessly with a harshness that Dicky had continually misunderstood, I watched the latter with some concern. The life had not been exciting enough of late to take his thoughts from Aggie and Jock's apparent rudeness to her. I knew how it would rankle with the man until the smallest things would appear gigantic. Jock's irritability, too, made me nervous of the results of any thoughtless remark Dicky might drop in veiled protest. On one occasion I saw Jock looking at Dicky over the top of his paper, silently and morosely, and before I could drop my eyes he had turned to me. When I looked up again he was reading his paper. After I had surprised several of these looks it began to disturb me more than ever. And yet I felt how unjust it would be to judge Jock by my standards. He had always been so different from the rest of us that we had given up trying to understand him. The fault lay with me in not remembering the peculiar kind of dear old fellow he was. Like as not he was planning the next day's trip, or thinking of some new entertainment, and the

limitations of the life made it a worry to him. I did wish he would not take it so seriously. Both Dicky and myself could have found our pleasure without troubling him, and, truth to tell, more agreeably than in the constant riding he suggested from day to day.

Naturally his irritation showed itself more and more in his abruptness with Aggie, and at such times Dicky would sit quietly sullen, or go outside.

It was not, therefore, a surprise to me when, on one of our rides, Dicky announced to me that he was going to leave. Indeed I am not sure that I was not relieved at the announcement. The fear of an outbreak was a nightmare to me.

“It’s no go, Count,” he announced. I did not need to be told to what he referred. “I’ve tried to look at it from every one’s point of view—but I can’t grasp any one’s but my own. If I saw much more of the way he muzzles and browbeats her, and the way she suffers in silence, I’d kill him.”

The vehemence of the usually imperturbable Dicky worried me with a sudden terror, particularly when I had looked to him so much to steady me in the exciting moments through which we had passed. I saw that I had to quiet him in some way. I tried to ridicule his temper, saying it was only that he wasn’t used to being with women for so many years that he had forgotten how to act. Then I tried to show him how unworthy of him this outburst was.

“I can’t see why you should take it so hard,” I said. “I’m no fonder than you are of seeing her suffering, but that never made me think of doing anything rash. We never understood Jock, and the way Aggie loves him shows how good he really is to her.”

Dicky looked at me and smiled sadly. “Count,” he asked, “did you ever know what it was to have loved—and lost?”

My anger flared up in defence of his honour.

“Dicky, you’re a damn fool.”

I had thought that the love of our old college days was long forgotten. I could laugh at it now. To my surprise, he ignored the oath.

“I know it, Count,” he answered slowly. “I never had a chance with her, anyway. But the one who has won her has no right to domineer over a love I cannot help; he has no right to drive in so deep that she is his. I love her only to protect her now, Count. I think. . . . And yet I know as well as you that I have not the right even to feel that way.”

"It's only his way with her, Dicky," I said soothingly. "Any one can see how much he loves her. Remember that he has lived a very different life from what we are used to. And certainly you could not doubt her love for him. Don't lose your manhood, old boy. Dicky Tatham has yet to show signs of that."

He bit his lip and bent his head in acknowledgment.

"Yes, she loves him. If I hadn't some little of that manhood left, Count, I'd say that was the worst of it. . . . Don't be afraid I'll forget myself. I think I'll be better now that I have told some one about it. But it's so hard, Count, that I don't see why I should stay and suffer more."

We had gone some miles, heading for a deep coulée we were anxious to explore. Dicky, as he finished speaking, turned and waved his hand towards the ranch-house where the subject of our talk would now be busy at her morning's work.

Then he started and pulled up his horse, wheeling it toward Abbot's and sitting there gazing intently up the side of the mountain. I could see nothing.

"What's the matter?" I asked anxiously. Then I noticed that we were close to where we had come upon Corporal Humby a few days before looking up at the rocky sides of the mountain in the same way.

I drew up beside him, and as I leaned towards him something flashed high up on the mountain.

"Humby did see something, after all," Dicky mused. "What can it be away up there? Nothing but a large sheet of metal or a mirror would make a reflection like that. How in the world could any one get up there?"

I remembered my first evening's ride.

"I can assure you that it's possible. It was somewhere near there where I saw that running figure on the ride over from the station."

The flash suddenly disappeared, and where it had been we could see a dark spot like a grotto or hole in the mountain side, one of a hundred such spots that showed up on the rugged face of Abbot's.

"Hm-m-m-m," Dicky exclaimed suddenly. "Some one there now, I guess. Unless the wind did that, and—I don't—think—it did."

As he spoke he whipped a pair of field-glasses from his pocket. From the spot we had been examining a figure could plainly be seen climbing rapidly downward.

Dicky looked steadily, his breath coming in the sharp hisses I had heard the night the Blue Wolf had passed us. Once he lowered the glasses quickly and drew his finger across the lenses.

“For God’s sake, don’t move,” he whispered.

“Let me see,” I pleaded in excitement, pushing my horse closer and reaching for the glasses.

Dicky reluctantly handed them over, but before I could put them to my eyes the figure had disappeared. I searched the mountain carefully, but there was nothing to show that the foot of man had ever been there.

“What was it? What did you see?”

But Dicky’s eyes were on the ground, his mind not on my questions.

“Count,” he said slowly, “I’m going to find what’s up there. And when I do I imagine a lot of things will be explained.”

“But we promised never to risk our lives on Abbot’s without Jock. Will we take him along? Perhaps he knows what it is, anyway.”

The odd laugh Dicky gave in answer made me wonder if the mysteries of the past few days had unhinged him.

“Possibly he does.” His laugh was bitten off. “But I want to ask something of you. Don’t—say—one—word—to Jock. I made no promise not to climb Abbot’s, you’ll remember. I’m free to break my neck if I want to—and I’m going to risk it before long.”

CHAPTER XV

THE CLEARING IN THE HILLS

The coulée for which we had started had now lost all interest to us. Dicky rode along deep in his own thoughts. There was something in the seriousness with which he had spoken that made me think he was concealing something. Under the side of a bluff he veered to the east, and as soon as he was certain we were out of sight of Abbot's broke into a canter that quickly took us into the woods at the foot of the Hills.

Much as we had ridden on the prairie, we had never entered the wildness of the Cypress Hills. I had practically promised Margaret that I would keep in the open, and Jock had never included them in his plans for our trips. From what we could judge on the outside they seemed to be made up of impassable forest, of rocky chasm and hills. There was something unaccountable in the general lack of knowledge that existed among those who had lived around the base of the Hills for years.

But now we passed beneath the first trees without hesitation. For a couple of miles the ride was steadily upward, with bush of sufficient sparseness to permit progress on horseback. Then the forest thickened and the ground grew rougher, until we were forced to leave our horses and proceed on foot.

Dicky's life had been among wildest forest in all its forms, so that he advanced with a confidence I could not feel. Many times we came to clearer spots among the trees, and two or three tiny mountain lakes added to the charm of our surroundings. Up steep ridges we climbed, and beyond these descended into deep ravines; then over rocks and across small streams. It was a wearisome march, but there was not a moment of monotony.

We had come upon no traces of man; even the animals we had been led to expect seemed to have deserted this end of the Hills. It was like some dream world, with everything waiting for the touch of life to make it a Garden of Eden. An hour of this kind of travelling had led to nothing of more than scenic interest, when Dicky, who was ahead, turned abruptly to the right and stepped out upon a cleared trail that led on among the trees. We

followed it until it led into a larger clearing that was evidently its destination. Man had been there and had built the trail for frequent use. There were not lacking signs that men had passed over it recently in large numbers, and the clearing was the end of their march.

"The Dreamers," Dicky whispered, quieted by the importance of our discovery.

In the clearing there was but one thing to attract attention. At one end two stumps about three feet in height stood six feet apart, and from one to the other extended a narrow platform of smooth boards. All around the clearing the trees grew with almost impenetrable thickness. As I looked around from the platform I was startled at the distinctness of Abbot's peak standing threateningly above the tree-tops at one end. Not another peak or hill was in sight; we were probably on a level with them where we stood.

It was like a scene from a play, save for the subdued twitter of a bird in a near-by tree. Everything but the trail and the clearing was as nature had made it; and on this account these two dumb evidences of man were the more unbelievable and strange.

We had discovered enough for that day, more than we had hoped for in our blind stumble through the woods in search of something to relieve the strain of the mysterious figure on the mountain side. With Dicky's wood-experience we had little trouble in finding our way back to where we had left the horses.

But they were not there.

We stopped in amazement, for we had taken the precaution of winding the reins around trees. Then we heard down through the forest the sound of something moving away from us. Breaking twigs and an occasional hoof beat on rocks left no doubt that it was our horses. Dicky listened a moment.

"Three of them," he muttered.

He put his hands to his mouth and sent the name of his horse rolling down toward the retreating sounds. In a moment they ceased, only to break out again more loudly. Dicky started to run.

"Come on," he called. "We can make as much speed through this bush as they can."

We ran along as fast as we could, Dicky calling again and again. We could hear that we were gaining.

"Pretty hard for one man to manage three horses among these trees?" gasped Dicky.

Then we heard the sounds separate, the louder of them continuing straight along at a faster pace and leaving us quickly behind. A few minutes later we saw Dicky's horse through the trees on our right, and when we had captured it we could hear my horse to the left crushing the dead leaves and branches among the thicker trees.

Dicky silently ignored my expressed surprise. Ever since he had watched through the glasses the figure on the mountain side I felt that he was concealing some thoughts that were troubling him. Even now as we heard the galloping of the horse ahead of us, freed from the limitations of the trees, he would talk little about it.

"Look here, Dicky," I said at last impatiently, "what are you keeping from me? Surely you need hide nothing from me."

"I'm sorry, old man," he replied with an apologetic smile. "I really know nothing, and what I may think—I am not at liberty to whisper, until I have a great deal more evidence than I have now."

Presently we rode out from the thickest trees upon the trail. To our surprise Corporal Humby was in sight some distance away, half hidden in the trees. As we approached he merely turned his head toward us as if he had been expecting us. I looked quickly at Dicky. Was the Corporal connected with the mysteries? I knew if he were Dicky would be the last to talk of it until he was perfectly sure. But there was too much frankness on the policeman's face to allow that suspicion to remain. However, I decided to let Dicky lead the conversation.

His opening remark did not bring any relief or enlightenment.

"Have you caught all the other criminals, Corporal, since you have been away, and now come back for us?"

"There are a few still at large, unfortunately," answered the Corporal seriously. I could see that he was worried.

Dicky turned to me with mock seriousness.

"You haven't been murdering any one, have you, Count? I'm certain I haven't."

Humby smiled.

“One does not always watch people to prevent them from murdering. Sometimes they need to be protected.”

Dicky said no more, but suddenly became serious.

“Where have you been, Corporal?” I asked. “That is, if you don’t mind my asking. We’ve missed you the past few days. We’ve pretty well covered your district without seeing you.”

“And when you come up into the forest you find me.”

“You don’t mean to say you’ve been here all the time?”

“Not just here, but within ten miles of here. I saw you riding out there.” He waved his hand toward the prairie. “I saw you stop there to-day and look toward Abbot’s. I saw you ride into the trees a couple of hours ago.”

“Then you’d see who it was stole our horses and almost got away with them,” I exclaimed in excitement.

“Yes.” But he did not offer to tell what he had seen.

“Which means,” I observed with annoyance, “that you won’t tell me any more than Dicky will.”

“And what does Dicky know?” he asked quietly, looking at Dicky as if there really was not much to know, and we were unduly disturbed.

“He knows — —” I began.

“Nothing,” interrupted Dicky vehemently. “Just because I refuse to guess at everything, Count thinks I know all about it. I wish I did.”

The Corporal made no further comment, but I saw his eyes catch Dicky’s and gaze steadily into them; and Dicky’s fell first.

Long after I went to my room that night I sat looking from my window up at Abbot’s, cold and quiet and mysterious in the moonlight. What were the secrets it could tell with those strange flashes of metal and its undisturbed watch over the country for miles around? I climbed into bed, chilled through with the cool night air that blew steadily through the open window, and in desperation counted flock after flock of sheep to induce sleep to come to me.

Just when the sheep were jumping the fence in uncountable bunches, and I was wondering why I was interested in them at all, I suddenly became conscious that I was resting tensely on my elbow listening with bated breath. Before I knew what had disturbed me, I was beside the open window. Close

to the house the crunch of loose rock broke the stillness with a sharpness that pounded in my ears.

As I looked I caught a glimpse of a mounted figure disappearing into the trees farther up the trail. Instinctively I knew that the horse had been kept to the grass until the house was passed.

Why?

The only answer was the melancholy yap-yapping down on the prairie.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREES

Dicky and I would have liked the next day to ourselves for further investigation of the Dreamers' clearing and the road leading to it, but Jock insisted on our going with him on his rounds. During the fatiguing ride, Jock and I had the conversation almost entirely to ourselves, for Dicky, who was usually so talkative, relapsed into silence and could only be brought out of it by direct remarks. Many times I pulled myself up just in time to prevent broaching the subject of the figure on Abbot's and the Dreamers' meeting-place. I had promised Dicky to say nothing about it, assured that he had some reason for it, or thought he had. With everything I could not understand I connected the Dreamers, and Jock's defence of them provided the possible reason for Dicky's request to maintain silence. If there was anything wrong it would be better to present incontrovertible proofs to Jock when we attempted to show him how they had succeeded in deceiving him. I felt certain they were trying to use him for some design of their own, but I knew enough of Jock's nature to avoid the anger any such suggestion without evidence would bring on me.

The day passed pleasantly, and at night we were all tired enough to go early to bed. And yet, like the night before, I could not sleep. In spite of myself my mind kept coming back to the mounted figure which had passed the house the night before, evidently anxious not to be heard. I sat at the window partly dressed, with my coat over my shoulders, staring into the deep prairie silence, lit brightly with the early light of the moon. I did not know what to expect from my vigil. There was no reason for thinking the same thing would be repeated—that stealthy figure with the careless disregard once the house was passed.

It was not repeated. Something different happened.

A woman in a heavy cloak crept noiselessly into the shadow of the house, stopping every few steps as if listening. A twig snapped among the trees at one side of the clearing and she turned towards the noise and disappeared.

It was Margaret. I recalled the same proceeding on my first night, when I had attached nothing more to it than a desire to get out alone in the open to think. Now a hundred ideas flocked through my troubled brain.

Last of all came the thought that, whatever was her reason for being there, she was not safe. I remembered the mad love in Maskin's face and his reckless effort to detain her when we had met on the trail. I thought of the stories of lawlessness ascribed to the Dreamers, of the mysteries of Abbot's, of that maniacal laughter, of the Blue Wolf. It was no country for any girl to be out in alone at night.

Unwilling to rouse the others without good reason, and depending on a few pebbles on Dicky's window to summon him to my assistance if I wanted to return without using the stairs, I dropped softly to the grass from my window and ran quickly into the trees some distance from the spot where Margaret had entered. Reaching the protecting shadow of the thick brush, I placed my back to a large tree and listened intently. Not a sound could I hear. Even the coyotes were silent now, and there was no breath to stir the leaves.

After standing for what seemed many minutes I carefully stepped out towards the point where she had disappeared. She could not be far away, or I would have heard her moving. Walking forward as stealthily as I could, and stopping to listen at every step, I reached a point beyond which I knew she could not have gone. Out under the moonlight I could see the house, and I guided myself by it. Beneath the trees it was too dark to see more than the dim outlines of the tree-trunks in time to avoid them.

Then I stopped and listened long. Not a movement could I hear. And yet something told me I was not alone. If Margaret were near why should she shun me? If it was not Margaret I was in danger myself, since my presence must be known and resented to bring that deep silence. For a moment I had an inclination to call her name. Then the uselessness of such a proceeding, even if she were there, stopped my mouth while it was open to utter the word. Whoever was there must be deeper in the trees, and therefore able to see me against the lighter background of the clearing.

I began to feel the tension, and an uncanny helplessness made me wish I had brought Dicky with me. The thought of him strengthened me with the idea that he was not many yards away, and I might still get him by going under his window, and yet not lose track of any noise. With this in my mind I moved farther through the trees, and a few minutes later was relieved of

that feeling of some one unseen watching me. I had passed beyond the influence.

My intention was to work my way along until I could cross the trail in the shadow, pass through the trees on the other side of the clearing and approach Dicky's room without having to cross so much moonlit space. At each few steps I stopped and listened, still hoping to discover Margaret's presence by some thoughtless noise. And it was during one of these stops, when the intense silence seemed to weigh on me like a nightmare, that I heard a branch snap ahead of me. I leaned back against the nearest tree and waited. The sound came again, followed by the careful crunching of dead leaves where the wind had failed to clear them out or drive them into the thicker fastnesses of the trees.

Something was moving toward me in the darkness. I had a strong inclination to turn and run for the house, but I fought it down. It was not Margaret, for she could not have come thus far without my hearing her, in the short time she had been out of my sight, and the noise was making towards the spot where I thought she still was.

I pressed back, scarcely breathing. Close beside me passed something—a man, I could tell from the breathing. Evidently he considered that with ordinary care there was nothing to fear. For one instant I saw a shadow pass between me and the moonlit clearing. Its size was supernatural in the dim light.

Quietly I waited until he had passed on a few yards. Then the silence fell again. I stood until, in sheer nervousness, the perspiration was running down my face, but there was no further sound. I could stand it no longer, and softly struck out in the direction I had been going. There was no sign that I had revealed my presence. I reached the trail, and after looking out and listening for a long time ran lightly across and entered the trees beyond. Here I felt safer, and a few moments later was close to the house across the clearing from where I had first gone into the shadows of the trees. Then, after a moment's hesitation to summon courage to step into the open, I picked up a handful of earth to throw against Dicky's window, and ran to the side of the house.

As I raised my hand to throw, a rifle shot rang from the trees behind me, and a bullet shattered a pane of glass in one of the lower windows close beside me.

Instinctively I fell to the ground. I could hear a crashing among the trees of some one running; then there was a woman's scream, and to my utter

amazement Corporal Humby burst from the trees close to where I had seen Margaret disappear, and came running toward me.

“Count, Count,” he whispered anxiously. “It didn’t get you, did it? For God’s sake, speak.”

I raised myself on my elbow and laughed nervously. It was the only answer I could make. My brain was in a whirl. The Corporal stooped over me, and as he did so there was the sound of rushing feet within the house and the rattle of a door-knob.

The Corporal started up, grabbed his Stetson, which had fallen off as he leaned over me, and whispered hurriedly:

“Not a word about me, Count. It’s a matter of life or death. Not a word.” As the front door was jerked open the Corporal leaped toward the trees and disappeared.

A moment later Jock came around the corner of the house fully dressed. “What is it, Count?” he shouted as he caught sight of me leaning against the side of the house. “Who fired that shot?”

Before I could answer Dicky shouted something from the window above me, and the next instant landed beside me and leaped between Jock and myself, pistol levelled.

“What in h— — are you doing, Dicky?” Jock demanded as he drew back.

Dicky collected his wits and dropped his arm.

“Is that you, Jock?” he asked nervously. Then he looked him up and down. “How did you come to have your clothes on?”

Jock looked down at himself in momentary embarrassment.

“Must have gone to sleep with ’em on. You’re not hurt, are you, Count?” he continued, coming closer to me.

As he spoke the clatter of a swiftly galloping horse cut the still air. Jock raised his head. Then a spasm of rage shook him.

“Damn them, I’ll put a stop to that,” he snarled. And in an instant he was running for the stable.

In an incredibly short time he was at the door of the stable with his horse ready saddled, and leaping on its back tore down the trail, bending low over the pommel and using his quirt unmercifully.

“Count, who fired that shot?” Dicky asked.

“God knows, Dicky; I don’t.”

“Who was it I saw making for the trees?”

I did not answer. Probably the Corporal did not wish me to make his presence known to any one. It suddenly struck me that if I told it might lead to the exposure of Margaret there among the trees with a man in the dead of night. Dicky waited while I debated with myself.

“I can’t tell you,” I said. “There’s nothing about it you need to know, and I’m not free to tell. It seems to me we all have our little details about these mysteries that we are keeping to ourselves. Perhaps we could solve them if we compared notes. . . . But I can’t tell you any more just now, Dicky.”

He looked at me without speaking for a moment.

“We’d better go in. It’s too cold out here for pyjamas.”

Aggie called to us from her room, her voice broken with terror. I assured her there was nothing to worry about; no one had been hurt.

When I was again in my room I could not take my mind from Margaret still out there among the trees, and her concealment through all the disturbance but for that one scream. Loyally I made myself think that the midnight tryst was what any lover would arrange and any girl agree to. There was no reason that I knew for secret meetings of any kind, but lovers had always longed for them since time began. And yet why should she keep herself hidden from me when I had shown that I knew her secret?

There came to me the determination to test her. No matter what her reason for seeing the Corporal in this way, however secret she might wish to keep it, there was a point beyond which she would not go in hiding herself.

Throwing up the window noisily to its widest extent, I placed myself upright close in front of it, where they could not fail to see me. For several minutes I stood silently watching in the full light of the moon.

Then two shadows walked into the clearing and stood one moment on its edge. The woman turned away towards the house, while the man stood and watched her. She walked slowly and openly forward, and passed from my view around the kitchen. The man stepped back into the trees. Neither had looked at me.

And yet I read the message as clearly as if it had been spoken. I undressed and went to sleep. Jock’s chase of the would-be murderer was

forgotten.

CHAPTER XVII

THE IMPUDENCE OF LOVE

I was wakened later in the night by a low knock at my door.

“Who’s there?” I called softly, reaching for my revolver at the recollection of the night’s events.

The door opened quietly. “Are you awake?” a voice asked, and Jock stepped into the room.

“You weren’t hurt, Count, were you—not a bit?”

“Never touched me,” I laughed, with more levity than I felt.

“Thank God!” he muttered fervently.

“Did you find out anything?” I asked, remembering his wild ride in pursuit.

“Nothing, Count. I just wanted to tell you that you needn’t be afraid of it occurring again.”

“How can you tell that if you don’t know who did it?”

He did not answer right away, but walked to the window and looked out into the moonlight.

“We scared them, I think. I imagine they won’t come around here again.” And before I could recover myself to ask the questions that were rushing through my head he had gone.

From the limited discussion of the shooting incident on the following morning one would think human targets in that country were quite the thing. I asked Jock some of the questions he had not waited to answer in my bedroom, but he was evidently looking upon it in an entirely different light under the morning sun. He had already replaced the shattered window glass.

“Some crazy galoot of a cowboy trying to scare us,” was the explanation he gave when I asked him what steps we should take to find out who did it. “If it had been in Medicine Hat he’d have been shooting out the lights. But

there's nothing like that out here to do, so he pegs at some frightened tenderfoot. That's part of their fun. Depend upon it, if he'd wanted to hit you he could have shot off any button on your coat."

"But how did he come to be there?" I asked, as if that would refute such an explanation.

Jock laughed. "You'll find them——" he commenced. Then his face sobered and he looked at me frowning. "How did you come to be there?" was the form in which he concluded.

For a moment I was nonplussed. Across the room Margaret's eyes were fixed steadily on me, and my wits returned.

"I couldn't sleep. It looked so lovely out there in the open that I could not resist the temptation to get outside and see if the air wouldn't send me to sleep."

Margaret's face lightened and she threw me a grateful look. That morning she had looked me straight in the face when we met in the sitting-room, and I knew that I would have wagered my life on her womanliness.

Somewhat to our surprise, Jock rode away alone that day. He suggested to Dicky and myself that we accompany him, but we had been so fatigued with the previous day's saddle experience that we did not wish to undertake two days of it in succession. At our refusal he at first determined to stay with us, but some pressing matter forced him to change his mind.

All morning Margaret avoided me, although not in such a way as to lead me to believe that she had anything in particular to hide. She merely did not wish to discuss the night before, and naturally she would be diffident at acknowledging my right to the proof she and the Corporal had given me in the shadow of the trees. Even to myself I had been unwilling to admit the delight I felt when the two lovers stepped into the open in answer to my challenge.

In spite of my knowledge that any mention of my satisfaction would be an imposition on her consideration for me, I wanted to show her in some way that I could never again misunderstand her. There was surely some reason why she did not meet the Corporal openly; something must make these clandestine meetings necessary. I remembered that the policeman had never been inside the house since I came, in spite of his apparent friendliness with every one in it. Perhaps Margaret would give me an explanation.

All morning long I tried to get a chance to speak to her alone, but the housework seemed to be overwhelming. At any other time, when she had completed the few tasks that were hers within the house, she had always taken her seat on the verandah, where the wide view and the protection from the sun and winds made it the choice spot of the house. Therefore, I was unprepared to find her standing idly beside the house before her bedroom window.

“Margaret,” I pleaded, with something, too, of rebuke in my voice, “is the verandah not large enough for the two of us?”

She clasped her hands tightly behind her back and looked over the tree-tops to the yellow-grey sheen of the prairie. In her answer was none of the subterfuge of a lighter mind. “What is it you want, Count?”

“We’d be alone on the verandah,” I suggested, “and it would be more natural to talk there.”

She led the way to the chairs with no further attempt to prevent anything I might say.

“Margaret,” I began, as kindly as I could, when we were seated and I had arranged her cushion in the way I knew she liked, “there is nothing for me to say save through your permission. I can only hope that you will not misunderstand; I don’t think you will.”

She was sitting back in her chair, her head leaning against the high rush back and her eyes straight before her. She was too honest, too natural even to avert her face to conceal the feeling my questions might arouse.

“I am not doubting your claim,” she answered in a low voice.

“No, I claim nothing. I only want you to know that what I say is born of my interest in you. There is nothing on earth that means more to me than your happiness—however that might affect my future.” I added the last on the spur of the moment, and was sorry immediately, for she turned her head from me.

But she did not make believe to misunderstand me, nor did she speak the many things that would have silenced me.

“I don’t think it will surprise you to be told that Margaret Crawford is too much to me to allow anything but her happiness to influence me.”

“Thank you, Count,” she replied simply.

I hesitated. A flood of questions came to me, questions that concerned every minute of my life since I had come. I happened to glance at her feet; they were crossed and gripped together in unnatural strain. Even as I determined to end her suspense and speak out, her hands fell suddenly on the arms of the chair and she spoke almost hysterically.

“What is it, Count? Why don’t you speak?”

It was the first time I had seen her calm strength break before internal pressure. It came to me that her calmness was but on the surface, that she, too, was driven by some nervous tension that was hidden only by her superb control.

“What is the obstacle between you and Humby? Why are meetings like last night necessary?”

She was looking at me surprised, and her feet had fallen apart in evident relief. Yet the impudence of my question frightened me.

“You need not answer,” I hastened to add. “But there are so many mysteries around that I can’t bear to have you connected with them. Can I not be told something—something to relieve my mind from the whirl of queries that is making my holiday anything but a rest? I would rest easier anywhere than here, where I expected my first real holiday. But I couldn’t leave you until I know what it is that hangs over everything like a pall.”

She leaned forward with trouble in her face.

“No, no! Don’t go, Count, not yet. I’m frightened by the same things—the things you do not understand.” She dropped back in her chair. “It may be because of my efforts to unravel some of them that you misunderstand—things.”

“And am I to know nothing more, Margaret?”

She thought a moment.

“I would tell you all I know if I could; but you won’t ask any more, will you, Count?” The pleading in her voice would have made me promise anything.

“But you and the Corporal—you’re not part of the mysteries.”

“What about me and the Corporal? What is it you think about it?”

“Think about it? There’s not much thinking to do. There’s something that keeps him from the house. He loves you”—she smiled wanly—“and you love him.” She made a movement of protest. “That being so,” I proceeded

firmly, determined to show that I was proof against such petty denial, “why meet this way? I’ve seen you meet him twice now among the trees. I didn’t know that was why you were out there the first night I was here, but I do now. We all like him. If he is the man I would like to think he is, why does he not come to the house to see you openly?”

I expected her to defend him; and I was disagreeably disappointed that she did not.

“I have seen him a great many more times than that since you came,” she admitted frankly. “And if you watch from your window you will probably see me meet him a great many times more.”

“But I have never watched you,” I objected hotly. “Naturally, I looked when I saw the girl I have tried hard to forget since I found I counted nothing, walking alone out there at that time of night. I don’t like to think that the girl I have long held up before me to the exclusion of every other woman as a model of womanliness—that she could make herself so——” I floundered helplessly to think of a word that would not be too strong.

She finished the sentence for me bitterly.

“‘Cheap,’ you mean. Say it, Count.”

“I was not going to say ‘cheap.’ I meant that you might be misunderstood. The Corporal—you surely want him to look up to you like—like I used to.”

Her hands gripped the arms of the chair with a sudden spasm. I glanced up at her face resting against the rush back. Her eyes were closed, but as I looked a moisture gathered below the eyelids. Then a drop slowly formed, and before I could remember what I had said, so coarse and brutal as to bring tears to her eyes, she had suddenly risen from the chair and slipped from the end of the verandah.

“Margaret! Margaret!” I called in desperation as I looked blankly at the place where she had sat.

But she was gone, and I dared not follow.

Presently I heard her door open and close, and Dicky’s footsteps were coming down the stairs. I could not meet him. I went around to the stable and busied myself with rubbing down my broncho, a proceeding he did not appear to understand.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GAME ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

It was natural that at lunch Margaret should ignore me; her manner was so full of hauteur that I dared not even plead with my eyes for forgiveness. I had stirred a justifiable resentment by my angry, ill-judged criticism; and my indiscretion was the greater for having taken advantage of her kind acceptance of the fact of my interest to show that I was unworthy of such consideration.

Therefore I was the more surprised when, after I had left the table and was standing on the verandah alone looking gloomily over the lake, she came frankly out to me, and without waiting for me to speak, said:

"I have told you, Count, that I will probably meet Corporal Humby many times more before you leave. I did not need to tell you that, so I depend upon your silence, not out of consideration for me, but for others—many others."

Without allowing me time to reply she left me more dejected than ever, and wondering if I had deserved that suggestion of doubt concerning my silence.

It was a pleasant relief when a party of riders broke from the trees down the trail and Rosa dashed ahead to announce in a loud voice: "Here we all are. What have you got for dinner?"

It was the Mathers family—Rosa and her father and mother. The last two rode more slowly up the grade, and the woman dismounted first, turning to assist the man, who, however, laughingly pushed her hand away and climbed from the saddle with an unsteadiness he could not entirely conceal.

"Tut, tut, Mary," he said in the deep voice that announced the dread disease that had smitten him. "You'd make a baby of me if I'd let you. You and Rosa forget that I can still hold my own with you in cribbage. You won't forget last night for a time, I'm thinking."

His wife smiled as she faced the verandah, where now were gathered the entire household to welcome them.

“Here are these women folks of mine—two of them—picking on a man who’s out of training, and trying to make him think he couldn’t get along without them. It’s woman’s suffrage, that’s what it is. I’m going to cancel my subscription to *The Times*, that’s what I am, putting all these ideas in their heads. Thank goodness, there are two of my own sex here to help me out, now I’ve started the suffrage question.”

He was walking up the steps of the verandah, trying to step lightly and jauntily. But at the top he reached out his hand and leaned against the post until his breath returned. Rosa stepped anxiously toward him, but he recovered himself immediately.

“Rosa,” he ordered with exaggerated sternness, “you go and—sit on the end of the verandah and count one.” Rosa obeyed in mock terror. “Mary, you—let me see those little teeth in the front of your mouth.” She smiled in spite of herself.

“There,” he blustered, sinking heavily in the nearest chair, “I’ll teach you who’s boss in our house—you and your woman’s suffrage!”

Then his face brightened into the sweetest but most pathetic smile I had ever seen on a man. He was game to the last ditch, a brave old Englishman that only death could conquer.

When Dicky and I returned from stabling the horses the women were gathered on the end of the verandah we always used, while at the other end, seated on the floor with his back to the house, was Mr. Mathers, lost to the world in the weekly edition of *The Times* that we had seen protruding from his coat pocket. When he heard us move past him towards the steps he dropped the paper for a moment and made some trifling remark about the weather; but his mind was on the paper. It was his only means of keeping in touch with England away off in this far colony, in the farthest part of it, thirty miles from the nearest railway, and blessed with mail but once a week.

“Now, Richard, do put down that old paper, and — —” chided his wife.

“But, my dear,” he interrupted, “this paper is not old. I’ve had it only three days.”

Dicky and I laughed. Mr. Mathers looked at us for a moment in wonderment.

“Man alive! You don’t think I can finish *The Times* in three days, do you?” Then the first note of sadness came into his voice, the strain of the life he had to live. “If you’d been from home ten years—ten long, home-sick years—you’d think just as much as I do of the old sheet.” He rubbed a hand

lovingly across it. "If it was the only little bit of dear old England you ever saw, and ever hoped to see"—his eyes wandered past us to the East—"you'd never want to be through one issue till the next came."

He seemed to realise suddenly that he had thrown off his cloak of merriment. "If *The Thunderer* should ever send less than thirty-two pages I'm afraid I'd have to read the advertisements in the *Medicine Hat Times*. I do know the price of the latest frills and furbelows in London, and I can tell Mary how much we are saving by living where she doesn't need them."

He folded the paper up with a sigh of mock resignation and shoved it into the voluminous pocket which seemed to have been made for it. And all the rest of the afternoon one could not miss the name of the great English paper that was to him second only to his family.

The women had much to talk about, for they had not been together for weeks; and it gave the men the afternoon to themselves. Mr. Mathers, in spite of his vehement assertions that there was "really nothing in the newspaper world but *The Times*," was conversant with all the leading events that had been chronicled in the American newspapers.

"I see they're dabbling with the tariff again at Ottawa," he said when the conversation had swung from weather to crops, and then to harvesting implements and the prices on the prairies. "Somebody down there seems to think that if the tariff can be reduced a few shillings they're—" he always said 'they' when speaking of any country but England—"going to get their binders here for a bit of gab-fest and a farthing. There are a whole lot of farmers out here who would rather save a half crown on duty than make a fortune by real hard work."

Politics was a tabooed subject between Dicky and me because we never agreed.

"You don't get that from *The Times*," I smiled.

"One has to read some of this other trash to appreciate *The Times*. I read *The Times* for the news."

"And what do you read the other papers for?"

"Just to see what they miss—and sometimes to fill in until the next issue arrives."

It was on this afternoon that Rosa revealed the girl she really was. Brimming over with the untamed spirits of the broncho and the unlimited stretches for her wild rides, she had fixed herself in my mind as a lively

animal in action, with an unusually bright intellect. Bright she had seemed, but never deep. And yet on this afternoon I realised how much was beneath this chatter and apparent lightness. As we men sat talking I frequently looked up to see Rosa's eyes turned on her father, deaf to the lively conversation of her own sex beside her. And when they went inside to prepare dinner the subdued tramp of light feet would preface a golden head peering from the door and then hastily withdrawn.

On one of these inspections her father happened to look up.

"No; I haven't run away, Rosa. Nor have I been murdered and my body thrown into the lake. You don't think I'm going to leave with the smell of that chicken in my nostrils."

"I wasn't looking at you at all, daddy," Rosa fabricated. "I was just seeing if Count looked as hungry as he did the last time I was here. I'm afraid there might not be chicken enough to go around. They didn't expect us, you know."

And when the call came for dinner she tripped merrily out to us and steadied her father under the pretext of leaning heavily on him for support.

When Dicky and I brought around the horses later in the afternoon and Mr. Mathers climbed heavily into the saddle, Dicky stopped on the verandah long enough to whisper to Mrs. Mathers:

"I don't think these long rides can be good for him, Mrs. Mathers. I consider myself something of a doctor, you know, and I would say it was the worst thing possible for him."

A look of pain passed over the woman's face. "I know," she said sadly: "but what can I do? I positively forbade it, but he would come. He said it wouldn't be neighbourly to let it go any longer without welcoming the visitors."

"That's just like him, I should say. But ride back very slowly, please."

I walked out to shake Mr. Mathers' hand. "I see you use an English saddle, Mr. Mathers, the only one I've seen since I came out here."

He patted the little bit of leather showing in front. "And why shouldn't I? I don't need a rocking-chair and a rope to keep on my horse. This and *The Times*"—he slapped his pocket where the paper was—"oh yes, and my wife"—he smiled sweetly at her as Dicky assisted her into the saddle—"are the only English things I have."

"And how about me, sir?" demanded Rosa, reining up close beside him.

“You, Rosa,” he replied, fondly reaching over to pinch her cheek, “you’re a bit of the wild prairie, with a little cowgirl—and your mother—thrown in. And then, I’ll lose you some day, anyway.”

The girl blushed vividly and galloped away.

CHAPTER XIX

A MOONLIGHT DISCUSSION

In the evening we sat late on the verandah drinking in the clear brightness of the limpid air where prairie dryness met the brisker ether of the hills, filled with the freshness of the trees and the intoxication of lake and mountain. It was a beautiful night, quiet and dreamily pleasant. There was nothing to remind us of the night before with its danger and anxiety, and we were content to sit and dream, saying little, thinking much. Occasionally the yap of a coyote drifted up from the prairie, but even it had changed into nothing but an animal's greeting to the night. Not a leaf stirred, not a twig cracked. But out beyond, as the hours passed, the hazy outlines of tree and mound came more vividly into view under the soft touch of the rising moon. Slowly the moon crept higher, and its effulgence grew more sparkling. Black fell the shadows like parts of a great pattern of black-and-white. The moonlight was a new glory to me. Unlike the cold, hard whiteness that I was accustomed to, its softer yellow, or creamy white, was like the glimmer of the setting sun through thin clouds. It was a typical Western night with all its glory of peace and shimmering radiance.

I was thinking of Margaret and how I could convey to her most plainly my message of complete faith. And thoughts just as serious must have wrapped the others in oblivion of time and place. For a long half hour we sat, filled with the subtle influence of the moonbeams. Dicky was the first to speak, and from his tone the light-hearted Dicky was fighting against the call of the hour for silence.

He raised his hand and pointed over the tree-tops to the bright prairie. "Out there it must be almost bright as day."

Instinctively it came to me that Dicky was looking on the clear, unobstructed brightness of the prairie as a relief from something that had been in his mind as more mysterious, less open and plain. And his next words strengthened my conviction.

"How different it is all around us—the black shadows, the grass and twigs and the rough bark of the tree-trunks so familiar in the light of day,

now black as only contrast can make them. In the moonlight it is the prairie calls.”

“But it’s better to be in the dark and look into the light,” answered Margaret, “than to be clothed in light, and forced to look into the blackness of these shadows. From here we get hope; from there dread. Were we out there we would feel that ahead of us were shadow, and life, fearful because it is but guessed at.”

Her chin rested on her hand as she leaned forward on the arm of her chair.

“That’s rather a pretty thought, Margaret,” Dicky replied slowly. “It’s another form of the many promises and comforts given man through the ages for his consolation in the troubles that might discourage him. ‘Every cloud has its silver lining,’ just as the darkness of the tree-covered slope is rimmed with the radiance of the prairie. Looking out from the gloom we are sustained by the promise of better things; out there in the glow of success we read the other side shown to us as a curb; something like ‘in the midst of life we are in death.’ Everything tends to moderate man, in his over-exuberance or his dejection. Calmness—that’s what it all means—the power to endure our lot.”

It was an unusual speech for Dicky, but none of us wondered. There was that in the air which made it fit into our minds like the voices in a chorus.

“Surely it is not the aim of an anxious Providence to spoil man’s joys,” I ventured.

“Not to spoil them, but to temper them. In unrestrained pleasure man forgets to give thanks.”

“And in his sorrows—would you have him give thanks for those?”

“I do not say that. In his pleasure man must remember his servitude, in pain he will rest easier by remembering that his servitude presupposes a paternal Master. In our success He demands a share of the credit; in our failure He assumes a share of the blame and assists us. He warns us in one condition and comforts us in the other.”

Jock joined in the conversation. “‘Success’ and ‘failure,’ ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain,’ are they not all largely dependent on man himself? I employ the best cowboys I can secure to take charge of my herds. I deserve success from my efforts, and I will get it. If I neglected the first principles of ranching I would meet failure. I eat too heartily, or I fail to protect myself from the cold—I have pain; if I live wisely I have——” he hesitated at the word and

reconsidered it—"I was going to say 'pleasure,' but perhaps that is too strong. Still, if I obey the physical laws I have the nearest to pleasure my body can enjoy. And if I am responsible for the success or the feelings I have, why should I be deprived of the utmost benefit of those feelings by anything that would moderate them?"

Dicky laughed low. "One would think you wanted us to believe you were an atheist, you Scotch Presbyterian!"

"No; I don't mean that at all. I merely emphasise the power each man has of making his own bed. Whatever my faith in a Supreme Being, it would not lessen one iota my belief that He does not intend to be a father, in all that a young boy expects of that relation. Even the father strengthens his son by making him fight his own battles."

"Not when the battles are too severe for the boy," interposed Margaret. "The son learns from the experience of his own conduct, and so does man. But man learns that there are things over which he has no control. To-night we want rain; for two weeks we have needed it. What good would your cowboys be if there was not rain? And yet you can do nothing to bring it. Providence has His part in everything, and— —"

"And so has man," Jock interrupted. "I am not disclaiming the sphere of a Higher Power, but I have always had the feeling that we are inclined to leave too much of our share to Him, and thus to place ourselves in the position of being able to blame Him for what was our fault. Over-sentiment in our relationship with God has led many a man to ignore his talent. The over-dependence it brings puts many a stone in a man's pillow."

"Can a man bring too much sentiment into his relationship with God?" asked Aggie gently.

"Certainly. Take the Dreamers, on your own conception of them. Dreams are sent of God. A man is in his most helpless state when they come. A Dreamer dreams that a certain thing must be done, and he does it. You blame him. Why, unless he is over-sentimental in his beliefs?"

"Dreams are not beyond man's control," I objected. "Two cups of coffee would make me dream assault and battery, a third would make it murder. If I wanted to quarter my best friend all I would have to do would be to go to bed on a fruit-cake."

Margaret and Dicky laughed, but Jock was too serious. He did not say anything for a few minutes, and the rest of us watched a cloud flit out from

the shadow of the house, pass over the trees, and enlarge until it cast a depressing darkness over the prairie.

Then he resumed the conversation just where it had stopped.

“But suppose I found a man about to lead a bunch of my cattle over the border, would it be the proper thing for me to leave everything to Providence?”

“That’s an extreme case,” said Dicky. “A man can trust Providence, share with Him all his successes and look to Him for help in his failures, without lying down and leaving it all to Him. That is a case where instant effort is needed. Since miracles have passed God works more slowly, but just as surely. Even there you would not be justified in taking extreme measures for prevention. A bunch of cattle is of less value than one life.”

“Do you mean that there is no instance where a man would be right to take life for protection, and even to prevent disasters that are more terrible than death itself?”

“I cannot recall any.”

“Supposing your wife—or your mother—was in danger, that your future happiness and that of your house depended on the prevention of some deed a man might commit. Would you not dare anything and do anything to prevent it? Could anything make up to you for the love of your wife, for instance?”

Aggie was sitting on the edge of the verandah near Jock, and I saw her lean over and lay her hand on his arm lovingly. And Jock took his eyes from the trees, where they had been riveted all the evening, and looked at her.

“Any man’s wife who would be influenced by another man is better lost to her husband and his home,” she said simply.

He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. “Many a man isn’t worthy of his wife,” he answered.

She got up from her chair, whether impelled by his hand or of her own accord, I do not know, and sat on the arm of his chair.

“The wife who would think that is not worthy of him,” she said, as she nestled against his shoulder.

“Here, you two,” broke in Margaret, “if you’re going to spoon like that I’m going in. And anyway, we’re a mile away from the subject. Dicky was trying to prove that, as we credit a Supreme Power with our successes, so we

can depend upon Him for assistance in our failures. Isn't that what you meant, Dicky?"

"Better than I could say it, I'm sure, Margaret," he replied.

"And you merely say, Jock, that a man has to depend upon himself, and succeeds as he works."

Jock did not answer.

"But you do not tell us," she went on, "who gives him the ability to help himself. You might be able by force to stop that rustler carrying off your cattle, and another man, just as eager, would fail. You use the talent God has given you. If with a rifle I give you a wolf falls, is there not some of the thanks for that piece of good fortune coming to me?"

But still Jock did not answer. I was sitting next to him, and in the light that crept under the verandah roof from the brightness beyond I could see that Aggie had sunk into his lap and her head was against his shoulder. It was an unusual bit of tenderness that he should hold her there so quietly, and I could not help wondering if his apparent rudeness at other times was not the shyness of a reticent man—one of those unfortunate husbands who chill the home with the careful suppression of outward affection. Now he was holding her tight in his arms, too full of his love to notice Margaret's arguments. Then Aggie's head slowly turned away from his face, and I was sure I could hear subdued sobs. It was a distressing scene to me, for it told of love controlled and now unable to contain itself in the supreme joy of the moment.

I think Jock heard the sobs, too, or felt them. He half raised her as if to look at her face, but thought better of it and let her lie. Then he suddenly commenced to talk.

"I do not think we are so far apart in our opinions after all. I maintain a man must do his own work. You state that he owes the outcome to Providence and should be thankful for it. With my belief I might think the same. By the way, Aggie, I couldn't find the handkerchiefs from the last wash, and I took mine out of my pocket when I came in. Would you mind getting me one? I looked for them before I came out. You must have them in your room."

I understood the move immediately. His ingenuity opened my eyes to a new side of Jock. I was further surprised when he called out, after Aggie had gone inside: "I'll come and light the lamp for you." They were away for some time, and Aggie returned to the verandah in full control of herself.

In the meantime more clouds had gathered, and the moonlight flickered over the trees and the prairie in fitful spots and racing flashes. All the peace had gone out of the landscape, and instead was the moody instability of a stormy moon. Jock stepped to the edge of the verandah and looked up.

“Rain is coming at last,” he said, examining the sky, the Hills, and the prairie. “About twenty-four hours more and the farmers will have what they’ve been praying for.”

To me his very voice seemed changed from the one that had called to Aggie. The difference in the moonlight had affected us all, and there was no attempt to reopen the argument.

“Bed time, now,” said Jock, and we willingly went into the house.

I was sleepy when I blew out my light and started to climb into bed. Then I thought of the fleeting shadows over the prairie and the coming storm. Up here I would be able to see the peculiar effect to better advantage, and I climbed out again to have a last look. I was well rewarded for my effort, and sat down where I would see prairie and trees.

Presently a faint sound outside attracted my attention. I was about to look toward the trees whence the sound came, when I suddenly bethought myself of my message of trust to Margaret. There was no better way to prove that than to ignore the noise. She had told me she would see the Corporal many times more. She had not wasted many nights before doing so. But it surprised me to think that the Corporal was near the house again to-night, although, when I came to think of it, I had not believed him around the night before until I had seen him.

I did not look. Instead, I kept my eyes riveted on the prairie, just where it was visible over the trail disappearing among the trees. As I watched, determined not to make a sign that I knew Margaret was out there at my right, a horse swung into the opening, and a rider leaped into the saddle as the trail was reached and rode quietly away. As on that other night, I was unable to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of him, and the unanswerable query as to the reason for his passing the house so quietly brought back all the mysteries and perplexities of the weeks since I had been there. There was something in this silent act that must be connected with the things I could not understand. Was this the man who had fired at me? Where had he been when we were sitting on the verandah? Why did he remain near until that hour of the night, and then ride away up the cliff trail that led to no houses? I determined to tell the Corporal about it as soon as I had the opportunity.

CHAPTER XX

MARGARET CHANGES HORSES

It was the day Rosa had invited Corporal Humby to supper. Margaret would, without doubt, be eagerly looking forward to accepting the invitation Rosa had given for us to join the party, and I wanted to know more of kindly Mr. Mathers. Nothing had been said as yet about our visit to the Mathers, and I knew that Margaret would be reluctant to remind us when her reason would be the Corporal's presence there. So I anticipated any embarrassment by proposing the trip at the breakfast-table.

Dicky had not heard of the informal invitation, and supported me eagerly, and Jock made it simple by disclaiming any plans for the day: in fact, he appeared relieved. Our entertainment, in the serious way he treated it, must have been a strain to him. To-day he was needed at the ranch where I had had the adventure with the cattle and could ride part of the way with us.

To my surprise, Margaret demurred. She proposed postponing the visit until the threatening rain had passed, but Jock insisted.

"Better go to-day," he advised, "or you may not be able to for a week. This rain won't come before night, but when it does it's going to make up for its delay."

Still Margaret had excuses. She wanted to finish some sewing, and, anyway, she did not feel like riding.

"Nonsense!" protested Jock. "It's not so very long since I had trouble confining your riding to reasonable proportions. What in the world has got into you so suddenly?"

She looked down at her plate in some embarrassment. "All right," she agreed. "I'll go."

When I saw her alone on the verandah shortly afterwards I could not refrain from expressing my surprise. "Are you forgetting the Corporal is to be there?" I asked.

She looked at me with some surprise. "Is that why you suggested our trip?"

"Yes, partly—that, and because I wish to see Mr. Mathers in his own home."

"You're a kind of a dear," she declared, and I was amply rewarded.

I was conscious of a keen disappointment that her love was so shallow as to forget, and it was still more disagreeable that she should give me credit for reminding her, even though she had done that so sweetly.

"Some day a girl will be falling in love with you," she said speculatively. "I suppose you'd never forget a possible meeting, would you?"

"Lord forbid!" I was answering the first part of her remark.

"Forbid what? The falling in love?"

"Maybe," flippantly.

"Don't be silly about it," she rebuked. "Don't you think even that is possible?"

"There are strange things happen, I know. I've often wondered how some men deceived any woman into marrying them. Then there are others who deserve to have a dozen wives, that is, if that's any criterion of eligibility. You know a man must have some of the qualifications to be considered."

"You're too modest, Count. A man is usually taken at his own valuation. Surely you have no fatal objections to marriage—on general principles, I mean."

"Marriage is a grand institution," I declared, grandiloquently throwing out my arm. "It frequently puts an end to a man's fool days. It sometimes combines in one house evils that might otherwise have been distributed over two. It takes a man's thoughts and a woman's dreams from such frivolous unecessaries as dress and complexion, and turns them to those loftier ones of how to raise thirteen on the same money that failed to pay the man's flower bills before marriage. Marriage mends torn and broken garments and furniture, rather than bear the expense of buying new ones. It is — —"

"Don't be silly."

"Which is the second time in this brief conversation you have said that."

"A proof that I am consistent—and you are consistently silly."

“Am I silly because I reminded you that a man worthy, I hope, of all the love you give him is waiting for you, when you had forgotten it?”

“I suppose you think I am fortunate in having the man I—love waiting for me.”

“I do,” I answered seriously. “Some women have that pleasure: few men.”

“Why do you say ‘few men’? Are you not convinced that Corporal Humby knows how I—what I think of him?”

“Lord forbid! That’s the second time I’ve said that, I know. But it isn’t good for a man to know too well what a woman thinks of him before they are married.”

“Some men ought to consider themselves fortunate,” she called back as she went to her room to dress for the ride.

I had forgotten all about Margaret’s last attempt at riding, so that Jock’s exclamation when she appeared in riding-habit was not understood. But he did not wait to take chances on her ignoring his objections to such unsuitable attire for prairie equestriennes.

“Not this time!” he exclaimed, stepping out quickly to her horse and leading it away from the end of the short walk that led to the verandah. “I’m not going to give Ginger the chance of throwing you again. You must be crazy, Margaret. You know he won’t stand for it. Put on your other outfit or I won’t let you have Ginger.”

“But, Jock,” she protested in annoyance, “he can’t throw me now that I am prepared. I simply *have* to get accustomed to riding with a habit. I’m not going to live here *all* my life, and I *can’t* ride astride in the East. I must learn to use a habit or I will never be able to ride there.”

Jock was impressed with the force of her arguments.

“Do let me, Jock,” she pleaded, seeing him wavering. “You know I am too good a rider to be thrown easily. You can ride beside me, and I promise you not to let him have his head.”

She was walking out to Ginger as she spoke, and I could see the horse look around Jock’s shoulder, at the fluttering skirt that had frightened him a few days before. I didn’t like the looks of the animal.

“Margaret,” I called after her, “you ride Scar Head. He’s quiet enough. Let me have Ginger. I want something livelier under me, now that I’ve

learned to stick on them a trifle better.”

She had turned to listen to me, and as she stood I walked out and took Ginger from Jock’s hand. I did not wait for Margaret to consent or to refuse, but mounted and rode over to Scar Head to bring him to where she was standing.

“I want Ginger,” she persisted petulantly. “I’m not going to ride a family horse like Scar Head.”

I paid no attention, but handed out Scar Head’s reins to her. She was angry, I could see, but I professed not to notice it.

“Count, give me Ginger—my own horse, please.”

“Jock thinks you shouldn’t ride him, Margaret,” I said, trying to place the responsibility on the shoulders of some one else. I had done enough to incur her displeasure.

“Jock will let me ride him now, if I have him ride beside me.” She looked at him to verify her assertion.

“Oh, well,” he yielded; “one might as well give way first as last. But wait till I hold Ginger for you to mount.”

“Margaret,” I protested, trying hard to mingle stubborn refusal and entreaty, “you shouldn’t do it. What’s the use of risking it?”

She walked toward me, ignoring my appeal.

“No, you won’t do it, either,” I continued stubbornly. “I’m not going to let you place yourself in that danger again. I don’t care how angry you get.”

Margaret bit her lip to keep back her resentment at my impudence. Jock leaned his hand against the verandah post and laughed in a teasing way that added to her anger and my stubbornness.

“Count,” she began with her anger in careful check, “this is the second time you have interfered with my horse. Don’t you think you are exceeding your rights? Please give me Ginger.”

“I can’t. If Jock orders me to, of course I must. But you don’t know what is best for you. You’re not afraid, and therefore you think there’s no danger. I won’t risk it, even if you will.”

“Oh, I’m not going to order you to do anything, Count,” laughed Jock. “Between ourselves I think you’re right.”

Margaret turned to him and stamped her foot. I saw it again as I had seen it long years ago above me on the step.

“Jock McTavish!” she stormed.

Before she could vent her anger on me I spoke as gently as I could.

“I’ll enjoy the ride more, Margaret, if you will only mount Scar Head. I can’t help this. It’s no more pleasant to me than to you, but I’m more interested in your safety—even than in your anger. And I don’t blame you for feeling as you do.”

She opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it and took Scar Head’s reins.

“Good boy, Count!” cheered Dicky, who had come out in time to see the last part of the incident.

“Shut up,” I returned viciously.

I think Margaret sent me a grateful look. But she did not speak to me throughout the ride. And I was glad of that, because there was nothing but protest and displeasure she could have heaped on me for my presumption. She rode ahead with Dicky most of the time, while Jock, Aggie, and I followed. I am afraid I made a poor riding companion that day, because there was so much to think about, with Margaret’s anger, and the silent night-rider, whose existence I could not banish from my mind. Through it all would recur my disappointment that the girl ahead could love so lightly as to forget a meeting with her lover. Lost her I had, but I would like to feel that I had lost something worth striving for, rather than that she was incapable of returning such love as I could give her. I was able to convince myself that if she was no more eager to meet Corporal Humby than that I need not worry myself so much about arranging the meetings.

Jock, too, had relapsed into one of his fits of silence, and as I glanced at him I could see on his face from time to time that harassed puckering of the eyebrows that gave him such a look of sullen anger. Aggie, I think, had for companions two men who were too wrapped in themselves to care for aught else.

Near the Dreamers’ settlement we came upon the Corporal, seated on his horse beside the trail. He joined the party, although he made no mention of being on his way to the Mathers’. That, I thought, was part of the unnecessary though sweet secrecy of love. Jock had appeared to be displeased at the first sight of Humby, but afterwards he lost his worried look and called the Corporal back to us to talk about the success of the

spring's round-up compared with other years. In the midst of the conversation we branched off across the prairie toward the western end of the Hills, while Jock kept along the beaten trail toward the ranch.

As we topped the rise over which I had first seen Rosa tearing down to meet us I happened to glance back, and saw Jock disappearing into a coulée with another rider. The Corporal had looked at the same time but took no notice. A moment later we joined the pair in front.

A few minutes afterwards the Corporal left us to ride into a coulée to our left to examine it, he said, for the tracks of a small bunch of steers lost from the B bar Y ranch. He did not rejoin us for a half hour, during which we had ridden slowly on, Dicky and Aggie doing most of the talking.

I dropped behind as the Corporal galloped up. "Who was that I saw Jock with?" I asked.

He looked at me with a slight start, I thought.

"When do you mean?"

"Just now. I saw some one with him as we came over the rise. You must have seen it too. You looked back when I did."

"I suppose it was some cowboy. One could scarcely tell from that distance," he answered carelessly.

"It looked to me like Maskin, the leader of the Dreamers. I think I'd know that pair of shoulders anywhere. What in thunder are he and Jock so thick about? I always feel as if he'd stick a knife in a man as quick as speak to him."

Aggie called back to us.

"Are you going to the Mathers', Corporal?"

"I may ride that far."

"I thought you were to be there for supper to-night," I blurted out.

I imagined I saw Margaret turn the back of her head more fully to me.

"No; I can't do that. Worse luck!" he complained. "I've got some work to do down this way. I don't get much time to sup anywhere, except from the saddle, or in a rush at some house where I happen to be at supper time."

"You have to look up that lost bunch from the B bar Y ranch, I suppose."

"Ye-es," he assented, somewhat doubtfully. "I really shouldn't go any farther," he continued, consulting his watch.

But I knew he hated to leave us. Margaret came to his rescue.

“Do ride with us as far as the house, anyway,” she pleaded.

No man, lover or no, could resist that. So he remained, and presently we commenced to climb from the prairie in among little bluffs of trees. The bluffs developed into larger bits of bush, detached portions of the thicker forest that hung over our head on the west end of the foothills that led down from Abbot’s, now some miles to the east. The trees were not so thick, however, on this side of the Hills, and there were more pines on the slopes, sending down to us the refreshing odours of the dead needles covering the ground beneath.

Long before we came to it we could see the house where the sick man was trying to win back his lost strength, and succeeding merely, we knew, in prolonging the spark that would one day flicker out quietly, as befitted the fine old man, old to us because of his drooping power. Far above the house waved a huge Union Jack. Soon a handkerchief fluttered from the verandah.

“Rosa will be here in a few minutes,” Margaret observed. “She always meets us. One can see so far from up there, and Mr. Mathers is usually sitting on the verandah, where he can see everything for miles.”

Sure enough, presently we heard the clatter of her horse’s feet, and from behind a bluff she broke into view, hatless and flushed.

“Hurrah,” she shouted, as she saw the members of the party. “Now we’ll have just a lovely day. We were wondering when you were going to return our call. And you, Corporal Humby, have owed us a call for many a day. Do you know, Margaret, I’ve asked him up to see us dozens and dozens of times, and we don’t see him once a week scarcely.” She looked chidingly at the Corporal, who was sitting his horse, straight and handsome, with his Stetson in his hand.

“If the Inspector knew I came that often,” he laughed, “I think it would be difficult to explain the necessity of so much police work in this section; especially when there are such well-known criminals in the country as are staying around at the foot of Abbot’s.” He looked at us with mock seriousness.

“Well, I’m going to do something awful, just to make it necessary for you to investigate. Anyway, you’re coming now,” she continued, falling in beside Margaret.

The Corporal looked pathetically at Margaret.

“Miss Crawford, will you tell her how impossible it is? I’m afraid to. But I warn you, Rosa,” he went on hastily with assumed fear, “that when it comes to lady criminals I’m not the least use. I leave that to Wooller, down on the Gros Ventre. He’s a regular woman-hater. So if you steal a steer or maim a horse I’ll just send down for Wooller. Nothing he’d like better than to run you into Medicine Hat, or lock you up at the Post until the Inspector can come out to try you.”

Rosa appealed sorrowfully to Margaret. “Can’t he come, Marge? Or he is just playing with me?”

“He couldn’t play with you, Rosa,” answered Margaret; and I felt my anger rise at the careless cruelty of the words.

“Oh, can’t he, just!” pouted the girl. “Corporal Victor Humby,” she continued, wheeling her horse across his path, “the next time you come you have to do it without invitation. I’m not going to ask you again till you come yourself, so now.”

He laughed admiringly. “I’ll do that, Rosa. You see your invitations only make it harder for me to stay away.”

“Maybe there are other young women he wants to see occasionally,” said Margaret.

I frowned at the levity and heartlessness of these two lovers, knowing as they did how deeply in love was this poor young girl. I could not understand Margaret and the Corporal.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MATHERS AT HOME

The Mathers' house was a bungalow, large and roomy, with a wide verandah on the three sides away from the Hills. The south-west corner of this verandah was partially screened from the winds by glass which could be removed at pleasure. This was Mr. Mathers' special corner, and in it we found him and his wife when we dismounted before the verandah.

Mrs. Mathers rose and smiled a welcome, but she did not come to meet us, a precaution which was explained and justified a moment later.

"'Will you come into my parlour?'" quoted her husband, trying in vain to conceal the weakness of his voice. He placed his hands on the arms of the chair as if to rise, but his wife had been watching for that, and gently pressed him back.

"Don't get up, Richard," she begged. "You don't need to move. Let yourself rest, dear." She took his hands from the arms of the chair with mock determination and severity.

"There are those bossy women again," he blustered; but he did not resist, sinking back gratefully into his chair. "I tell you I'm going to change my will. When I get tired of this view and these trees I'm going to leave my money to a home for henpecked husbands. If there was such an institution now I'd qualify for shelter. May I rub my right hand, please? It's itchy. Or have you decided I shouldn't?"

Rosa walked over to him and rubbed the hand.

"But that's not the right one," he grumbled.

She rubbed the other.

"Is there any other way you want us to show how we manage you?" she asked.

"Nothing more is needed, I think," groaned he, looking at us with exaggerated appeal. "Boys, never marry a woman who bosses. You can't call the back of your hand your own."

“Men have changed nowadays, daddy,” Rosa observed.

“I know that. Remember what I used to be, and compare it with what I’ve come to.”

“But men need to be bossed. I’ve a theory that — —”

“Oh Lord! Another of them! Theoretically, Rosa, you’re a marvel.”

We laughed with Rosa.

“And I was going to add that practically — —” he looked at his wife as she shook a disapproving head — “practically you’re your mother’s daughter. That’s what I call a precise description. And it lets me out of another row, besides conveying all I wanted. But, boys, I can tell you her mother was not always thus. She and her daughter are spoiling each other more every day.”

Mrs. Mathers smiled fondly at him. “Twenty-two years with you, Richard, would change any one. Rosa’s had eighteen of them, and, as you say, she’s changing, too.”

“There it goes again. Blame it on me. If I had my way — — Hello, Corporal! I didn’t notice you. You’re such a modest Westerner, hiding around there behind Rosa. Let me feel the weight of that hand of yours again. It seems to send the blood through these flabby muscles of mine. . . . That’s right,” as the Corporal grasped the extended hand with the gentleness of a child, but with apparent roughness. “Makes me feel able even to handle these women once more. Sit down, Corporal. And the rest of you. We’ve got a good steak to-day — something you don’t get very often in this country, where all one should have to do is to go out and cut what one wants. Had to buy a whole steer to get a decent bit of steak, and had to pay export prices, too. If I were back in old England a month from now I’d probably be eating a piece of steak off the same animal’s brother at the same price I pay here, where I saw the beast grow up from an unbranded calf.”

Mrs. Mathers leaned toward him and began to talk to us. The movement was as readable as his fatigue after the long, excited talk. He was not able to stand it, although he delighted in it, and she drew the general attention to herself to make him rest.

“Can you not stay, Corporal?” as the policeman refused to sit down and moved back to the steps. “Rosa, and Mr. Mathers and myself would like to have you stay.”

But the Corporal could not wait. We watched him as he rode away to the north through the trees around the base of the Hills till he passed out of

sight.

It was a beautiful view from where we sat. The house was situated high on the slope, at the extreme western end of the Hills, looking far over the rolling prairie to the west and north and south. Below us coulées of various sizes cut the immediate prairie into ridges of blazing sunlight and lines of mellow shadow. Here and there, down in many of these coulées and wandering down their sides, bluffs of stubby trees broke the yellow-grey of the deadened grass with dark patterns of green. Beyond, the prairie levelled more and more into the veiled distance, and on its surface but two or three bunches of cattle fed leisurely, looking at this distance like bits of blackened flotsam, drifting so slowly at times, and at others caught in an eddy and held on the surface of the waters. Every now and then a spot would detach itself from the edges and drift around to bring into the group another spot that had wandered. To the north nothing was visible to break the grey stretch, except close to the Hills, where one or two of the Dreamers' shacks were in sight, and farther out four detached buildings, miles and miles apart. Southward a black line showed where trees had for some reason decided to grow.

"Can you blame me for thinking that this is next best to home?" the sick man asked as he saw me looking around. "And it's so high I can close my eyes and think I can see away to my old home. Long way, that way, to England, but it's not hard to think anything when you have nothing to do but put your mind on it. Sometimes I do really think I can see the Rockies from here, but Rosa says it isn't possible to see two hundred and fifty miles even up here. Between ourselves, I don't believe she knows."

He spoke in a loud whisper as if to keep the girl from hearing, but all the time looking over to see that she did. Rosa patted his hand and pulled it down from beside his mouth.

"Daddy's imagination is better than a telescope any day."

"What sweet ways women have of telling you that you don't know what you're talking about," he grumbled. "That's exactly the same as calling a man a — —"

A protesting hand was hastily placed over his mouth. "Daddy, daddy!" Rosa expostulated.

And "Richard, Richard!" joined in Mrs. Mathers in mild rebuke, turning away from Margaret, to whom she had been talking.

"I was just going to say, my dears, that it was the same as calling a man a dreamer of dreams, or, as Rosa would say, with her modern slang, 'talking

through his hat.”

Their banter was pathetic to me. Here was a man so weak with a fatal sickness that his days were few—so sick that he could only sit and think of the country he so longed to see again before he died. And at his side stood two women, suffering uncomplainingly the miseries of an exile relieved only by the few congenial friends at the house around the Hills. There was little in the life to take their minds from themselves and their ever-present forebodings, and yet at all times a conversation of light badinage and mock seriousness came and went with all the apparent light-heartedness of happy conditions. If the fight of the two women was hard, his was terrible. Their sorrow was the end they knew; his was that, and the weakness of mind and body to play the part he had assigned himself. They knew; but he knew as well, and knew they knew. They realised not that behind his mirthful banter was the stubborn determination of the brave gentleman he was that they should never know he knew—the last brave stand that would leave a memory of honour and unselfishness.

On that verandah there was sufficient reason for silence; one would never feel the need of more than the beautiful, varied stretch of landscape. I have always been content to sit on high places and look, simply look. There are times when no word of man fits into the landscape God has made.

Thus we sat in broken silence, until from under the trees far around the Hills came a mounted figure. It turned, stood still a moment, and again disappeared among the trees. I had no difficulty in recognising the Corporal, but his reason for coming out there, almost back on our trail, was not so evident. I found no readier solution when, after examining that slope of the Hills for a long time, I saw the same figure ride out at a much greater distance and down over the ridge toward the houses of the Dreamers. He was back almost where he had joined us.

“Squart appears to be having some difficulty with his bunch to-day,” said Mathers at one time, breaking a long silence among the men, although the women had been talking quietly farther over on the verandah.

“I noticed that,” agreed Rosa. No matter to whom they were talking the ears of these two women were constantly open to what Mr. Mathers might say. Rosa stepped into the house and brought out a pair of field-glasses.

“I guess it’s the thunder in the air,” she announced, putting the glasses to her eyes.

“You don’t mean to say you can tell which is Squart from here,” said Dicky. “I thought my eyes were good, but that’s miles beyond me. They all

look alike to me from here.”

“That’s because you’re not used to them,” laughed Mr. Mathers. “Squart usually has a bunch out there—that second one to the south. There! That’s Squart himself riding along the top of that ridge.”

“But how in the world do you know it is he?”

“You can tell with the glasses after you get used to things a little. But we know because we have seen him there so much. He seems to favour that stretch. A small stream runs off to the river where you see the line of trees.” He pointed to the dark line I had seen away to the south. “That’s across the border, in Uncle Sam’s Land.” He pronounced it as one word.

“First thing in the morning after eight o’clock,” broke in Rosa, “Squart rides wildly up and down twice at the side of his herd. That’s the signal it is he. Daddy or I usually respond with the flag.”

Mr. Mathers looked up lovingly at the flag fluttering wildly in the breeze from the head of a tall flagstaff on the highest ground at the corner of the verandah.

“But what can be the matter?” Rosa was looking through the glasses to the spot where we could make out with the unaided eye a rider moving rapidly along.

A few black spots detached themselves from the bunch and spread out, and new ones appeared over the ridge and ran in various directions.

“Something in the coulée is frightening them.”

We were all watching now, and presently two horses appeared out of the coulée and stood still on the top of the rise.

“Why, it’s two men been riding through the herd. . . . Oh!”

We could see Squart riding fast towards the strangers, and at Rosa’s exclamation one of the figures seemed to shoot from the saddle and disappear on the other side of the horse.

“Squart threw his rope at that one. Not to lasso, but to frighten the horse. It has bucked its rider off. . . . The other man has stopped it running! . . . Squart’s riding along around the bunch without stopping! Oh, what can have happened!”

The dismounted stranger regained his saddle and the two of them rode away in our direction. Rosa was following them with the glasses.

“I believe it’s Mr. Maskin, one of them. Yes; that’s who it is.”

“Another damn Dreamer with him, I guess,” explained her father. “Oh, I beg your pardon, dears, I mean another that will be damned or I’m out of touch with the ways of Providence. They’ve been riding through the bunch. Squart tells me they often do that. Claim the cattle have no right to block the way, that the country belongs to the farmers, and if the ranchers’ cattle are disturbed—well, they must take the consequences.”

“There, they’re turning off toward that other bunch. The cowboys have seen them and are rounding the cattle up to give no excuse for disturbing them.”

“By Gad! The Dreamers are going to get a bunch of shooting cowboys around their ears some day. I think I could help load the guns, anyway.”

The Dreamers did not interfere with the second herd, probably deterred by the stand of the cowboys, who rode around to that side of the herd and waited for their approach. Instead, they veered off and returned to the more beaten trail which led toward the foot of the slope beneath us. In a few minutes they were below us, almost a mile away but plainly visible. Maskin, to our surprise, kept straight along up the slope, while the other held the trail toward the Dreamers’ settlement.

“I don’t remember having invited Maskin here,” muttered Mr. Mathers. “Am I wrong, dear?”

Mrs. Mathers smiled at the nearest approach to hostility her husband could bring himself to show an approaching guest, however unwelcome.

Maskin rode along without hesitation until he came close enough to recognise us. Then he took off his hat with an imposing sweep that sat well on the upright, well-knit figure.

“A grand day!” he said, taking in the entire group.

We all bowed in silence except the host.

“Rain coming soon, though. Don’t you think so, Mr. Maskin?” he said.

The Dreamer looked carelessly up at the sky, as if in recognition of the fact that everything said thus far was mere form.

“Probably,” he replied. “We need it badly enough.”

“Won’t you come in and enjoy the view with us? Rosa, bring out another chair, please.”

Dicky and I jumped to bring the chair.

“No, no; I’m not coming in. I just wanted to ask how you were, Mr. Mathers. How do you feel this spring?”

“Fine and fit, thank you. It would be rank ingratitude to this air to feel otherwise.”

“Glad to hear it, very glad.” Maskin swung his horse around with a jerk of the rein. “I’ll bid you good day, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you enjoy the view long.”

“We will,” replied Rosa. “One can see everything that happens so far from here.”

There was no mistaking the hint in her words, and Maskin unconsciously looked out towards where Squart and his assistant had finally succeeded in rounding up the disturbed herd.

“Rosa, Rosa!” whispered her mother reprovingly.

Maskin removed his hat again to bid us good-bye, with the sweep that became his big frame—the scoundrel knew it, I felt sure.

“I see you have your flag still at the top,” he called back.

“Yes, and it’s likely to be there till sundown for many a day yet,” shouted Mr. Mathers with a strength that surprised us and drew a soothing hand from his wife.

Our host continued to fume quietly long after Maskin had dropped from view among the trees.

“Still at the top,” he growled. “And why shouldn’t it be? He’d like to have the black flag there. Kicked out of the States, I guess, and then comes over here to run the country. Wonder the cowboys don’t puncture him like a rabbit warren. And comes up here to ask me if I’m well! He wouldn’t care if I weren’t. Needn’t pretend that was what brought him here. I wonder what it was. Wanted to see who was here, I guess.”

His wife gently soothed him, succeeding at last by reminding him that it was scarcely fair to receive a kindly inquirer that way. The ladies went inside to prepare the dinner, and Dicky, who had been very quiet since we had come, now broke into conversation, at the same time closely watching the sick man with a scrutiny that convinced me that he had something in his mind. Gradually the talk veered round to climate, and then to health, and before I was aware of it he had Mr. Mathers talking reluctantly of his illness.

“Don’t you think, Mr. Mathers,” Dicky asked, when the conversation had proceeded along this line for a few sentences, “that this country has given you about all it has for you? You know there’s a time when a change is best even from the healthiest of climates. . . . Now, I have done some work down in Arizona. It’s a great place for some forms of your—ailment.” It was so like Dicky to select the word that would hurt least. “Just as much sun down there as here, just as dry, pure air; and there’s nothing of that severe winter I understand you have here.”

“You talk like a doctor I had from Medicine Hat a few months ago. But I like this country too well to risk another. Maybe the Union Jack over me has something to do with it.”

“But you’d find them just as good to you there as here. And, after all, it’s your best health that counts.”

“If they’d let me take the old flag with me, perhaps I might go sometime. I’ll wait till fall, though. There can be nothing better than this country in summer. You seem to have made a study of these things. You’re an engineer, aren’t you? I’m not saying that to doubt the value of your advice, but you talk intelligently about the thing.”

“No, I’m not an M.D.,” admitted Dicky, “if that’s what you mean. But one of my best college friends studied medicine. I always was doubtful which I would like to be most, a doctor or an engineer; so I used to use his text-books and squeeze into some of the lectures and clinics; and I picked up much that way. Since then I’ve read a lot about it. But better still, I’ve been practically the only doctor in my camps most of the time, down there in Peru for years, and later in Arizona and Colorado. . . . It was some experience, I tell you, for variety of illnesses and accidents.” He stopped with a consciousness that he had been talking of himself to an unusual extent. “But don’t take my advice against a physician’s,” he urged. “That Medicine Hat doctor thought the same, by what you say, and— — What’s the matter, man? Here!” For Mr. Mathers had suddenly fallen back in his chair, a deathly whiteness in his face, and a weak hand clutching at his side.

A call to dinner came from within the house, followed by Rosa’s appearance on the verandah.

“For God’s sake,—keep her—away,” breathed the stricken man. “I’ll—be—all right—in a—minute.”

Dicky was leaning over the chair as if engaged in deep conversation, and at the same time was feeling in his pockets. I rose quickly and met Rosa half way.

“Here, let them be till they thresh that question out,” I said as calmly as I could. Dicky told me afterwards that I even managed to laugh. “They’re discussing the merits of operation for appendicitis. I’m no use to either side, so I’ll go in with you. They’ll be through in a minute. Dicky’s already looking for help and quoting authorities I don’t believe exist.” I took her arm and drew her back towards the door.

“Father’ll beat him sure,” she said, smiling indulgently. “When he is quiet like that I know how interested he is. That’s one of his favourite discussions.”

I drew my hand across my damp brow and pulled her inside with shocking familiarity. We were deep in the discussion of the duty one owed himself and his neighbours in adopting the latest fashions, when the two men entered. Dicky was holding Mr. Mathers’ arm as if to emphasise a point he was trying to drive home.

“Phew!” said the sick man, dropping into his chair with a sigh of relief. “Mr. Tatham nearly downed me that time. I’ve got to read up a few more authorities.”

I chuckled in a way that must have sounded silly, and Dicky whispered to me amid the clatter of dishes: “Jove, boy, you’re great.”

In the afternoon Mr. Mathers and Dicky retired to the warm side of the verandah, while the women and I chose the shady side to allow Mr. Mathers his rest.

The most important piece of news that had come from England in the recent letters to the Mathers had been the marriage of an old schoolmate of Rosa’s, a little girl whom she had left in England with pig-tail braids down her back and a romantic child’s belief in the coming of a real prince some day. Rosa was full of the subject. To her marriage was so far beyond mere love that her young friend appeared to have aged ten years in the changing of her name. The little piece of wedding-cake which she brought from the house and kept in her hand as she expressed her naïve opinions on marriage as it affected life seemed to her to be the magic emblem of the altered condition of her schoolmate. That little piece of hardened cake, an inch square, was the difference between pig-tails and “Mrs.” before your name; for she had remembered her friend always as the little girl at school, and now she had a man—and a house—all to herself.

“Dear Edith!” she sighed. “I see she has called herself ‘Edythe’ on her announcement. I wonder if that is a part of the change of name. She’ll never have any more worry about the number of petals in a daisy. There won’t be

anything to wish when she sees the new moon over her right shoulder. Life is just one big certainty for her now—not even the man to worry about!”

She sighed again prodigiously, and we laughed.

“Why don’t you make sure of one for yourself?” suggested Margaret, pointing at the piece of cake.

“I only wish I could. I think it’s real unfriend-like of Edith to beat me out by so many years. Because it’ll be years and years before I’ll be old enough to marry.”

Mrs. Mathers laughed quietly.

“And how old is Edith, Rosa?” she asked.

“Nineteen—why, she’s just a year older than I am.” And the dimples came again to her cheeks in a ripple of joyful laughter. “Just to think! All that difference in one year! Just three hundred days between uncertainty and peace!” She looked down at the cake and its yellow bit of crumpled icing.

“There are just seven days between you and as much certainty as you can have short of the ceremony,” laughed Margaret. “Why don’t you sleep on the cake? That will settle all doubt.”

Of course Rosa made her explain. All you had to do was to have another write down the names of six men on separate slips of paper, leaving a seventh blank. These were placed under the pillow at night with the wedding-cake, and each morning a slip was withdrawn and destroyed without opening. The name on the last slip was the man the Fates had destined to make wedding-cake necessary for yourself. The blank meant oldmaidship.

Interested as she was, Rosa was not too absorbed to remember the love affairs of others. “How much cake do you require?” she inquired. When she was told there was no limit she rushed into the house and returned with the inch-square bit divided into three parts. “One for each of us,” she announced, indicating Margaret and me.

“Margaret can write my slips, and I’ll write for the two of you.”

“But you don’t know the names of enough girls for me,” I protested, indulgently falling in with her mood. “Give me a fair show. You may not be acquainted with the very ones I like best. And I don’t want my chances to be ruined by your ignorance.”

“Wait and see,” she smiled knowingly. My character and career had evidently been well discussed before my arrival. I suppose the topics of conversation in that country were limited enough to make material even of me.

“Better leave all mine blank,” I called after them, as Margaret and Rosa withdrew into the house to write my slips. “You’ll be sure to strike it then.”

“I think I’m sure enough as it is,” Rosa called back. “I’ll convince even Margaret that sleeping on wedding-cakes is infallible.”

There was a great deal of laughter at first within doors, and then I could distinguish subdued protestation from Margaret. Presently Rosa appeared with one hand held behind her back, using the other to repel Margaret, who was trying to reach the closed hand. I rose and took the slips from Rosa.

“But they’re not the right names,” protested Margaret. “I know more about your friends than she does.”

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” suggested Rosa. “We’ll read the names to Dicky and let him decide.” But Rosa’s proposition was not accepted. Instead, Margaret suddenly yielded, although there was an annoyed look in her eyes that did not lessen under Rosa’s mischievous watching.

“One thing I want you to promise, Count,” Rosa stipulated, “that you will not look at a slip without sleeping on them. Promise me that.”

I pocketed the slips and the tiny bit of cake.

“I promise nothing. But when one’s destiny is so easily decided you surely do not think I would do anything to break the charm. And I suppose at the end of the time I would be justified in seeking out the girl and making the slip the foundation for my appeal.”

“Certainly!” answered Rosa with emphasis.

Margaret was talking fast to Mrs. Mathers and Aggie, but it was not difficult to imagine that her ears were open to what we were saying, even though her back was turned quite deliberately towards us.

“And if I’m refused—or if I’m a bachelor—I’m to blame it on you,” I threatened.

“If I could only feel as blameless of other things!” said Rosa with a tinge of seriousness, soberly watching Margaret’s back. “Perhaps it would have been fairer of me to have allowed Margaret to write the names.”

“Yes, indeed it would,” assented Margaret, breaking in instantly on her conversation with the other two women. “Let me do it now.” She left her seat and held out her hand.

Both Rosa and I laughed.

“That was just a little private conversation of ours,” I answered. “We did not imagine it possible that you could hear us in the midst of such an absorbing talk as you were having.”

Margaret laughed half angrily, half helplessly, and turned her back to us again, never addressing me until supper was called.

When Dicky and I had brought our horses around to the front after supper, the sick man clasped the hand of my friend in both of his.

“Good-bye, Dicky,” he said, using the nickname that had been reserved for the Quintuplets and their friends. “When I need a doctor I’ll send for you.”

Dicky looked down into the man’s eyes with that sympathy I knew so well.

“I hope you’ll never need me but as a friend. But don’t forget me—any time.”

I had made my adieux and was holding the horses until the rest were ready. Aggie had mounted her horse and was riding away, but Margaret remained talking to Rosa until Dicky had mounted. Then with a tinge of flush in her cheeks she stepped to me and held out her hand for Ginger’s reins. I shook my head and passed the reins of Scar Head to her.

She pouted a little.

“Am I not to have my own horse this time, Count?” she whispered pleadingly.

I shook my head again, and without further protest she mounted Scar Head. My shoulders rose with pride at my authority. Then Rosa’s merry laugh deepened the pout on Margaret’s face and sent a droop to my shoulders.

CHAPTER XXII

RAINBOUND

Late in the night the June rains commenced. Since autumn scarcely a drop had fallen, the winter snows providing the necessary moisture for the crops in this semi-arid district. Long before the moisture left in the ground by the heavy snows had gone the spring crops had been planted, and by the time I arrived the tilled fields were showing green. The farmers had learned to adapt their tilling to the requirements of the moisture conditions, and every drop that reached the ground was carefully conserved by a system of dry farming that prevented its evaporation.

But this spring the rains had been delayed so long that the farmers had feared for their crops, and the ranchers were bemoaning the lack of fresh grass and water for the herds, and every cloud in the sky had been watched to its end. Jock had estimated the arrival of the storm within a few hours, for in less than twenty-four hours after we had been sitting on the verandah watching the cloud fantasies of the prairie the rain-fall commenced. All the following day and the next there was no sign of the storm having spent itself. We remained close indoors, and Jock would not leave us, although the work on the ranches was going on as usual and for some of it his presence was needed. Dicky and I insisted on his continuing his duties as if we had not been there, but the more we insisted the more stubborn he became.

On the morning of the first day Margaret did succeed in prevailing upon him to the extent of a doubtful consent. Dicky added his word of urging, and Jock promptly refused to go.

“Look here, old man,” urged Dicky, “you’re altogether too good to us. We can get along all right for a day. It makes me feel uncomfortable to see you sacrificing your duties to our pleasure. We will find enough to entertain us while you’re gone.”

Jock looked gloomily at Aggie.

“I suppose you could, but I’m not going.” Aggie added no word of encouragement to our proposals.

“Aggie,” I protested, “can’t you convince this husband of yours that you and Margaret can look after us while he is away?”

Instead of answering me she appealed with a look to Jock. He glowered in reply, and Margaret watched the scene in silence.

“I believe they’re afraid of you, Jock,” I laughed. “You’d better give Mathers the secret. He thinks his women boss him shamefully.” Aggie blushed, and Margaret looked at me quietly; but in her eyes was disapproval. “We would rather have you with us, Jock, if you can stay, but I don’t think one with your large interests can afford to waste time on two useless Easterners who have nothing to do but be nice to the ladies and look pleasant.”

My speech did not appear to have cleared the atmosphere. Jock was silently threshing the question out for himself, a habit to which I had become accustomed in the college days.

“I suppose he knows best,” said Margaret. “But if you’re not going, let’s have a game of bridge. I’ll play until Aggie finishes her work; then she can cut in.”

Jock’s brow cleared with the dismissal of the worry of deciding whether his duty to us was stronger than that to his work, and threw himself into the game. He and Dicky beat Margaret and me disastrously, and when Aggie came into the room later in the morning I suggested that she take my place to change the luck for Margaret. But the latter insisted that she had some sewing to do and that Aggie take her place.

However, Jock would not hear of it.

“No; the family challenges the guests,” he declared. “Aggie and I can trounce you two just as badly as Dicky and I beat Count and Margaret. It’s I who has the luck. For the honour of the West we’ll show them a few wrinkles in bridge, won’t we, Aggie?”

Dicky changed into Margaret’s chair, and for the remainder of the morning we played that way. After lunch I suggested that we have another rubber, with Aggie as my partner, just to see who had the luck; but Jock would not consent; and throughout the many rubbers we played in the three days’ rain Aggie played with Jock, unless Margaret was filling her place. We joked about it, and dared Jock to let either one of us have Aggie for a rubber. He laughingly persisted in his belief that the West could outplay the East, and would not risk breaking the combination.

They were three happy days, more so than we had come to anticipate. Jock showed less of that nervous energy and irritability that we ascribed to the daily grind of ranch life and the general rush of the West. I had a deep sympathy for the lack of companionship he must have suffered during the years since he had come West. I felt that a year of it would work untold changes in me. It was pleasing to us all to see him drawn out from his narrow interests in cattle, and frequently our conversation reverted to the old Quintuplets' days when he would either be fighting with us for interrupting him in those endless experiments with sound, or leading in some harebrained escapade that frightened the rest of us.

Aggie, too, smoothed out the lines of worry, and resumed some of the cheeriness which I had known in the bright girl at college. Whenever Jock brightened the smiles would wreath her face in a touching way, and once when I was alone with her, and Jock's laugh came through the kitchen door, I was tempted to ask her to tell me what had brought those lines.

"I'll never believe again that rain is depressing," I said. "These are the pleasantest days we've had yet—and that means a lot." I added the last to prevent her misunderstanding me.

Jock's pleasant raillery came to us, coupled with a laughing protest from Margaret at some teasing remark he had made.

"I think it's as pleasant a time as *I've* had for years," Aggie answered. Then she hastened to add: "It's so pleasant to see some of the old Toronto friends after years of exile. I don't think I would ever tire talking of the days when we thought of little else than our lectures and the receptions and college entertainments."

"You'd like to go back to Toronto to live?" I asked.

"Oh, wouldn't I? If only I could get Jock to see it that way. But then there's more money out here, and he won't think of any other life."

"I may be wrong," I commenced reflectively; "but I don't think he likes it here as much as you think. He doesn't seem to be entirely happy, and I can't see how it can be good for either of you to be so out of touch with the people you might associate with and enjoy. I think he's just attracted by the hustle, and drawn on with the gamble of cattle. Once he had the opportunity of seeing some other life again, I believe he'd realise the difference."

She leaned across and laid her hand on my sleeve with a seriousness that startled me.

“Do you think we could get him to go, Count?” I was sure there were tears in her eyes, but I would not embarrass her by looking. I had an impression that those tears were not for me to see—probably she did not even know that they were there.

“No harm in trying,” I answered lightly.

“Where’s Aggie?” I heard Jock call suddenly from the kitchen, as if he had just noticed her absence.

“Don’t try yet, please,” she whispered hurriedly. “He mustn’t know I suggested it.”

By the time Jock was in the room she was sitting back in her chair with her head turned toward the window, and I had, without apparent reason, begun to talk about the stream of rain pouring from the corner of the verandah roof. Jock’s mood had changed, and I was conscious of an awkward silence for a moment, broken by the entrance of Margaret and Dicky.

The attitude of Dicky during those three days bothered me most. He was the quiet one of the party. I often caught him looking at Jock with a thoughtful expression. Then he would stare at Aggie from under his eyebrows. At such times I endeavoured to bring him into the conversation before Jock would notice him. Sometimes he would reveal his old self, only to stop with an abruptness that told of weightier thoughts that would remain hidden for but a few moments at a time. Then he would glance at Jock in a stealthy way and relapse into silence. I began to notice that wherever Aggie was he was not far away, and sometimes I looked at him so intently that he noticed it and withdrew with an annoyed blush. After, he would talk to Margaret or Jock as if unaware that Aggie was around. Gradually he overcame this unconscious direction of his looks and movements, and with this came an increased cheerfulness, until Dicky became the practical joker and fun-maker of old. I knew that the man was fighting the magnetism of the woman he could not forget. I was never troubled for a moment with the idea that his thoughts were other than the purest and most honest, but I feared that Jock might notice.

On the third day, when the sky showed signs of clearing, we began to make plans for the following days. Jock threw himself into them with an ardour that made us look forward with pleasure to the approaching completion of the spring work when our host would be free to give us his whole attention. There were many parts of the district we had not yet visited, and which Jock would be able to show us to the best advantage.

"I'm looking forward to that promised trip up Abbot's," I remarked when several excursions had been outlined. "The forbidden fruit, you know. I'm just longing to eat of it."

"I'll take you there some time," Jock assured me. "But we'll leave that until we've done the easier trips. Once you have taken that trip you won't want a second experience. It's a stiff climb."

"How did you come to know about it? Corporal Humby tells me that scarcely any one has climbed there—none that he knows of."

"I've only been a small part of the way up, far enough to know how hard it is and to realise some of its dangers. When I came here first I was full of the same longing to climb it as you are. That's when I tried it. I've had to work around its base a little, too, in among the trees. Once or twice I went in to see if I could get a shot at a pack of wolves that killed some of my calves one winter. It's an easy place to get lost in, I can tell you."

"Dicky and I are going to see all there is to see before we leave the country. We're too ambitious to let Abbot's frighten us. Aren't we, Dicky?"

My friend was standing with his back to us looking out of the window at the breaking clouds. He turned at my question and answered half-heartedly.

"Dicky Tatham," I said, "you know you're as anxious to get up there as I am. You're not losing your courage, are you?"

Dicky laughed.

"Hardly that, Count. But there are lots of other places I'm just as eager for Jock to take us."

I would like to have spoken of the meeting-place of the Dreamers which we had discovered, and of the figure we had seen and the flashes on the side of the mountain. It struck me then for the first time as strange that both Dicky and the Corporal had made me promise to tell no one, when Jock, at least, should have been let into the secrets and consulted. He might be able to explain these uncomfortable mysteries.

The first trip we had planned was to a spot of local fame, called the Red Cliffs. Some fifteen miles farther east, at the edge of the Hills, was a peculiar cliff of red clay. In some bygone day it had been burned into a solid mass of brick by fires whose origin could only be conjectured. The Indians could not remember when the red cliff was not a shining mark for miles around. It was surmised that an escape of natural gas, which is now found plentifully in and around Medicine Hat, had been ignited by lightning and had burned until the

pocket was exhausted, changing the cliff into brick in the burning. It was thought by some that there was oil in the neighbourhood, and that this had caught fire in some way.

Dicky was greatly interested, but inclined to discount the story and believe it but a cliff of red clay that had hardened with the heat of the sun and the exposure of centuries. Aggie added to the tale by narrating some of the stories popularly connected with the spot.

“You must be careful there, if what they say has any truth in it. They tell of thousands of rattlesnakes there in former years, drawn by the heat that is retained by the hardness of the brick, and by the convenient cracks.”

Jock laughed sneeringly.

“That’s another of the Indian yarns told to interest the tenderfoot.”

“What do you mean by ‘another’?” I asked. “Is it the Blue Wolf you mean?”

“There are dozens of them you’ll hear if you’re here long enough. This snake story is as believable as the rest of them.”

Still Aggie persisted.

“They say there are some there yet. I heard Corporal Humby tell of them once. He said the Mounted Police many years ago almost exterminated them by blowing up a large rock on which they used to coil in a great mass after sundown to get the last of the heat kept by the stone.”

“I’m afraid Humby says more than his prayers,” Jock commented. “I’ve often ridden past the Red Cliffs in my search for lost cattle. I guess my riding has taken me there as much as Humby’s. Anyway, snakes won’t hurt to look at. I don’t believe there are a dozen rattlers within fifty miles, unless they’re in the Hills. One never knows what may be there. I guess you’ve come across a few rattlers and other poisonous snakes, haven’t you, Dicky?”

Dicky admitted that he had, and that acquaintance had not made him any fonder of them.

“Well, I can vouch for the Red Cliffs being snakeless. Of course if you’re frightened we won’t go. We can take in the cut-bank this side of the Red Cliffs to-morrow if you like. By Jove! There’s the sun.” He looked at his watch. “Four thirty. I’ve got time to ride over to the second outfit and get back before dark. Then I can spare the day to-morrow without worry.”

Jock returned shortly after the swift darkness of the prairie had fallen, and went to his room early, tired with his long ride; and the rest of us were not long in following.

It was a calm, clear night after the rain, and Abbot's looked down on me with startling distinctness as I gazed up from my window. What secrets did it hide up there on its rough sides with those mysterious flashes and running figures? The air to-night was full of that boding watchfulness that I had always noticed after dark when all was quiet. The moon came out fitfully through the fleeting clouds, throwing the clearing into relief and again disappearing in a silver-rimmed cloud, veiling everything in mystery. I thought of the silent rider I had already seen twice, and wondered if he would be out to-night. I was sorry that I had not had the opportunity of telling the Corporal about it when we met on the way to the Mathers'.

I sat until I was chilled through, unable to tear myself away from the window long enough to wrap something around me for fear the rider would pass unseen. I was about to give up and go to bed, when something moving in the shadow of the trees behind the house made me draw farther back from the window.

I could dimly make out the shape of a horse, with a man leading it quietly towards the cliff trail. As before, when he reached the trail he mounted and rode away. But this time there was more to follow.

Scarcely had he disappeared from view when there emerged from the trees at the side of the trail another mounted figure. Just then the moon came out, and a piece of metal flashed from the rider's shoulders.

It was Corporal Humby. The feet of his horse were wrapped in cloths, and he rode silently up the trail after the first rider.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE RED CLIFFS

Jock had us up early the next morning in order to complete most of our ride to the Red Cliffs before the sun came out in its strength. That we were in for a very warm day was evident from the haze that hung over the prairie below. Even as we rode into it, it melted before the dawning brightness of the sun creeping up over the Hills far to the east. But at that hour of the day there was little of heat in the rays that wafted away the thin haze, especially as the prairie still sent up the coolness of the recent rains, only to make the heat the more unbearable a few hours later. There was a grateful freshness in the air that made us urge our horses to a fast gallop, and the whistle of the exhilarating air past my ears as I rode tingled my veins with excitement and pleasure.

We were content to ride without talking, although Dicky's free-hearted laugh came back from the front, brimming over with the inspiration of the gallop. I rode next and Jock last. There was no difficulty in finding the trail, for we had merely to keep along the base of the hills; and after a fast ride we came in sight of the ruddy glow standing out with convincing distinctness straight ahead. Many miles away the brilliant red was the most striking feature of the landscape. Now the sun was almost in our faces and not on the cliff, but even at that the colour gave us some conception of what its brilliancy would be when the sun would shine on its face a few hours later. It was a startling sight, and one that put an end to any doubts that we might have felt. Even if it were but clay, it was the reddest we had ever seen—too red for any clay with which we were familiar.

At the base of the cliff ran a small river, starting back in the hidden recesses of the Hills, and winding around the face of the cliff to the east. Back from the top, where the red ended abruptly in the green of the Hills, extended a terrace of rolling ground thinly treed for some distance and beyond, covered with the thick green verdure that was such an agreeable rest after the dead greyish yellow of the prairie.

Jock led us to a ford and crossed some distance below the cliffs, leading the way up a steep slope until we were on a level with the trees. Leaving our horses at the top, we clambered down the broken face of the cliffs and landed on a narrow shelf that fell off to the river below.

All doubt as to its being brick was gone. Upon nearer view the red surface was broken into innumerable clefts and crevices, like overbaked brick that had cracked in the baking. The red was not so striking close at hand as it had been at a distance, but we did not even need to feel it to know that it was a solid mass of hardest brick, baked by some fire of nature. Beyond that there was little interest in it for me, but Jock drew Dicky's attention to tiny bits of quartz and rock that protruded here and there, unyielding to the wear of the centuries that had rubbed away the surrounding brick. And immediately Dicky had his knife out and was lost in an examination of these bits of rock.

Jock and I left him at that, promising to return for him before the sun grew too warm. Up the slope we wandered, in among the nearest trees, examining almost invisible trails, diving into ravines of varying depth, gazing into the limpid waters of small mountain streams that flowed into the river below. Some of the trees were new to me, and in this part of the Hills there were more birds than around the ranch-house. In some of the thickets it was so dark that only by standing until our eyes grew accustomed to it could we discern even the individual tree-trunks.

I tried to draw Jock farther in, as the wildness of the scene was absorbing, but he would not do more than skirt the deeper parts and describe the rocky wildness I would find if we went farther.

"This would be an ideal place for the Blue Wolf," I suggested, laughing.

"You won't find it here. It never leaves our end of the Hills."

"That certainly adds to its mystery. If it were a real wolf it would scarcely remain there, particularly when you can never trace its depredations. If it is a myth, what are the conditions that keep it there?"

"At least, it has never been heard anywhere but there. I never remember hearing the Indians tell of it elsewhere. I've only heard it myself two or three times. It has come to mean the death of some one. When they hear it the Indians—what few of them there are now—lie down and cover their heads. It came last fall; that was the last time before the night you came—and then—"

He did not complete his sentence, but suddenly straightened up and looked around him as if just now conscious of where we were. Then he turned back toward the cliffs at a hurried pace. I followed in some bewilderment. But fast as I went he kept ahead of me, increasing his pace until by the time we reached the horses at the edge of the trees he was running. He leaped on his horse and rode rapidly down the slope.

The sun had crept higher in the heavens and was now shining down with oppressive heat. It was no time for haste, but there was so much mysterious excitement in Jock's movements that I scarcely noticed the heat. Faster and faster we rode, winding in and out among the thinning trees with a recklessness that was dangerous on such a slope.

At last we came close to the cliffs, and Jock was off his horse almost before it had stopped. To the brink he rushed and peered over the edge, while I dismounted in a more leisurely manner and was starting towards him when he suddenly leaped to his feet and ran back to his horse.

I hurried to the edge, a foreboding of danger to Dicky winging my feet. I had just thrown myself on my face to look over when Jock was beside me with the rope from his saddle. I glanced up at him, and there was that in his face that struck terror into me. An awful whiteness, with a shade of sickly bluish tint, had settled where I thought the tan of years could never be concealed. His upper teeth were clenched over the lower lip, while the upper lip pressed down so hard that an unnatural wrinkle ran beneath his nose.

It was a look of terrible fear, or worse—of horror: such a look as a man would have when suddenly struck with the realisation of some terrible crime.

“What—what is it, Jock?” I whispered, lying flat on the grass, but dreading to look over.

He did not seem to be aware of my existence. Throwing himself on his face, he leaned far over, holding the rope loose in his right hand.

I turned my head and looked.

At the bottom of the cliff, twenty feet below, Dicky stood, calmly facing the cliff and chipping away at the brick, completely absorbed in his task.

And on three sides of him, basking in the warm sun, coiled and uncoiled a dozen snakes of varying size—rattlers.

From the crevices in the ledge appeared the heads of others coming out into the heat. Within a yard of the unconscious man one huge reptile, more

than four feet long, lay partly coiled, warmed by the sun to the point where it was taking an interest in the man. Two others, so similar in size and shade that they looked like doubles of each other, were stretched at one side full length in parallel lines, with their heads pointed toward the chipping of the knife.

A peculiar odour came up the side of the cliff, whether from the snakes or not I did not know, but it added to the repulsion and terror which held my eyes glued to the scene. I drew fearfully back until I could just see over the edge.

Beside me Jock lay working rapidly at the rope. Then it began to descend slowly toward Dicky's head.

When it was but a couple of feet from the man below Jock spoke, so quietly that it seemed but a more urgent breath of the steady prairie wind, yet with a penetrating force that could not escape Dicky's attention.

"Don't move, Dicky, till I tell you. Rattlesnakes behind you. You're all right if you do what I say." There was not a superfluous word of exclamation or fear.

I saw a slight quiver run over Dicky's body at the first words. To fight down with the quickness of an instinct the alarm of an unexpected voice from above, and to keep from looking around, was something only Dicky could have accomplished. His nerves of iron were his salvation.

The quiver was gone, and then he stood rigid as if turned to stone, his hand extended to the rock as if ready to chip away with the knife. Not a glance did he take at the awful perils around him.

The rope dropped a few inches.

"Raise your arms slowly, hands together—slowly," Jock's words came in sing-song monotony.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the arms commenced to rise. Not a muscle in the rest of Dicky's body showed the upward movement of the hands in front of him.

Gradually they came up straight toward the waiting rope, and halted. A slight wave of Jock's hand threw the rope over them. Then it fell slowly downwards.

"Arms back a little." There was a dreaminess in Jock's voice that acted on me like hypnotism.

The arms bent obediently backward, so that the loop could slip over Dicky's head.

The nearest rattler began to take a greater interest in events. Its coil was hardening, the little head drawing closer to the centre. A faint, dry rattle, like wind in dead leaves, came up to me.

"Grasp the rope in your hands as high as you can. Count, bring my horse—quick, quick!"

I leaped back to the horse and took it as close to the edge as it would go.

"When I say 'Go,' jerk yourself up as far as you can and climb for your life."

Jock jumped back to the horse and wound the rope around the pommel of the saddle, while I looked on the scene below.

"Watch that big one, Count. If it draws its head back yell 'go.' We'll be ready."

"Go!"

The command came with a sudden burst of sound. At the word I saw Dicky leap as if thrown from below, and the next instant he hung straight out from the face of the cliff with his feet braced against its side.

Even as he jumped the coil of the snake sprang open and the head darted forward. For a moment I was in doubt whether Dicky's leap had taken him out of reach. A moment later the ledge was clear of snakes—every rattler had slipped into a crevice—and Dicky was climbing rapidly upwards in long, strong reaches, while Jock held the horse braced against the weight.

It was Jock who threw himself on the ground when it was over, his head buried in his arms, convulsed with the terrible tremors that passed over his body.

"For God's sake, don't tell Aggie," were the first words he uttered.

CHAPTER XXIV

PLAYING THE GAME

There was no hiding from Margaret's keen eyes that there had been an event of unusual excitement. I had an impression that Aggie had the same idea, for she scanned our faces more closely than usual when we came in from stabling our horses, and I saw her hand go to her heart as if a sudden pain had caught her. Dicky, the big, kindly fellow, broke into a joke on the manless house, and was willing to bet that they had not even set the table when we were away. He always did think, he said, that everything was run for the men, after all.

Margaret surprised me by showing plainly that she wished to speak to me alone. But I could not talk to her of what had happened. Jock's beseeching cry that we should not tell Aggie I took to include her. It would only disturb the women, and nothing could be gained by telling. As a last resort Margaret proposed a walk down the hill to the lake, but I made the excuse that I must change my clothes before dinner.

When I came from my room Margaret was in the sitting-room doing nothing. This in itself was enough to make me halt at the foot of the stairs and look at her through the dark doorway. She was sitting in a rocking-chair, leaning back with eyes half-closed. Her head was turned carelessly toward the window, but I knew she saw nothing there. Her work had fallen from her hand and was lying at her feet unnoticed. From the verandah came the sound of the voices of the other three.

For the first time I caught in Margaret's face a look of worry and anxiety. Sometimes before, I had imagined that she was trying to hide something that sought expression, but this I had attributed to the lines of Aggie's face and the feeling they aroused in me. This was the first time I had seen Margaret when she thought herself to be unobserved. I stepped quietly through the doorway and was almost beside her before she knew of my presence. Then she started, partly in alarm, but partly in annoyance, I thought, at my coming upon her when she thought herself alone.

"Oh," she exclaimed, reaching for her work, "how you frightened me!"

“Margaret,” I said, ignoring all but the look I had seen on her face. “What is the matter? What do these aching hearts mean? What is it out here that makes those lines of care on Aggie’s face and the trouble I just now saw on yours? No; there’s no use denying it.” I held up my hand to stop the words of denial I saw coming to her lips. “If you can’t tell me I do not want to know. But please don’t try to deceive me.”

She closed her lips again and sat thinking.

“You don’t think I should know. Very well! But, Margaret, are you sure you should keep these things? I have no idea what they are. They make up but a part of the many mysteries I have had to ignore since I came. They are happening every day. I’m getting farther at sea about everything; and whatever happens I have to promise some one not to tell. There seems to be a conspiracy of silence to keep me from knowing or talking. Why can’t we speak when we see the same things?”

She bit her lips and looked at me with pity in her eyes. “There may be things you’ll wish you’d never known. Was there anything happened to-day?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes. But there was little of mystery about it. It might have happened to any one. I can’t tell you what it was—as usual, I had to promise not to tell, but you can see no one was hurt.”

“Whom did you promise?” she questioned.

“I don’t think I’m at liberty to tell even that much. And it wouldn’t help you any. I’ve had to promise every one since I began to see and hear what I couldn’t understand. Are you worrying because you know more about these mysteries than I do?” I leaned over her as I spoke, and she bent away from me. “But then I think all of you know more than I do. Am I so dull?”

I suppose there was more of querulous complaint than of anxiety in my tone, for a slow smile was at first all the answer I received; and it added to my annoyance.

“I think you know some things none of the rest of us suspected,” she said.

“There you go, putting me in deeper than ever,” I complained. “You’ve said something like that to me before. I give up trying to understand you. But I wonder if any one does that.”

Of a sudden I remembered the wedding-cake and slips reposing forgotten in my pocket. And with it came the thought that it was strange that

Margaret had said nothing about them during the three days.

“By the way, you haven’t asked me how carefully I have been observing the rules for the deciding of my life’s partner,” I remarked, trying to look as if I knew how interesting the thing was to her.

She looked up at me startled.

“Oh, that children’s game! Of course you’ve forgotten all about it, just as I did. I burnt mine long ago. Let me do the same with yours.” There was a little forced levity about her, I thought, and my opinion was confirmed a moment later when she failed to continue her disinterestedness by asking: “You haven’t looked at any of them, have you?”

“Oh, no, I haven’t read them. It would be only fair to Rosa to see it through now, so that when I open the blank on the last day I can go right back to Toronto and select a cosy den and bedroom, with a staid, old housekeeper to criticise and be criticised. That’s all I envy married men for—that they have some one to blame when things go wrong.”

“But suppose you do not draw a blank,” Margaret insisted.

“I cannot imagine such a contretemps,” I returned. “But if it does happen I’ll find out where she lives and—move to the other side of the world to prove the inefficacy of wedding-cake as a marriage bureau.”

“Wouldn’t it save you a lot of worry if I destroyed the slips now? Or why not remain in this country? You’d be as far as you could get from any name you would draw.”

“I don’t know about that,” I blurted out thoughtlessly. “You see I know nothing about the names you and Rosa selected in your wisdom.”

“Rosa selected them,” she hastened to correct me. “I had nothing to do with them. You know that. I told you at the time the names were no good. It’s awfully foolish for a man to lend himself to such silliness.”

“I’m willing to be foolish if it pleases Rosa.”

She turned her head to look me in the face.

“Why Rosa?”

I laughed heartily.

“One would think you were interested in what I might think of Rosa. Is she the third party sometimes, and do you want me to relieve you of that?”

Her brow had cleared before I finished.

“According to what you told me the other day, my reason should be to relieve myself of a rival. I’m a heartless girl, am I not, Count? You must be learning a lot about the girl you thought you knew pretty well long ago in Toronto.”

“I am,” I admitted seriously.

“And it isn’t much to her credit, is it? I have a rather sensitive recollection of a conversation we had three days ago—or was it four—about a girl who had fallen to meeting a man clandestinely at night.”

“You’re putting the very worst construction on what I said,” I protested. “I meant nothing.”

“No? One doesn’t speak about such things as a general topic of conversation, does he? There can be no reasons for mentioning them except to show disapproval.”

“But, Margaret,” I stammered, “I have no right to approve or disapprove. I speak only as a friend at any time. I have a right to do that, surely.”

She did not answer for a time, but her eyes dropped and she leaned forward with hands clasped above her knees.

“I wonder what your definition of a friend is, Count,” she said slowly. “Is he the one of all who would suspect? Or would he be expected to be the last to think evil? Strangers might convict on circumstantial evidence, but friends—something more than even sight or hearing would be demanded. Don’t you think so?”

Although there was the most poignant reproof in her words, I knew that there was more in her mind than that. She sat perfectly still as she spoke, her eyes fixed on space and the words coming forth as if she were talking to herself rather than to me—trying to analyse some feeling in which I did not count.

“I know how hard it is,” she went on, “even for a friend, to fight proofs that are appearing every day to convict. . . . But we have to do it; all of us must do it. I cannot accept what I see or hear.” She stopped abruptly and raised her eyes to mine with a start. “But we were talking of you, Count.”

“I would just as soon we didn’t at this moment. One shouldn’t discuss his friends, particularly to their faces. It’s bad form, you know.”

She threw aside what had been making her so serious, and laughed lightly.

“Count,” she said sweetly, “you’re the greatest mixture of humility and daring, of foolishness and sense, of stupidity and perception, that was ever left twenty-eight years without a chaperone.”

“Thanks! That leaves me a virtue or two. I was beginning to think the supply must have run out at the moment when my turn came. I have evidence before me that there was a new lot for disposal two years later. Your surprise at my unchaperoned condition at twenty-eight is a mild feeling compared with my disappointment at a world of young men who allow a blessing to go unclaimed for twenty-six years. At least I have the virtue of appreciation, in addition to what you so kindly allowed me.”

“Why not develop your other virtues along with that of trying to misapply sugary nothings?”

“You mean that I might be a real friend, for instance.”

She stood up and started for the door.

“I don’t know that I want you for that,” she called back mockingly. That was my punishment.

I did not follow her to the verandah. I went back to my room and drew a small parcel from my vest pocket. I unrolled it and extracted a smaller parcel and seven little slips of paper carefully folded. For some reason Margaret’s badly acted lightness had given them an importance they had not before possessed. Who were the six girls whom Margaret had talked about to Rosa in connection with my name? And why had Rosa drawn certain deductions from Margaret’s conversation which apparently did not agree with the conclusions of Margaret herself? The latter had disapproved of the names selected. Twice she had tried to induce me to let her destroy the slips. Of a sudden it came to me that Rosa might have included Margaret’s name, and the sensitive girl had rebelled at the chance of reminding me of a hopeless love.

I began to wonder idly which of the slips I would have thrown out on the first morning had I observed instructions—and which the second, and the third. Smiling, I closed my eyes and drew one. That would be for the first night. I drew a second and a third; and I threw the three into a drawer. There were still four left in my hand. Which would be the one for the next morning were I to sleep on them? They all looked alike, and I was as likely to draw one as another. I found myself looking them over carefully to see if any of them revealed anything. And I laughed when it came to me that I was spending much time and foolish thought on them. Just for fun I would open the one my hand fell on first; that would be the one I would have opened on

the following morning, let us say. Then the name on the slip would be that of some one of the six girls I was destined not to marry. That would be some satisfaction, I mused with a smile.

I reached out and took one. But as I was about to open it I remembered the blank that was among them. If this was it, then, according to Rosa, I was doomed to marry some one, for each one of the others would contain the name of a girl. My inclination was to toss them all into the drawer, or burn them without looking at them. But in ridicule of the seriousness of my thoughts I laughed and opened the paper, trying to drown a maddening nervousness that was shaking my hand. I held it open a moment without looking, and at last rose and walked to the window where the name would strike me at the first glance, I looked down.

The name was "Margaret Crawford." I knew then why there had enveloped the opening of that slip an importance that made me ridiculously nervous.

"Margaret Crawford!" I laughed aloud bitterly. Certainly the Fates never tired of convincing me.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CALL FOR DICKY

In the luminous darkness of the starlight we sat on the verandah waiting for the moon to rise. To my chagrin Margaret had no word for me. Even when I sat on the edge of the verandah at her feet, instead of taking my usual chair, she was only interested in Dicky's description of native life in Peru. I had worked it out in my own mind that the best way to overcome my silly sentiment was to treat Margaret as the best of friends, candidly, and always. And one of my first steps was to be to omit in our conversations any references to former conditions, or lovers, or blighted hopes—topics which I recalled upon review as having been brought in copiously by me in all our talks. But to-night, beyond the desultory talk aroused by Dicky's reminiscences of his South American life, and the few questions Margaret asked about the Peruvian women, there was little spoken.

Jock sat gloomily back in the deep shadow of the roof, with Aggie near him. From the kitchen came the intermittent, disjointed hum of the German maid, and the little bursts of song broke in on our silence with a distinct punctuation of her work. When her thoughts were concentrated on some stitch that required care her voice died down to the merest hum, only to break out aggressively when the difficulty was temporarily overcome.

Jock rose abruptly after several disturbing interruptions of the singing, and went back to the kitchen. We could hear his voice for a moment in anger, and upon his return he sat down without a word. But the voice of the girl came no more, and presently we heard her heavy step on the stair on the way up to her little room in the attic. And we sat on quietly watching the growing light of the moon rising from behind the house.

Suddenly I saw Jock lean forward in his chair as if listening. A few moments later the subdued clatter of hoof beats came from far down the trail.

Jock rose quickly from his chair and tiptoed to the edge of the verandah. None of the rest of us moved. As he stood with his head advanced into the dim moonlight he was a statue of anxious attention. With one hand leaning

against the supporting post, the other was slightly extended as if to command silence. For several moments he stood thus, as the thud, thud of the pounding hoofs came fitfully through the trees, with that peculiar rising and falling of noises amid the deep silence of all else.

Presently he gave a sigh of relief and turned to the house. Then I noticed that there was but one horse. An instant later our host came out from the doorway bearing a rifle in his hands.

“No cowboy tricks to-night!” he muttered. I thought he was more serious than the occasion called for, and when he stepped from the porch and stood behind a tree some yards down the trail I could feel little shudders coming and going through my body.

Long before the rider dashed from the trees into the circle of light we could hear a voice repeating something over and over, and then the sound of muttered oaths. And yet the voice had nothing of anger in it, but rather anxiety and, perhaps, fear. In those oaths that seemed to flow as a man repeats the words of a song there was an excitement that was wringing the man to his soul.

Jock stepped from behind the tree and listened again, all traces of fear gone from his face. Then he walked back to the verandah and leaned his rifle against the side of the house.

“Squart!” he exclaimed with relief.

To us the name made the galloping figure all the more terrible in its significance. Squart had never been known to use an oath, and that which had made him break loose now must be of dread import. Margaret stood waiting with hands tightly clenched. Dicky and I rose to our feet and fixed our eyes on the spot where the trail led out from the trees.

Then we heard the heavy breathing of a fagged horse, the loud, raucous intake of breath into lungs taxed to their limit. No horse could stand that pace up that hill. To us it prophesied calamity. To Jock relief came more and more plainly. The difference was confusing. Had he feared something more threatening, compared with which this unknown disaster was unworthy of consideration, or was I reading too much tense excitement and dread into the approaching rider?

Nearer and nearer came the horse. The meaningless mixture of oaths could be distinguished above the pound of the hoofs, but now the difficult breathing of the beaten horse was more impressive than anything else.

Then suddenly into the moonlight shot the racing figure, and the sight was even more terrifying than the sounds had been. Leaning far forward in the saddle as if to counterbalance the pull of the steep grade, Squart lay low with a hand extended on either side as far down on the reins as it would reach. And constantly a foot flew out, and plunged back against the side of the horse. We could see the dark stain where the skin and flesh of the poor animal were lacerated with the cruel, long spurs Squart always affected but had never before used.

He did not notice us until he had pulled the stricken horse to a sudden stop and had dropped to the ground in the same movement. Freed of its rider, the animal stood with braced legs, its head drooping to the ground, and long, spasmodic shudders shaking its frame. One faltering forward step it took to fight against the pulling down of an irresistible burden. Then it stumbled to one side like a drunken man, and with a broken, hoarse gasp sank slowly to its side. There was never a twitch after it touched the ground. It had died in the saddle.

“Is it Rosa?” asked Margaret, in an anxious whisper as Squart approached the verandah. I had had the same thought.

At the question Squart stopped suddenly and looked up in terror.

“Rosa!” he exclaimed in the plaintive voice of one who is fighting back sobs long suppressed. Then his voice cleared. “No! Hell, no!” he whispered back with sudden relief. “It’s her daddy.”

The touch of the pet name Rosa called her father was more expressive than a world of words. It was Mr. Mathers who was in danger, the word said to me, but it was on Rosa’s account Squart had come.

“He’s bad,” the panting man went on. “She wants Dicky—Dicky Tatham—right away. Hæmorrhage!”

Dicky leaped within the house and rushed to his room. Squart turned back to his horse. He saw it lying there still in the moonlight, but it meant nothing to him save that he must have another mount. He ran back toward the stable to help himself. I joined him and threw the saddles on Scar Head and Grey Ghost, Dicky’s horse, but Squart would not wait for the saddle.

“I’ll get back and tell Rosa you’re coming,” he called, and was on the horse’s back almost as soon as it had cleared the doorway.

I heard Dicky shout something at him as he rode past the end of the verandah, and when I had saddled the horses I found Squart still there

explaining to Dicky what had happened, but talking with the impatience of one anxious to get away.

At last Dicky lost patience with the short, incomplete answers.

“Squart, Squart! Bring your wits back. I’ve got to know what’s happened, and all about it, or there’ll be that much time lost after I get there. Now tell me all you know.”

He was mounted by the time he had completed his admonition, and I followed the two men in a swift gallop down the trail. Squart started to tell what he knew, when Dicky suddenly interrupted:

“Look here, Squart, if you don’t stop using those spurs I won’t ride with you.”

Squart’s eyes opened wide. “Wha—at’s that?” he asked bewildered. Then he looked slowly down to the side of his horse. Already the big prongs had broken the skin.

“Did I—was I doing that to Wildcat?” He was stooping and unbuckling one spur, holding his place on the saddleless, plunging horse without an effort.

“I should say you were,” answered Dicky sternly, while I tried in vain to catch his eye to make him stop. The thought of what he had done to Wildcat was entering the poor, sensitive cowboy’s brain with racking throbs.

Squart leaned over and loosened the other spur.

“And wasn’t I swearing, too . . . Wildcat’s dead,—isn’t he?” he faltered.

Then, with the two heavy spurs in his right hand he gripped the horse’s back between his knees and rose straight up. With a vicious swing the spurs whistled through the air, and fell below into the lake.

“That’s what killed Wildcat,” he concluded, and with bowed shoulders he burst into low sobs.

I had got around beside Dicky’s stirrup.

“Dicky, you’re a brute,” I muttered.

“I know it, Count,” he whispered back. “But I had to do it. He’d have killed that horse next. Poor old fellow!”

We rode in silence for some minutes before Squart recovered himself. He was just commencing to tell us what had happened, and we were emerging from the trees out on the more open rolling prairie at the foot of

the Hills, when another rider suddenly rode along beside us. I jerked my horse nervously to one side; my nerves were raw.

“It’s I, Humby!” called a voice, apparently annoyed and surprised that his presence should disturb us. “What is it? Is that you, Squart? I heard you going up.”

“Squart was just commencing to tell us,” replied Dicky. “Go on, Squart.”

Mr. Mathers had had a hæmorrhage, and Rosa had told him to go for Dicky Tatham. Her father had asked for him. That was all he knew about the sudden attack of the sick man, and Dicky had to be satisfied.

“But how did Rosa happen to get you?” I asked. “Where were you?”

“I heard her scream from the verandah,” he answered with a shudder.

I did not wish to know more. Squart would be at hand when Rosa needed help, that I knew. He had not been far away that night when Rosa screamed with the terror of her father’s attack. He had probably not been far away many a night in case he should be wanted. By day he was in sight of that verandah where lay Mr. Mathers, with Rosa sitting near; by night he kept within hearing. I could read the same thoughts in Dicky’s mind, for I saw his hand reach out to stroke the arm of the tender-hearted, faithful cowboy lover.

Corporal Humby and Squart were steadily drawing away from us by their superior riding. Dicky and I tried in vain to keep up. At last the policeman looked back over his shoulder and shouted:

“We’ll go on. You’ll get there a minute or two after us. The women will be frightened.”

Ahead of us we could hear the thunder of the hoofs in the still night. We urged our horses on, but gradually the galloping crept farther away. Soon we approached the settlement of the Dreamers, and a flitting shadow or two in the moonlight told us that the riders ahead had aroused the men of this strange sect. Then at the edge of the village, within the shadow of the first house, the Corporal rejoined us.

“Can’t trust them,” he said laconically, as we galloped through the village in front of him.

Beyond the houses he plunged ahead again. As we raced up the slope away from the village and turned to the left, a faint noise away back beyond the village made me turn in my saddle to listen. It was another horse at full speed. The Corporal also had heard it, for he had slowed down at the top of

the rise and was listening. “Ginger!” he said after a moment, and again he sent his horse racing ahead of us.

By the time we had reached the bungalow the galloping behind us was more distinct. Whoever was following was able to get more from his horse than we could. If it was Ginger, then the rider must be Jock, but we could not see how any one could recognise a horse at that distance from the sound of its hoof beats. Dicky leaped from his horse and tiptoed quickly up the steps and into the house. I waited for the oncoming rider.

A minute later Ginger dashed up the slope and was jerked to a standstill. Its rider was not Jock, but Margaret. At sight of me she jumped quickly to the ground, but not before I saw that she had been riding astride.

“Margaret!” I chided, “you shouldn’t have come like that.”

“But—but I couldn’t ride fast enough side-saddle.”

“I didn’t mean that, Margaret,” I said tenderly, with no thought of rebuke in my mind. “I mean you should not have come alone.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PASSING OF A GENTLEMAN

Sick-rooms have always been repulsive to me. Even my closest friend on a bed of sickness becomes my greatest aversion. It is not that I am the less interested in my friend, but I am too fond of him to endure his impotence in the grasp of a stronger power. It is sickness I hate, not the sick.

Yet there was not so much of sickness in the room in which Mathers lay, as there was of the last stand of a brave man to keep up to the end. It was not capitulation but defeat by an overwhelming force, with the defeated valiant to the last. I knew I would witness that before I stepped softly through the door of the bedroom where every Western friend I had save Jock and Aggie was gathered to the protection of one weak man, or in humble respect for his courage. Beside the bed Mrs. Mathers and Rosa knelt, not with their faces buried helplessly in the sheets, but looking bravely and lovingly into the white face on the pillow. To the last they would not grieve him whose only thought had been that they should not sorrow for him. With faces that almost smiled, concealing stubbornly the tragic tears held by bonds of will alone, they listened to the sick man speaking softly with his last strength. Dicky stood beside the bed with his back to me, holding one of the weak pulses in his left hand. Near the head of the bed, out of sight of the pillow, was Margaret, the tears streaming quietly down her cheeks. Hers was not the fight of tears restrained, but sympathy for dying and bereft. Squart and Humby stood just within the door, unobtrusively waiting with downcast eyes.

"I thought of you, Dicky, when it came," said the dying man weakly. "I kind of owed it to you. . . . But I knew no doctoring would stand me now."

For answer Dicky smoothed back the hair with his free hand, and tried to soothe the man to quietness.

"Talking won't hurt me now, Dicky. I'm going to go out as I've lived—no surrender."

A mist came over my eyes until I could not see the bed.

“You knew it was coming, Mary, didn’t you? And you, Rosa? We’ve all seen it for months. But we didn’t—give in, did we?”

He stopped and closed his eyes, but the clasp of his hand must have told the watchers at his side that the old man had not yet succumbed.

“Tell ’em in old England—that I never forgot ’em—or her. This body—never was—much good to me.”

There was another long pause. Through my wet eyes I could see the gathering forces of grief in the faces of the two silent women at the bedside. Their sorrow was surely great enough not to need the added struggle of concealing it. But the glorious veil that had hidden their fears and pains was not to be drawn aside at the last, when the sick man needed it most.

“It’s not England I would be buried in. I would be very happy there in life—but I was happier here. Perhaps—I’ve been the happier in mind with this less happy body. Mary! Rosa! Here where you’ve made this—going out possible, where we’ve fought it out together, I want to lie. Out there near the corner where I can see so far—the trees down south, the prairie away over Squart’s cattle—that’s the place. I’ll lie happy—where—I lived happy.”

Squart raised his hat to his eyes, and the sick man caught the motion of some one else in the sick-room.

“You here, Corporal?” he asked in a louder voice.

Humby stepped forward beside Dicky.

“Not that side, Corporal!”

Humby walked around beside Rosa.

“Rosa, has Humby a right to stand there? Has he a right— —”

Squart, poor stricken lover, could stand no more. He turned abruptly but silently and walked past me.

“I guess I’ll be going now,” I heard him mutter.

I followed him out, closing the door behind me. There was nothing for me in that room; I felt as if I had been intruding on a sacred scene. I pitied the dying man with his belief that the Corporal loved Rosa. I pitied Margaret that she had to witness such a scene. But more than all I pitied this heartbroken cowboy, who had loved at a distance without one look of love or even of pity that he loved in vain.

“Poor old Squart!” I said, as we walked slowly through the front door.

He looked quickly up at me, aware for the first time that I was by his side. Then I got a lesson that only the prairie-reared cowboy could have given me.

“No—no, don’t pity me!” he quavered piteously. Then he threw up his shoulders and stood looking back for a moment toward the room we had left. “I ought to be happy—happier than I deserve. Didn’t she need me? And wasn’t I able to bring the doctor? Corporal Humby couldn’t have done that. I guess that ought to be enough—for a cowboy?”

He leaped to the back of his saddleless horse and rode slowly away into the night until he thought he would be out of hearing of the sick-room. Then I heard the wild running of his horse urged to its utmost.

Presently Dicky came out. He did not need to tell me of the end. Silently we mounted and rode away, leaving Margaret and the Corporal to attend the grief-stricken wife and daughter.

“How did he—‘go out’?” I asked at last.

“No surrender!” Dicky whispered.

CHAPTER XXVII

WARNINGS

Daylight was breaking when we sought our beds, and it was after lunch before we could return to the house of death where the women and the Corporal were keeping watch. The latter was walking up and down the verandah, and when we had stabled our horses he motioned us to a chair. It was the same spot we had sat in when Mr. Mathers was alive to point out to us the beauties of the view. I looked away to the dim line of trees to the south and tried to imagine the Rockies westward.

But there was something missing from the landscape. At first I thought it was the life gone from the cold form within, and I wondered at the effect of human life on the unchanging prospect before me. Then I found my eyes wandering around the prairie below in search of something definite that had given life to the view. The explanation came to me.

Squart was missing—Squart and his bunch of steers. Two other bunches fed at greater distances, but the touch of intimate life in the cowboy we knew was gone. Squart would come no more within sight of the verandah to be at hand in emergency. Perhaps to hide his sorrow he had left the district entirely, but I remembered that revelation of thankfulness that he had been able to serve Rosa. The generous, clean cowboy with the tiny vanities of high heels and gold teeth would never succumb to anything that looked like cowardice. Jock would find him just as reliable as ever, a boss beloved by the other cowboys, an employee wrapped up in his master's interests. But the beauty of the view had departed for me.

My thoughts were broken by the Corporal asking where we had been the day before. He had looked for us, but until evening had seen nothing of us.

We told him about our visit to the Red Cliffs and of Dicky's narrow escape. At the mention of the place he started. The rest of our description he heard without a word. At its conclusion he sat wrapped in thought, a perplexed and anxious look on his face. Presently he sat up in his chair and looked from one to the other, as if hesitating to say what was in his mind.

"I want both of you to promise me something. And I don't want you to ask questions. If I could tell you it wouldn't be necessary to ask, but I am too uncertain of some of the links of the chain I am trying to forge to risk anything. When I can tell you I will. I know you won't tell any one—*any one*—what I request, if you decide you can't promise."

He leaned his chin on his hands and looked over the prairie for a moment before he continued. Then:

"From this on, at least until I release you, I would like you two never to be separated so long as you are here in my district. I would not think of asking it if I were not convinced that it is necessary for—for your very safety."

Dicky and I looked at each other in perplexity. That anything should make such a promise necessary proved that there were dangers of which we knew nothing. All my old fears and doubts returned with greater force. I had almost forgotten the Blue Wolf and the suspense of the unsolved mysteries in the events of the past day. But in his duties of policeman Humby could never forget anything until it was cleared up. Why this adventure of Dicky's should lead him to extract such a promise was not clear. Probably it was the mere suggestion of danger to either of us that recalled some other dangers we invited.

"Was it in connection with this, Corporal, that you waited for us outside the Dreamers' village last night?" I asked.

"It is because of this that I have never been very far away from you since you came," he answered. Both Dicky and I knew from the closing of his lips that he would say nothing more. "Now you should know how serious it is," he concluded.

It was Dicky who promised for us both.

"Corporal," he continued, "there's something we haven't told you yet, because we wanted to find out more about it ourselves; but I guess you ought to know."

Humby looked hastily around as if fearing listeners.

"We've found the meeting-place of the Dreamers." Dicky threw it at him with all the force of a newspaper scoop.

It was characteristic of the Corporal that he did not become excited. He was deeply interested, but he allowed Dicky to proceed.

“That day we came on you when we rode out from the woods, we had found it.”

“Are you sure?” The question was not one of doubt, but of anxiety for verification.

Dicky described the clearing, while the Corporal sat listening closely to every word.

“Could you find it again?” he asked, looking at us in turn.

We both thought we could.

“Could you leave the house at night some time without the rest of them knowing it?”

I told him of the uncertain hours we kept, some nights sitting on the verandah until late, and at other times retiring ridiculously early. Then I remembered the lonely rider and the Corporal’s pursuit, and I told him of it.

“I was trying myself to find out that meeting-place,” he explained.

“Who was it? Was it a Dreamer? Why should he try to pass the house so silently?”

He ignored my questions entirely.

“And I’m sure the Dreamers do not pass the house on their way to the clearing. I would certainly have seen or heard them some night. They must have some other way.”

“They have.”

“Then why did that one ride past the house?”

Again he evaded answer.

Some gathering clouds in the east made us leave for home, fearing a repetition of the drenching storms we had already experienced. As we expected, Jock was away when we arrived, so we settled down on the front verandah to watch the fleeting clouds and to think over at our leisure the warnings of the policeman.

Dicky had just lit his pipe when a rider came out on the trail below and rode up to the end of the walk in a dignified trot. He had drawn up his horse before he noticed us, and something in his hesitation as he raised his eyes from the horse’s neck and saw us sitting there made me think he would gladly have gone on without stopping. But his hesitation was gone in an

instant, and he dismounted with a studied arrogance that was the result of his attempt to cover his indecision.

It was Maskin, the leader of the Dreamers. I was just as reluctant to resume our acquaintance as he seemed to be.

Without faltering he walked toward the door. Dicky was sitting with his chair leaning against the side of the doorway and Maskin could not enter until he moved. Expecting to be addressed, he remained where he was until the approaching man was almost upon him.

Not a word did the Dreamer utter, probably thinking Dicky would move in deference to his evident intention of entering. But my friend did not move. It was plain that he resented the silence of the man. Common courtesy demanded that the Dreamer should speak, and Dicky proposed to remain where he was until that happened. With a nonchalant swing of one leg over the other he continued to smoke. Maskin advanced until he was within a couple of feet; then, seeing that Dicky had no intention of moving, he stopped and fixed his eyes on him with an insolent stare that made me tremble for its effect on my hotheaded friend.

To my surprise Dicky showed no signs of knowing that the man was there, but talked carelessly to me about the threatening storm. And I recognised that by this move he was returning deeper insult for insult.

Maskin flushed, and the mark on his chin blackened like a summer cloud before the thunder. Then he stepped to one side and tried to slip past Dicky's knees without noticing him. But Dicky calmly took his pipe from his mouth to press down the tobacco, and leaned back with his legs outstretched, effectively blocking the way. Maskin had to speak.

"I see my friend McTavish entertains some peculiar friends," he sneered.

Dicky smiled in a manner I knew was a danger signal. He continued to pack the tobacco until he had completed it to his satisfaction.

"I'm seeing," he answered slowly, "that he entertains one less."

The wave of colour I had seen in the freight car flashed over his face again, and the birthmark stood out blacker than ever.

"I thought this was Mr. McTavish's house," Maskin said, striving to keep his temper and emphasise the sneer.

"In his absence some of his 'peculiar' friends are looking after it—and intend to continue to do so."

“When did you acquire that right, may I ask?”

“Yes; you may ask all you damn please.”

“I am a friend of Mr. McTavish’s. He will call to account those who insult his friends.”

Dicky neither appeared impressed, nor did he assume an unnatural carelessness.

“McTavish’s friends are our friends. His friends are not above recognising each other. Thought you could get along without that bit of ordinary decency, eh? Well, you can’t.”

Maskin regained his control with a rapidity I was forced to admire.

“Perhaps Mr. McTavish’s friends will inform him another friend wishes to see him,” he said with a sneering smile.

“Mr. McTavish is not at home—otherwise I would not have taken it upon myself to demand the passport of a gentleman.”

“Perhaps Mrs. McTavish will see a friend of her husband’s.” Maskin was deliberately smiling, as if in recognition of irresponsible indiscretions. My friend was no match for him at that moment.

Dicky rose and stepped within the door.

“You’ll wait until I see,” he commanded.

In a moment he reappeared, complete master of himself again.

“Mrs. McTavish will *not* see you,” he said, quietly but firmly.

“I would prefer to hear that from her own mouth.”

I rose quickly at the deep insult, fearing what Dicky might do. The blood flowed to his face for a second, then left it whiter. It was the first time I had ever seen Dicky colour—but it was also the first time I had ever known him take anything so insulting.

Then he rose deliberately. Walking quietly up to Maskin until the latter stepped back instinctively, he leaned slightly forward on his toes. His mouth opened to say something, and I saw his hand close tight and break loose again.

“That’s all,” was the only thing he said, but behind it was a vehemence that would have frightened a man less courageous than the Dreamer.

But Maskin looked Dicky up and down slowly, as if contemplating the chances of giving a lesson to this man who disputed his authority.

Dicky took another step forward, carelessly tossing his pipe to me as he did so, and Maskin unexpectedly turned his back and walked stiffly to his horse. We thought he was going to leave the field with dignity, but he had scarcely mounted when his anger got beyond him. Shifting around in his saddle he shook his quirt at us.

“The followers of the God Jacob will remember this,” he hissed in a choking voice, from which all control had departed.

“Almost a row,” said Dicky, relighting his pipe. “And I’m not sure that it’s over yet.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE VOICE ON THE LAKE

Jock returned before dark, surprised, and, I thought, a little disturbed at finding us there before him. He ate his meal hurriedly and left while we were still at the table, having to meet a fellow-rancher on some matter of importance.

“Look out for the Blue Wolf,” I called after him laughingly.

The clouds had passed with a few drops and had left in their wake a brooding quiet that intensified the heat hanging in a haze as if awaiting the return of the storm that had not fulfilled its mission. Many a night since that first ride I had felt this sensation of waiting, waiting. Even in the greatest silence there was no impression of sleep, but rather of a quiet watchfulness. To me the prairie was like some great, calm master that bred excitement by its own overpowering calm. With a condition so entirely opposite it aroused the same feeling of helplessness that is roused by the restless ocean. This was the calm dignity of supernatural power, the abasing omnipotence of an inscrutable force.

Aggie, Dicky, and I were glad of the little breeze that blew over the lake, coming up to our heated cheeks with a cooling agreeableness. Below us lay the lake, its edges deep in the shadows of the trees, the centre still mirroring the sky, that held the last glimmer of the setting sun. Not a ripple stirred the surface of the water. Looking down into the smooth surface, only the road and ragged tops of the trees where they broke on the prairie denied the impression of gazing into infinite space. The darkness was slow in falling. Imperceptibly it worked in from side to centre of the lake, until the only greater blackness was in the shadow of the Hills.

Something in the night impelled to silence. Seated looking over the prairie I had always felt the call to quietness. Over and over at the moment I was tracing the mysteries which had surrounded every one since I came. Over the visit from first to last had hung an oppressive helplessness and disagreeableness that could not be laid to any preventable source. At first I had thought it was my overworked nerves that were to blame, but I saw in

those around me the same uneasiness and anxiety. And yet each one appeared to be working out some solution by his own individual efforts. It was as if each had something to conceal from the other, as if the comparing of notes would bring a conclusion we wished to avoid. Even the light-hearted Dicky and the straightforward Margaret were under the influence of some great puzzle, and they would not tell me what they knew or suspected, so that I might piece up the broken fragments of my own knowledge.

Aggie was the first to break the silence.

“Have you heard the Blue Wolf again?” she asked of me in a hesitating voice.

The question fitted so well into my own thoughts that we seemed to have been discussing it.

“No, I haven’t,” I lied. Something in her voice made me hesitate to mention our experiences.

Dicky, too, noticed it, and it was evidently with the purpose of reassuring her that he broke in.

“That is one of the smaller mysteries I am going to get to the bottom of before I am here much longer.” He spoke with an attempted lightness, but back of it I could discern the note of determination as if he were making a vow to himself, a vow that was the more sacred to him from the agitation of the woman at his side. I had already imagined that lines were coming around Dicky’s eyes in sympathy for the woman he could not help loving.

The stillness of the night was disturbing me as it had done on that lonesome trip, and I spoke something of my feelings.

“It’s a night for anything. It was just such a night when I heard the Blue Wolf first. I find it almost impossible to convince myself that I am not alone in a deserted world. My impotence frightens me. I feel as if I can do nothing but just wait, wait for something to happen. If I but knew what!”

Dicky moved his chair with a noise that grated on my ear. He even reached over and kicked me quietly. But I could not stop. To talk and be answered was the only relief I knew of once I had started. It might make me feel less alone and powerless.

“It must be terrible to live out here alone, far from nature as man can control it, far from all that would take one’s mind from himself and his utter smallness. I could almost imagine that I hear— —”

It was an instinct that made me stop for a moment and listen. There was nothing to be heard at that moment, but before I could finish the sentence the sound of a woman's voice came floating up from the lake below. Faintly the singing voice came at first, then swelling louder and dropping away until it was but a murmur—the voice of an artist unmoved by the affectation of the gilded world; a voice into which had condensed all the emotion and mystery of the vast prairie, the unbroken solitude, the untrammelled feeling of some deep sentiment. In it were the pathos of the childless mother, the thrill of the swan-song, and withal the warning of the sirens. In the theatre of the crowded city it would have cast a spell, to have found expression in a burst of tumultuous applause. Out there, seven hundred miles from the nearest city, it was a hideous nightmare, the wild imagery of a brain sick with desolation.

A tremor ran over my body at the intensity of the feeling it evoked. But upon Aggie the effect was terrifying. She rose slowly from her chair, her mouth open, and in her eyes the horror that finds relief only in unconsciousness. Blindly she felt for the support of the wall.

“Morris! Field! Who now?” she gasped, and fell limply into Dicky's arms.

Dicky knew the right thing to do for the fainting woman, and soon Aggie was sitting on a couch listening intently, white and still terrified. But the song on the lake had ceased.

From one to the other of us she looked in terror. Something she wanted to say stuck in her throat.

“It came before Morris died. . . . It came before Field was killed. . . . I never heard it before or since. It comes for three nights, and then — —”

She stopped and looked at us in turn.

“Now it's one of us—one of you.”

A burst of tears came to her relief. Dicky started forward to comfort her, his face blazing with a pity born of love. I saw the danger and was about to speak when he anticipated me. With a stifled groan he sank down and buried his face in his hands. He was fighting the battle out himself. I hastened to Aggie's side and tried to calm her, but her weeping must have its vent. I heard Dicky rise from his chair and I looked around at him. In his face was the calm of a brave fight won. He came to us and gently soothed the almost hysterical woman.

It was in the quietness that succeeded this burst of tears that Jock returned, heated as from a fast run. For a moment he stood in the doorway as he had done the first night I arrived. Then he almost leaped forward and roughly pushed between Dicky and Aggie. He drew her head down on his arm and turned to look defiantly at Dicky. Then his expression underwent a sudden change.

“Hoighty, toighty!” he exclaimed, stroking Aggie’s head with a tenderness that was pathetic in the emotionless Jock. “What is it all about? You’ve been working too hard, dear.”

A look of infinite love, of a tenderness that made me ashamed at having seen it, passed over his face. A wave of warmer love, the love of the lioness protecting her young against all odds, followed it. He looked wildly around for a moment as if to grasp his surroundings.

“Let’s go away—go away!” he breathed passionately in her ear.

She threw her arms wildly around his neck with a cry of hysterical joy.

“Oh, yes, Jock, yes! Can’t we go now—right away?”

Jock quiveringly unwound her arms and folded her tightly in his own. She sank back with a sigh of perfect peace. Dicky and I tiptoed out, Dicky to disappear in the darkness, waving me not to follow.

When I returned to the room Jock was laughing at her fears.

“Only some rancher’s daughter out for an evening ride,” he was saying. “Lots of them have voices that would bring fortunes in the city. Hearing them on a night like to-night, and so far from civilisation, you weave around a commonplace event the unnatural atmosphere of the prairie. You should know that pitiless thing well enough by now, Aggie.”

But he convinced no one, and I think he knew it.

I crawled shudderingly into bed and tried to drown out the weird yap-yapping away below on the prairie.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE VOICE AGAIN

Dicky broke his promise to the Corporal the very next morning. When I went downstairs with my mind made up that some explanation must soon be found for these mysteries that had been making my visit a series of nerve-shaking events, I found that he had ridden off with Jock. I knew that something important must have happened.

Instead of riding after them, as I intended when I mounted my horse, I turned it down the slope toward the lake, skirting around until the thickness of the trees brought me to a standstill. I wanted to go farther, to get nearer the place of that terrifying sound of the night before. Struggling through the tangle of trees and brush, where no man seemed to have trod, I was startled by the low call of my name; and there was the Corporal leaning against a tree near the edge of the water.

“What in the world are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought I was the first to break this path.”

“Not many places you’ll reach in this district where I haven’t been.”

An inspiration came to me.

“You’re not here for the same reason I am, are you?”

“I guess it’s more than likely. I can’t imagine anything else.”

“Did you hear it, too?” Unconsciously I lowered my voice as I asked the question.

“Before it stopped I was almost as close to it as I am now.” There was something reckless in the carelessness with which the Corporal spoke of that ghostly song.

“What do you think of it?”

“I’m not doing any guessing yet.” It was a characteristic reply. “But I’ve got two or three parts of the solution. If I can only fill up the connections!”

“Were you around the house last night?” I asked in awe at his tireless watchfulness.

“I wasn’t far away. Why?”

“I was just wondering if you had a chance to follow the silent rider again.”

“There was no ‘silent rider’ last night. . . . By the way, where’s Tatham? At the house?”

“Dicky has broken his promise already. But then he’s only gone away with Jock, so he’s all right. Just the same, he owes you an apology.”

The Corporal was on his feet before I had finished.

“It isn’t what he owes me,” he declared. “It’s what he owes himself. Where did they go, and how long since?” He had passed me and stopped as he asked the question, awaiting my answer.

“What’s the matter? Dicky’s all right. They’ve only gone for a ride around the north ranges to see how the water is since the rain. You don’t intend to look them up, do you?”

The Corporal seemed to reconsider his decision.

“Not much use now,” he muttered, returning to his place beside the water. “As soon as he returns walk or ride down the hill toward the lake, will you? I’ll hear you. You needn’t say anything to him.”

He was silent for a while. Then: “Could you lead me to the clearing of the Dreamers to-night?”

“I think I could, but Dicky could be surer of it.”

“But could you? Never mind Tatham. For what I have in my mind I’d rather have you.”

I was pleased with the implied compliment, and promised to meet him in the trees to the left of the trail close to midnight, where he would have a horse for me. Dicky was not to be told of the expedition, as three could not move as quietly as two. Then he asked me all about what took place at the house the night before, making me repeat Aggie’s words before she fainted. They had not recurred to my mind before. He listened with knitted brow, but made no comment. Before I left it was agreed that I should join him that night at dark in that place, if I could.

“Don’t forget to let me know when Tatham returns,” he reminded me as I dodged back through the trees.

Early in the afternoon Dicky surprised me by returning alone. To Aggie he explained that he had left Jock at the camp, and had ridden back so that I would not be alone all day. It was very warm on the prairie, too, and riding was not overpleasant. But I could see that his return meant something more than that, and as I led him down the hill toward the lake, according to my promise to Humby, I kept silent until he should tell me what was on his mind.

I had not long to wait.

“I’m leaving to-morrow morning,” was the blunt introduction.

“Leaving?” It came to me as betokening the worst that could happen. “You haven’t been quarrelling with Jock, have you, Dicky? Why can’t you control that temper of yours?”

“If you knew how I did control it, Count, I don’t think you’d censure me. I’m learning things through suffering, old man. I didn’t start it; I’m innocent this time. In some way he had heard about my row with Maskin, and started off to give me a lecture. Lost control of himself and practically ordered me out of the house. I’d leave to-night if I could think of some excuse to give Aggie. . . . We had the row on the way out this morning. I’ve just been riding around the Hills since so that I wouldn’t get back too quickly. I told Jock I’d stay till to-morrow morning if he’d let me, for Aggie’s sake. I’m awfully sorry it happened, old boy,” he added apologetically, laying his hand on my arm. “It hasn’t been much of a holiday for you. And you needed it.”

His unselfishness almost unmanned me. He was not as sorry as I was, for I realised that life there without him would be intolerable—with Margaret lost to me, and nothing to take my mind from it. But I knew better than to plead with him to remain.

Dicky brought me to myself by turning the subject. He could not understand how Jock had learned of his scene with Maskin, when the former had ridden the night before to the east, away from the Dreamers’ settlement. He must have met Maskin; or some one else had told him after seeing the Dreamer.

It was Dicky’s intention to depart early in the morning, leaving his baggage for me to send on to him at his instructions. I told him of my plan to investigate the voice on the lake with the Corporal, so that he would remain

with Aggie while I was absent. Neither of us doubted that we would hear the song again as Aggie had predicted.

Jock did not return for supper; but we did not expect him when he knew Dicky would be there until morning. However wrong he might consider himself, now that the heat of the quarrel was over, there was no possibility of an apology. The Quintuplets had never apologised to each other. There were other ways of showing just as plainly regrets for misjudgment or over-quick temper, and the other members of the club readily accepted them without the formal words that have come to take the place of real penitence. We quarrelled and made up with a regularity and light-heartedness that had the more endeared us to each other. But I had no hopes of contrition in this instance.

Dicky explained to Aggie that he would have to go to Medicine Hat to get in touch with his work in Colorado by wire. He had been away as long as he dare remain without word of how the work was progressing without him. Aggie accepted the explanation, not thinking of an absence of more than a couple of days, until he was assured that the work was going on as usual. The fact was that she was too much absorbed in the dread of what was to happen to notice much else, and Dicky tried to brighten her up by laughing at her fears.

"Of course you're looking for that song again to-night. You've scared me so that I'm going to stay away until she gets tired singing. There's only to-night and to-morrow night, and I won't be back until the day after, or even the day after that. Count, here, will have to take the responsibility of attending to the needs of the siren." Aggie did not answer, and Dicky went on more seriously: "But you ought to have Margaret with you, Aggie. She can be of more use here than over there. At any rate she will come right back after the funeral to-morrow, I suppose."

"Better let Margaret remain where she is," Aggie answered hopelessly. "She has heard the voice before. There's no use frightening her."

My friend dropped his seriousness immediately. The mysterious thing was weighing on Aggie's mind to the exclusion of all else.

"By the time I get back, Aggie, you'll be so used to the song that you'll be joining in the chorus. You'll be sorry when the weather keeps the singer at home."

"Dicky, Dicky!" pleaded Aggie. "Don't make fun of it. Don't laugh at me."

Her voice quivered with earnest supplication. Dicky's hands clenched behind his back and he turned his head away from her. I found the view out-of-doors most interesting at that moment; I couldn't stand any more of that look on Dicky's face.

At dusk I excused myself on the plea of needing a walk after an inactive day. Dicky and Aggie I left sitting in the front room, the poor woman too terrified to remain outside on the verandah. Humby was sitting against the tree where I had seen him in the morning, and he made way silently for me beside him. There we waited without a word.

It came later than the night before. And preceding it was a peculiar grinding, rasping sound like the whirr of machinery. Then not ten yards away the voice broke forth.

Through the darkness we stared out over the water, seeing only that no ripple disturbed the surface. Loudly the song rose and fell, a beautiful voice. But in that place neither of us thought of its beauty as we strained our eyes to reach the spot whence it came.

The man at my side stirred. He stood quietly up, and I heard the motion of his arm. A stick struck the surface of the water just where the sound was. But it never faltered. The uncanniness of its indifference added to the terror it struck into me. But the effect was very different on the Corporal. He simply turned away and strode noisily out of the bush. There was something like disgust and disdain in his action.

When I reached the house Aggie was weeping hysterically, with Dicky helplessly pacing the floor. At my entrance he went to her and soothed her as he had the night before; until I was present he would not touch her. But that was Dicky. Not long afterwards he retired, anxious to escape meeting Jock on his return. I remained with Aggie until I heard the stable door close with a slam, and then went upstairs. It would be easier for all of us if Jock saw no one until we had slept over the quarrel.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE DREAMERS' MEETING

I had remembered the direction of the Dreamers' clearing well enough to make it a comparatively easy matter to lead the Corporal to it without loss of time. I made first for the cleared trail that was its entrance, but when we were within touch of it the Corporal turned to the left and skirted it, carefully leading through the clearer aisles among the trees. He feared that look-outs might be set along the trail to give warning at the approach of a stranger; they had balked him in that way once when he had attempted to follow one of the Dreamers.

Long before we were close enough to the clearing to make out what was being said we could hear the sound of a man's voice in excited declamation. It left no doubt that we had guessed correctly the use of the place. Humby struck off farther from the trail in order to approach the clearing from the opposite side.

Quietly we drew nearer, my instructions being to follow so closely that I could step in his tracks. Louder and louder came the voice, until at last it was just ahead of us. We crept closer on our hands and knees. Then the Corporal rose slowly to his feet and I did the same.

We were standing in the black shadows of the trees surrounding the clearing. In front of us the moonlight streamed down into the grassy space on the heads and shoulders of a crowd of kneeling men. The brightness of the moon was more intense than I had ever seen it in the east, and each figure stood out in the play of light and shadow so that we could see every detail of their attitude and numbers. Nearer to us stood one addressing the kneeling men, and on him the rays fell brilliantly. As he turned sideways to address one section of the audience, I recognised Maskin, their leader.

He was speaking in a dull, monotonous tone, that, taken with the position of his hearers, led me to think he was praying. But I soon found that he was delivering a sermon to those bowed heads. Not a face showed, except a little of those in front. The followers knelt straight up in a most

uncomfortable position, hands on knees and heads turned persistently downwards.

In the meantime the Corporal had been carefully scanning the figures. Again and again I saw him turn from side to side of the crowd, each time with greater impatience and annoyance. Once he moved silently to another tree and peered out to see the men at a different angle. Not knowing those before me, I was unable to distinguish one from the other of the thirty or forty worshippers, but the definiteness of the Corporal's inspection convinced me that a sight of their faces was not necessary for him to place them.

The talk was not very interesting, being a medley of scriptural quotations, all of which dealt with dreams and revelations. It sounded as if the same sermon had been so often given that it was but a form. Presently the monotony of the voice was dropped, and Maskin spoke with an enthusiasm altogether different from the minute before.

"I have had a vision," he exclaimed. "We have all seen it. This country in which we have cast our lot must be ours, and ours alone. We must drive out the base unbeliever, the destroyer of our faith, the infringer of our rights, the insulter of our beliefs. To us is given the power to accomplish this great deed. To us will be the glory when we do it. From the Almighty God we have derived the peculiar gift of dreaming dreams, of seeing visions that will enable us to make our enemies as chaff. Like chaff we must scatter them to the four winds of heaven. Already we have shown our might. We have made the unbeliever to be afraid. The earthly goods of some we have seen wafted away in smoke. Two have suffered the final end of the scoffer. Nothing can keep us from possessing the land the Almighty God has destined for us—our Canaan."

To our surprise he suddenly ceased speaking and turned away from the audience to glance stealthily at his watch. Then hastily he stepped to the small platform that had mystified Dicky and me. Raising his hands above his head he shouted rapidly:

"The God Jacob will reveal to you the word of the God Almighty. Listen!"

He threw himself at full length on the platform, his arms hanging loosely over the side. As one man the followers rose to their feet, their arms extended towards the moon, and a look of deep devotion on their uplifted faces.

Then a strange thing happened.

In front of us, and within six yards, the figure of the leader lay bathed in the clearest moonlight. Every move, every twitch of muscle, a flutter of an eyelid would have been visible to us gazing in fixed wonder. But not a nerve quivered. Like a dead man he lay, limply, eyes closed, lips tight together.

And yet there came a voice from him, a voice of unnatural power, a voice that was not the one to which we had been listening but a moment before. And just before it started we heard the same grinding sound of machinery that had come a few hours before from the surface of the lake. Out over the clearing the voice thundered, echoing off among the tree aisles with terrifying strength, a voice louder than any voice of man, and yet unmistakably from a man's lips.

I felt the Corporal clutch my arm in a grip of nervous force. A quiver ran through the crowd before us. But not a sign of life was in the reclining body. In that moonlight a strange pallor had seized his features, adding to the supernaturalness of the scene. No wonder was it that those standing men believed the divine source of such a voice under conditions like these, and carried out its commands at all hazards.

The words came slowly. Loud as the voice was, there was no trace of strain or shouting. It was like a voice full of emotion vastly magnified.

"First drive out the foreigner that is among you. Those who have come to scoff are condemned by their own lips. I, the All-Powerful, am a jealous God. Teach them my ways; and my ways to them are destruction.

"Two strangers you have already destroyed. And therein you have done well. But there are two more in your midst, two who have come from the same land of the unbeliever, and with the same mockery on their tongues, two who have vilely insulted your God Jacob. Will his followers endure the insults of the accursed? Will you not avenge in my name? Avenge! Avenge! Slay! Slay!"

"Avenge! Slay!" The words were echoed from the throat of every man in the assembly, fervidly, prophetically. I felt my flesh creep at the note of deadly portent. The shout of frenzied determination wavered off into a hum of intense feeling.

In the excitement the policeman drew me away. When we were out of hearing he spoke.

"Do you carry your revolver, and loaded?"

"Always."

He said no more for the moment.

“To-morrow you must not leave the house. But, yes, the funeral is to-morrow. I will be with you.”

“But Jock will be with me, too—Jock and Aggie. Surely that will be safe.”

“I will meet you within half a mile of the house. It is not likely they will have their plans completed for a couple of days, and I may be able to get ahead of them in the meantime. I would get help from the barracks, but there are a few things I want to follow up first. Whatever happens, don’t be away from the house without me. It will be for only a few days. By that time I will have them all cornered with enough evidence to put them out of the way for a time. Now promise you won’t risk anything.”

I promised.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CORPORAL WARNED AND WARNING

Dicky's room was empty in the morning when I hastened to it before going downstairs. I had expected it, but that did not lessen the feeling of desertion when I found myself without him. Jock, Aggie, and I started early for the bungalow, where our friend lay awaiting his last earthly rites. As he had promised, the Corporal came within sight not far down the trail, and joined us in our gloomy ride.

"I thought you were staying with the women, Corporal," said Jock in some surprise.

The latter treated the remark as if it were a mere passing of the kind of day.

"There are enough there now. The undertaker and the minister have been there since yesterday. There was no room, and I wasn't needed."

"The women shouldn't have been left alone with a houseful of strange men," declared Jock petulantly.

"And one of them a Methodist minister?"

Jock made no reply, but he appeared to be in a bad humour that morning, riding the remainder of the way with scarcely a word. When we came within sight of the settlement of Dreamers the Corporal rode up nearer to me and closely watched house after house, but not even a child was visible. I turned to make some remark to Jock, but something in the way he was looking at the Corporal took the words from my mouth.

The first thing we saw as we rode out from the trees that concealed the bungalow was the flag floating at half-mast from the tall pole, and the silent token of death brought us to the door in deep dejection. Already a few of the ranchers and farmers from the surrounding country had gathered in silent respect. A line of them sat on the edge of the verandah, talking but little, and that in whispers. Death was still an uncommon thing among them, especially the death of one who had been fighting a long, losing fight. I remained outside the house, restlessly walking up and down at the top of the slope,

and trying not to think of the deep, black hole there near the corner of the verandah. Once or twice I saw the Corporal come to the door and look around for me, and at last I went into the sitting-room to relieve his mind and to get out of sight of the grave.

There I sank into a dark corner and watched the passing to and fro of reverential friends who came shame-facedly in and tiptoed gloomily out. I could hear the voice of the Corporal now and again talking to some one whom he was trying to comfort, and the remembrance of the awakening that must come when the Corporal's love for Margaret was known roused me to an indignation that those who knew should allow the misunderstanding to continue. I could not believe it possible that Margaret was an accomplice, but I remembered several little events in which she had figured, and which I could not consider in any other light than as strange lack of consideration.

"Margaret, Margaret!" I said to myself, partly in protest, and partly in self-commiseration for the enlightenment I was receiving in spite of my blind fight to see nothing in her but the frank and noble girl I had long pictured. "Margaret, Margaret!" I repeated.

"Were you calling me, Count?" said a low voice at my side.

I looked up in bewilderment. It was Margaret. Had I unconsciously spoken her name aloud, when I thought it was only in my mind?

"I—no—I don't think so," I stammered. "I was thinking of you, Margaret," I said frankly, "but I didn't know I spoke."

She smiled a little consciously, but so sweetly and sadly that my doubts fled.

"Will you take me out when the minister goes?" she asked. "Aggie and I will be the only women he knew well."

From where I stood I could see the rope fluttering against the flag staff. It opened a way to change the subject, for Margaret was close to tears.

"Who was it lowered the flag to half-mast?" I asked, wondering what I would do if the girl broke down before me.

"Squart!" she answered gently. "He came up last night and let it down. He wouldn't come in. It was his little mark of respect."

"It was more than that."

"I'm afraid it was. Poor fellow! He never had any chance."

"Chance? With whom? Perhaps he may win out yet."

Margaret looked startled, and commenced to say something. But she caught a glimpse of the wonder in my face and stopped.

The procession filed out of the bedroom and Margaret fell in behind, leaning on my arm. Every man was standing, every hat was off when we came on the verandah after the pall-bearers, and to the oppressive stillness of a crowd of rough, weather-beaten men the remains of the friend I had known such a short time but admired so much were slowly lowered. Under the flag he had so loyally kept aloft, in full view of the wonderful stretch of prairie and foothills that he had gazed upon with thoughts we never would know, the unconquered loser in the hopeless fight was buried. Perhaps with intent the grave pointed straight out from the sheltered corner of the verandah where he had sat for so many years. At the first trumpet-call the spirit of the old man would rise to look out over that beloved view, imagining his England just there in the distance. Even during the ceremony, when only a small part of the respectful friends could crowd around the grave, some fine instinct kept them from obstructing the view across the prairie. That belonged to the body lying there, and even in death it was not to be denied him by earthly means. Not a man present but had seen the patient away above the prairie trail, sitting there where all was in sight, and never failing to wave an acknowledging hand to the pitying greeting of the passer-by.

Not a sound but the minister's voice broke the awed silence, save when the fitful breeze caught a corner of the flag and fluttered it against the pole. The dead man's requiem was fitting. In that solemn, dignified beat of the folds of the Union Jack I could read the knell Mr. Mathers would love most. Gradually it beat on Aggie as it was affecting me, and her stifled sobs at the end of the service told that the strain was too severe for her sensitive nature. Margaret, I felt, would not lose control until she was alone.

As we turned to go back to the house, the neighbours making way for us, I looked up at the flag, which was now hanging dead against the pole. My eyes fell on a figure standing with hat off and head bowed far above us on the side of the hill. It was Squart. He would attend the funeral, but he did not dare look on the grief that would be there.

When I could get into the open air again the neighbours had gone—the last one still near—straggling down the slope on their vari-coloured horses at a slow, funereal pace which the animals did not understand. I walked around the corner of the verandah and came full upon Squart, stepping quietly through the shade of the trees towards the flagstaff. He merely nodded to me solemnly and continued to the pole. With three or four vigorous jerks he ran the flag again to the top of the staff and fastened the

rope. He hesitated a moment with his hand on the pole and then walked to the head of the grave and stood looking over the prairie, still carrying his Stetson in his hand.

I moved out towards him, and he did not stir as I approached and stood by his side. He had not looked at the grave, but his eyes wandered slowly over the prairie. I left him to speak first.

“Do you think,” he began with a pitiful hesitation in his voice, “that she’ll need me any more now?”

“All the more in her sorrow, I should think,” I answered.

“In love one never needs any one else.” This son of the plains had passed me in reaching a truth.

I had no answer to make for a moment. Then:

“But her sorrow is uppermost now, Squart.”

“And there’s only one on earth to lessen that. I meant, do you think I need stay out there any longer?” He pointed to the prairie, where Rosa had told me he had fed his herds for a month. “I haven’t been there since—I knew, because I didn’t think I’d be needed.”

Again I was dumb. I was just beginning to know the bigness of this cowboy with the oiled hair and the gold teeth.

“The range out there’s no good now,” he continued. “It’s as bald as a corral. It ain’t been good for the cattle for a week or two, but I didn’t dare leave it as long as I thought she might need some one, and no man round but me. I don’t know as I could stand to see the Corporal coming up regular. But if you think I should I could get back here under the hills nights mostly, so that I could be near them.”

It was too much to expect him to endure the sight of the visits of the man he thought to have cut hope from him. I told him Rosa could not require such attentions now, and he sighed with relief.

The front door opened and the Corporal came out. Squart choked a gasp and whispered to me:

“I can trust you, Mr. Arthurs.” Then he started along the slope without making a sign of having seen the policeman. But he had gone only a few steps when he stopped and stood with his back to us for an instant before he wheeled and came back, walking directly up to Humby.

“Corporal,” he said in a strained voice, “hadn’t you better keep an eye on them Dreamers? I don’t think they like you.”

“Why, Squart, what makes you think that?” asked Humby carelessly.

Squart half turned to walk away, but fought down the inclination and again spoke.

“I’ve seen them watching you when you didn’t think they were around. I don’t like their looks when they’re looking at you. You can bet if I hadn’t had a reason for telling you I wouldn’t have done it.”

With a little flurry of anger that this man, above all others, should think he would put himself out of the way to warn him unless he thought it imperative, the cowboy walked quickly away without waiting for the Corporal’s answer.

The latter watched him a moment with something like amusement on his face. He could not seem to grasp the meaning of fear, and the thought of changing his conduct for the Dreamers never entered his head.

“Funny cuss!” he exclaimed. “I suppose I ought to be frightened. Squart isn’t very nervous as a rule.”

His carelessness struck a spot left raw by Squart’s silent suffering and unselfishness.

“One gives credit for such things without criticising the man,” I replied hotly.

“You’re right, Count. I guess I’ve lost a lot of sentiment out here that it would do me good to have retained.”

But I was not mollified. I remembered the lie that was being acted in the house of death, and the part in it that was being played by Margaret. Rosa’s awakening would be a repetition of Squart’s suffering.

“I think there must have been considerable of it lost,” I stormed, “or, at least, I would hope so. There may be many desirable decencies forgotten in this rough life, but there is a limit.”

Humby took a step towards me, but checked himself in an instant and looked me over critically. Even to me the insult had sounded crude.

“You have something more to say, Mr. Arthurs,” he said in a quiet voice, half question, half demand. “You, I take it, haven’t been out here long enough to forget yourself.”

Before his coolness my indignation seemed uncouth and artificial. I found it difficult to explain further, for I had started a quarrel under the very conditions I had considered demanded the gentleman. He stood quietly watching me, in his face a deep sternness that suited him well.

“I’m waiting,” he said, “for the lesson you are to give me.”

I was forced to speak.

“Inside there are two women bereft of the kind of man this world sees too little of. We all know—even you know—how he lived to the last for those women. When he called you to his side as a father calls only his child’s husband you went without protest. You allowed the father to die in the thought that he was leaving a lifetime protector for his daughter.”

The Corporal had folded his arms and was standing very erect, looking at me closely with lowered head. I was not making the impression I had hoped for, but I blundered on.

“In that I am not prepared to blame you. The old man died the happier because of it. No one would suffer from it if Rosa loved another, as you do.” His arms dropped suddenly and he commenced to speak, but I gave him no opportunity. “You must see what we all see, that she loves you. In the face of that, what defence have you for allowing the deceit to continue to this time? What excuse can you give for the heart-pain that will come with her awakening to your love for Margaret Crawford?” He tried once more to interrupt, but my words were coming now in a torrent. “That’s what rankles with me—the fact that you are making Margaret act the lie with you. I, who knew her many years before you, can tell you it is not like her. Time was it would have shocked her more than it does me; but I suppose Love will do anything. God! what would I not have done to win that which you are debasing!”

From the Corporal’s face had vanished every trace of anger, but my own anger increased when I saw that he was looking at me with something akin to admiration. It was almost an insult.

“Count,” he said, raising his chin, a trick of his when he was most serious, “you’re a decent sort.”

I scorned the compliment.

“And out there,” I said, pointing after Squart, “is one of the staunchest gentlemen of the prairie. You talk about his not having sentiment. I could tell you that which would alter your opinion. A square, all-round man, the

prairie has not rubbed it from him.” I turned towards the house, but he interposed.

“Count,” he called after me with that quietly impelling voice of his, “can you take a word from one man to another? Could you find it in you to believe what I have to say—as you would believe Squart or any other fine gentleman?”

I stopped at his appeal and stood listening with my back to him.

“I give you credit for being honest,” he continued. “I only ask the same from you. Whatever blame you attach to me cannot alter my defence. If I were guilty I would have no hesitation in telling you to mind your own business—in stronger words. Innocent, I could tell you the same. However, what I am going to do is to ask you humbly to defer conclusions until Miss Crawford has had a chance to defend herself. Conditions, which I did not know existed, have taken the matter out of my hands. I assure you that you can still trust Miss Crawford. I also give you my word, and I hope you will accept it, that I have done nothing of which I am ashamed; I can still look Rosa or you in the face. Do you believe me?”

It was not hard to believe the Corporal at any time. Perhaps I had not remained long enough in the sick-room to have formed an opinion. It was hard to doubt the frank hand that was extended to me.

“Not your hand, yet, Corporal,” I almost pleaded. “I am willing to wait. But tell me Margaret is innocent; let me know that.”

He laughed softly.

“I leave that to your own conscience. You knew her long before I did, you know.”

CHAPTER XXXII

THE THIRD NIGHT

When we reached home I spoke to Margaret about the voice on the lake. Jock had left us as usual, and Aggie was nervously trying to forget in her house duties that this was the last night of the song. To my surprise, Margaret was almost as agitated as Aggie had been.

“Is to-night the third night?” she asked in terror.

Her fright annoyed me.

“You’re not foolish enough, Margaret, to believe all this silly talk of Aggie’s!”

“And Dicky gone! And only you left!” was her terrified answer, as she looked with anxious concern into my eyes.

“That’s something like what Aggie said,” I sneered. “You people need to come down East to get some of this sentimental nonsense taken out of you. Why should any one select me for destruction? I’m a stranger.” Then I remembered what I had heard at the meeting of the Dreamers.

“What’s the matter?” she asked anxiously, noticing my start. “Has anything else happened?”

I did not answer her directly.

“Do you want so badly that I should get frightened and leave? Don’t think for a moment that Dicky fled from fright.”

“I suppose there’s no use asking you the real reason for Dicky’s departure?”

“You were told, weren’t you? He wanted to wire— —”

She waved a hand in irritation.

“Never mind. You won’t tell, I see.” She sat in silent thought, her lip between her teeth. “Count,” she said, suddenly turning towards me, “would you think it inhospitable of me to ask that you should go away for a few

days. There are strange things happening; you know it. I can't have you suffer."

Her concern for me brought a strange flutter to my heart, but I knew she would have felt the same for Dicky had he been there.

"Why do you ask it, Margaret? You must know some danger to which I am exposed. One would think I was the Corporal, from your interest in my safety." She frowned impatiently. "Perhaps it will make you feel better to know that the Corporal and I will be together most of the next few hours. Now don't ask questions. I told you that because I can't stand to see you suffer. Anyway, I'm not worth your consideration after what I said to the Corporal to-day."

As evening drew on Aggie's distress increased; and with it came an equal calmness to Margaret. Entirely forgetting the terror she had revealed to me but a few minutes before, she strove to comfort and reassure her sister. It was under strain that Margaret's strength appeared. As I looked at Aggie, sitting in tense silence, a girl who had always been above "nerves" and hysteria, the encroaching darkness became uncomfortable to me. The only distraction from the silence with which we awaited the voice was the blundering noise of the German maid in the kitchen.

When it came Aggie did not faint, but the look of dumb terror that held her stiff and motionless was even more disturbing. By a steely determination she held herself upright, but the haunting look of her eyes was terrible to see. When the voice ceased she rose, her hands tightly clasped over her heart, and stumbled to her room.

"Some day this will kill me," she muttered. "I can't stand it all. I can't stand it."

What a life these two women were forced to lead, doomed to a companionless existence with only German farmers and Dreamers and cowboys around them—all because one of them loved a man who had the wild desires of the ranching life! Aggie's love for Jock must be deeper even than I had thought. Not once in these five years had she returned East. Many a time with misty eyes I had watched her following her husband about, or eyeing him anxiously. Only when he joined in our laughter did the little lines of her face smooth out.

Jock loved her with a fierce passion; I had seen enough to know that. But, manlike, he yielded not to her craving for the signs of affection. Shortly after I had retired to my room I heard him enter the house and go to Aggie's

room. Then came the slam of his own door, and the house was silent. I dared not lie down for fear of missing my appointment with the Corporal.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN INTERRUPTED MEETING

At midnight I stole softly down the stairs with my shoes in my hands. In that country the doors were never locked, so that I experienced no difficulty in letting myself noiselessly out. As I drew the door after me another door in the house creaked, and I hastened to close off the draught that must be responsible. I drew on my shoes at the edge of the verandah with a strange feeling of being watched, a feeling so acute that I did not wait to fasten the laces properly. Then it struck me that it must be the Corporal, or that the remembrance of the last time I had been out there alone was weighing me down. The Corporal was waiting for me among the trees, and we lost no time in making for the meeting-place of the Dreamers.

Although we had left the house earlier than the night before, we were again too late to witness the entire service. Apparently we had come upon the gathering at about the same period in the service as the last night, although about an hour earlier. It seemed as if one of their methods of defeating spies was to alter the hour of meeting from night to night.

As we approached from the rear of the leader's position the same voice was speaking, but not in the same monotonous tone we had heard before. There was a fire in it that told of an excited man on an absorbing topic. In the fleeting glimpses we caught through the trees as we approached, the Dreamers were kneeling in the attitude we had already seen, but the moon had not yet reached the point in the heavens where it lit up the far side of the clearing with the same distinctness. From time to time the speaker stopped as if to let his words sink home, and on this account we were forced to approach with a great deal of caution.

We were yet too far away to hear what was being said with any clearness, when I felt the Corporal squeeze my hand suddenly, and the next instant he had glided away. We had come to a clearer spot among the trees, where the moonlight filtered through in a faint tracery of flickering spots, throwing a dim light that enabled me to see the trunks of the trees and the

obstructing brush, so that I could move with less danger of warning the Dreamers.

A figure moved quietly into the light before me and stood facing me with folded arms. It was Jock.

“This is a strange place for you to be, Arthurs,” he whispered. It made a peculiar impression on me that he had used my surname for the first time in my memory.

“Sh-sh-sh!” I hissed back. “Get down or they’ll see you there.” I crouched the lower myself.

“What if they do?” he answered in a louder voice than before. “I suppose they have a right to be there without your spying on them.”

Before I could grasp the meaning of his remark I saw the Corporal rise from the ground behind him and whisper something in his ear.

Jock started quickly, turned partly around to face the Corporal, and then sank slowly to the ground. As he did so I saw a revolver flash in Humby’s hand. As I crawled to them I heard the Corporal whisper in Jock’s ear:

“Had to do it, McTavish, to prevent any noise that would give us away. Now, let’s get a little nearer,” he muttered behind Jock’s shoulder.

The latter moved forward, the policeman still retaining his revolver. Thus we reached the blackness of the trees immediately surrounding the clearing.

The discussion had been going on with more and more excitement during this scene, but some decision appeared to have been reached, for the leader moved backward in a general silence and settled himself on the platform. I noticed Jock take out his watch and strive to get a glimpse of it, the Corporal’s eye on him all the time. But before he could satisfy himself as to the time the powerful, disturbing voice of the night before came again.

I heard Jock swear viciously below his breath, and then a slight noise drew my eyes towards the Corporal. The latter drew in a sharp breath and his arm rose quickly. At the end of it, outlined against the moonlit clearing, pointed his revolver. But it dropped again as quickly as it rose. I looked around for Jock. He had disappeared.

A moment later a peculiar cry came from the trees on the left, and in an instant the clearing was empty. But from the platform where the leader had lain that voice continued to come in deep, penetrating tones.

It was so much like the illusion of a dream that I winked my eyes rapidly to clear it from my brain. I would have rushed forward into the moonlight had not the Corporal caught my arm as I passed and jerked me back.

“Wait a moment,” he commanded. “It’s not safe to expose ourselves in that light yet.”

Just outside the circle of light we waited for several minutes. Then Humby moved forward slowly into the clearing and made straight for the platform, from which the voice came in thunders of denunciation of the strangers. Right on the spot where the voice seemed to centre he stood for a moment. Then he moved forward a few steps in a wavering line, finally settling to a straight course. As the last words rang out: “Avenge! Avenge! Slay! Slay!” he came thoughtfully back to me and stood with his head turned to the ground in deep meditation.

“Now to follow this thing to the end!” he almost hissed. “Are you in it with me? I can’t afford to wait for more help. Things are developing too rapidly.”

Our plans were quickly made in the darkness of the trees. He intended to ride as fast as he could to the Dreamers’ settlement, so that he could watch their homecoming and perhaps hear some of their plans from concealment. If he could arrive soon enough he might succeed in getting some information by threat from those who had not come to the meeting. It was his only chance of collecting direct evidence that might guide him in preventing the disasters foretold by Maskin and that strange voice.

My part was to remain where I was until morning, to see that nothing further happened around the clearing. At daylight, if he had not returned to me, I would go to the house and await him there. Either of us would surely have something to tell by that time.

I saw him creep away without the tingling of nerves I would have felt under less exciting conditions. The events of the night had keyed me up to endure anything, especially if it promised any solution of the mysteries. I sat down on a fallen tree outside the glare of the moon and waited with my eyes on the clearing. My arms rested on my knees, and my hands closed over my revolver as I stared thoughtfully across the moonlit space.

An hour passed. There had been little sleep for me the last couple of nights, and seldom since I had come had I secured all the rest I wanted. Therefore it was with difficulty I kept my eyes open.

I suppose I must have succumbed at last, for I suddenly awakened with a sense of insecurity, not exactly of danger, but rather of having been unexpectedly discovered. The same feeling of being watched that had troubled me when I left the house made me slip from the log and investigate from its shadow.

A glance across the clearing showed me that there was nothing there. The early daylight of the prairie was already creeping in among the trees, lighting them up with a weird, indefinite light that threw all except the deepest black into a dull grey, cold and lifeless.

As I turned my head to look where an overpowering force drew me I could see Abbot's peak standing out in the full sunlight above me, each unevenness in its craggy sides touched with black. Lower down the light grey grew dimmer and greyer. My eyes were drawn to the left. I knew it was there, but all my nerves rebelled at seeing what I could not imagine. And yet my head revolved slowly to the spot.

There, within ten feet of me stood a man, his arms folded on his breast, his whole attitude of folded arms and dropped head one of amused disdain.

It was Jock.

With a stifled cry of relief I laughed, hysterically, I suppose.

"Great Scott, how you frightened me!" I exclaimed, standing up and stretching my stiffened limbs. "How did you come to find me? Have you seen Humby?"

Jock did not answer my questions.

"Kind of a joke leaving you to watch, wasn't it, Count?"

"I haven't had much sleep for the last few nights. It's no wonder I dozed off for a few minutes." I was alive to self-defence in the face of that sneering voice.

He laughed, a tantalising, irritating laugh that convicted me without further words.

"I guess you've had as much sleep as I've had. And I feel up to anything."

I remembered his presence the night before, and it drowned out for the moment all else.

"How in the world did you happen to be here last night?"

“I might ask you that with more reason, mightn’t I?”

“Oh, I! I was here with the Corporal. We wanted to know something more about the Dreamers. We’ve watched them for two nights now.” I remembered how little we really did know, and how far we were from a solution of the mysteries. “But I don’t know if it’ll help us much to find out what we have been after,” I added.

“What are you and the Corporal after?” he asked.

“Voices—several of them—the Blue Wolf—why some one is after Dicky and me—what the Dreamers would do in their beliefs—half a hundred things I’m all at sea about. You heard that voice last night, yourself—you must have. That’s one of the things. There’s another one down on the lake. There are so many things I can’t get at the bottom of that it’s a wonder it doesn’t drive me crazy.”

“And why haven’t you said anything to me about all this? Maybe I could explain everything. Have you been working on them long with the Corporal?”

I suddenly remembered that I had been told to say nothing to Jock—warned both by the Corporal and Dicky.

“I always like to get to the bottom of things,” I explained lamely, “and it’s part of the Corporal’s duties. You’ve lived out here so long that you don’t notice. I did tell you some of the things, but you just laughed at me and said it was my nerves.”

“And you haven’t discovered where the voices come from? You haven’t found the lair of the Blue Wolf? But you *have* untangled the Dreamers’ mystery. What do you think is their skeleton? What is their special hobby?”

I did not tell him what we had heard. That was between the Corporal and myself.

“The Corporal knows more about these things than I do. He lets me help him, but he doesn’t take me into all his secrets.”

“Then you’ve really found out nothing,” he said, looking anxiously at me as he spoke.

“No, nothing definite. We’re just collecting the ends to make something out of it.”

“Why not let me help you? I know this better than either of you. I know the Dreamers, as you’re aware. You should take advantage of my knowledge

to hasten your conclusions.”

He laughed as if he knew his proposition was untenable. Then he sat down on the log beside me, his face lifted up to Abbot’s.

“Are you too tired, too sleepy, Count, to do something you’ve wanted to do ever since you came?”

“What’s that, Jock? No, I’m not too tired. I’ve been sleepier.”

“Do you see how close we are to Abbot’s?” he asked, pointing up to the sunlit peak towering above us.

I looked up with the dawning of a great interest.

“How’d you like to take that promised trip this morning—now? It looks like an ideal morning for such a climb. The view should be grand—better even than later in the day. I’ve never been up at this time of day myself. What do you say? Are you game?”

In my interest in Abbot’s I forgot about my plans to meet the Corporal.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A DANGEROUS CLIMB

Even the dreadful events of the next few hours have not obliterated the memory of that climb in the early morning light, nor will I ever forget it. Abbot's is not by any means a formidable peak, as I look back on it after some experience in mountain ranges, but at that time it appeared to me such an one as makes men's reputations. Ever since I came to visit Jock its rough, rocky sides had been within sight, forbidding, and yet inviting to conquest. Whether my interest would have been roused had not the strange figures and flashes upon its side formed a part of the unexplainable in my experiences I do not know; but since the first night when I had looked up from the lonesome prairie upon the leaping figure of an unknown man my imagination had clothed those rugged rocks and dark crevices with strange shapes and fantasies. Now that the hidden nooks and frowning rocks were to pass beneath my discovering eyes I felt I had come upon the supreme moment of my visit.

And I had—save one.

I thought no further of the reason for Jock's presence, save to decide indefinitely that he was there for the same reason that we were, to find out more about the strange sect he had as neighbours. From one of those peculiar ideas of honour of his he did not think it right to include the curiosity of Dicky and myself in a subject which was interesting to him only as a neighbour who was on friendly terms with the Dreamers. Lightly these thoughts ran through my head during the first few minutes of our climb as we passed through the darker depths of the trees, making for the clearer sides above.

We hurried along, desirous on my part of the view under the rising sun, before the glare and heat of the later hours would take away the softness of the scene. I looked forward to the clear morning light as the proper illumination of those stretches of prairie and foothills, beautified with the glamour of great height and unusual surroundings.

Jock maintained his place in front of me, try as I might to overtake him. He was in much better training than I, and benefited from a knowledge and experience that was denied me. He moved easily, almost without looking around, as if the track lay blazed before him in the ruts of a much-travelled road. Each fallen log and later the rocks and crevices presented no difficulties to him. Nothing made him even hesitate. I could imagine that he was merely retracing a path as familiar to him as the front walk from the trail to the house.

Bursting at last through the leafy darkness where the invisible sun had not yet reached in its steady course, we came with a suddenness that startled me, upon the steeper slopes where the trees could not secure a foothold. The glory of the rising sun, just now showing its curve around the face of the mountain farther along, blazed into my eyes with disturbing force. Nothing but a broken chaos of rocks and boulders intervened at this height between the half hidden globe of light and myself. In the same glance the pointed tree-tops pushed through from below straight and uneven. It brought to me forcibly the height which we had reached. Never before had I looked down upon tall pine trees like that, and the forest of green, ever beneath my eyes, was the outcropping of a lower world, distinct in appearance and plane from that in which I now moved.

Jock did not hesitate, pushing along over a huge boulder that seemed to me to present an impassable obstruction. I stood still suddenly from sheer giddiness of height and the unexpected break into the vivid light of the sun below me. For a time I was afraid to look below, afraid that the deeper realisation of climbing so far and going still upwards would weaken my determination to follow wherever Jock might lead. Then I stepped out to take, as I thought, an easier way around the big rock over which Jock had clambered. But he had become aware that I was not close to him, and turned just in time to stop my progress.

“Look out,” he shouted wildly. I stopped with a foot already advanced to the edge where I intended to pass. “Not another step that way or you’ve taken your last one here.”

I crept nervously back, my hands pressed tight against the firm rock I had attempted to defeat in its obstruction.

“You’ve got to follow me step for step,” he added when I had climbed the rock and, with nerves shaken, stood behind him, “if you want to save your neck.”

He laughed harshly, taunting my inexperience, I thought, and I determined not only to follow him so closely that I would be safe where he was, but also to show him that a “tenderfoot” could possess both brains and courage. However dizzy the great height might make me, I would not let him see me nervous.

From that time to the end of our climb Jock said nothing. Unflinching he led upwards, stepping over some stones that I considered might have been passed around, and carefully avoiding others that seemed to afford safe footing. But I followed in his steps, now with beating heart and shaking hand outstretched against the wall beside me, and now striding out on the wider ledges with reviving spirits. At first Jock did not even stop for breath, but, hearing me panting behind him, I suppose, he occasionally turned around to the prairie and stood gazing out over the view at which I dare not look until the first fear and dizziness were gone. Then I berated myself for a coward when Jock could stand and coolly gaze undisturbed. And at last upon a wider ledge where we had stopped for breath I leaned far back against the rock wall and looked.

It was a grand view. I have seen wilder, more terrifying sights since—broken glimpses of mountain chasms, and tumultuous streams, creeping glaciers and unmeasured depths—but never will I see that which will leave an impression as vivid as that view across fifty or sixty miles of level prairie, broken only in tiny spots, and cut off impassably from the mountain side on which I stood by a broad line of green tree-tops. On that ledge we stood for a long time. Perhaps Jock grasped my appreciation of the sight, and was willing to let it sink home.

Around the rocky slope to the east the sun was widening its glare, coming up over the prairie in brightening rays. As yet the flat stretch in front of me was in semi-darkness, but as I stood I could see the sunlight creeping down the hillsides until it would throw everything beneath me into brightness.

We crawled upwards, now along narrow ledges that made me hold my teeth tight closed. Again we would freely climb along flat shelves that would be easy roads on the level, or step more carefully across fields of broken stone where the huge rocks from above had thundered down to their own destruction. Once I slipped on a rounded stone, but Jock reached for me with the first rattle of the grinding rocks and pulled me back before I had realised my danger. At another time I hesitated a moment before attempting to scale a cliff-like surface that led to a ledge above. I looked up to find Jock’s hand extended to me, although his face was averted; he did not wish to notice my

discomfiture, and almost before my foot was solid on the higher level he was on in front.

I stopped to take another look across the lighting prairie. By this time the slanting rays had reached every corner save deep into the coulées, and these showed up like rocks in a summer sea. The dark spots I had seen before were the houses of the settlers and the bunches of cattle, appearing here and there from this height in a proximity to each other that I knew was vastly misleading. Away to the north a cloud ran from a narrow line of deep black to a wider band of duller hue. The point advanced slowly, and I imagined I could hear the laboured puff of the straining engine on the narrow line of steel. A touch of relief came with the thought of that sign of civilisation, but as I gazed the point widened out and the cloud drifted away to mingle with the vapours of the heavens. With the completion of the firing of that engine I stepped back into the upper world of separation from all with which I was familiar.

Higher and higher we went. It was long since I had dared look farther than the narrowing path ahead of me. Even the tree-tops ran together into a shaded green as they caught the corner of my eye. We were long past that world now. I wanted to ask Jock how much farther we had to go, but over my desire was an anxiety as to how it would sound to talk at that height. Since Jock had spoken when I made to pass around the rock not a word had been said.

At last we came to a wider ledge which led off around the curve of the mountain side out of sight. Jock stopped until I was forced to come to a standstill close against him. Then he stepped out to the outer edge for me to pass, and I saw ahead of me a narrow path that dropped straight down at the side in a precipice. Hitherto the rocky side had run down from us in a slope of varying steepness, but here it was an unbroken drop. Whatever fell over it would not stop before the tree-tops below.

I hesitated a moment, but Jock was watching me with a smile of contempt. I took a deep breath and stepped out, my left arm extended against the face of the towering rock while I held my right out to steady myself.

Suddenly my right arm was jerked fiercely to my side and a pair of powerful arms circled my shoulders.

For a moment I swayed on the brink of that awful depth. A vertigo seized me as I felt myself leaning farther and farther over, supported entirely

by those tightening arms. Even as my senses left me I managed to turn my head—and looked into the face of a maniac.

Jock had gone mad.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE MYSTERIES SOLVED

When I regained consciousness I was lying on a wide ledge that extended from an opening in the side of the mountain, a shallow grotto like a huge room. My eyes opened on a tangle of sheets of metal that shone like tin, and another material that resembled membrane or a close, dirty-grey textile. I stared stupidly at the hoops and sheets of metal, wondering what world this was in which I had wakened. The whole thing was too fantastic to be taken seriously, but there was a disagreeable memory back somewhere that impelled me to break the vision.

I lowered my eyes. In a flash I knew I was wide awake, and the events of the early morning came back in one stroke.

There, standing with his arms folded, a crooked, diabolical grin upon his distorted face, stood Jock, not the Jock I had known so well and loved as well in the old college days, but a Thing with the blood-hunger of a beast in its face.

I shut my eyes to blot out the hideous sight. But the Thing had seen me.

There came from it a noise—the insane, chuckling laugh we had heard out on the prairie, a laugh that would drive away a man's senses, even if the Thing that gave it had not been his best friend just a few hours before. The horrible cachinnation echoed back into the grotto, and returned to me with a thousand loud repetitions as it rattled among the sheets of metal and gut.

I remembered that last moment when I felt myself going slowly over the precipice, and I tried to rise. I fell back helpless. My hands and feet were tightly tied.

At sight of my efforts It laughed again, a gloating, feverish, exultant chuckle that made my blood run cold with the thoughts of what was to come.

Then It spoke.

“At last! At last! Ha—ha—he! Now she’ll be mine—mine alone, all alone! The last of the Quintuplets will have her to himself. Ha—he! Morris and Field gone! Dicky gone by this time! And now it’s the Count—the innocent, loving Count—the cunning, deceitful Count! He who posed so well until my back was turned!”

The look of terrible menace that had succeeded the gloating smile gave place again to the noise of maniacal glee. A long-drawn laugh with a gasp at the end of it that made me close my eyes with chaotic brain, reverberated among the queer things in the grotto.

“It’s taken me years to do it; but now the ends are in my hands.” He clenched his fists and ground his teeth, and a hideous sigh told better than words what those hands would do. “First, Morris by the cliff route!” he went on. “Then Field from an ‘outlaw’s’ back! . . . It was harder to get you and Dicky. I nearly had each of you once, but something—something interfered.”

A look of fleeting perplexity passed across his face, but his mind could not retain the thought.

“I nearly lost Dicky altogether by his temper. He nearly got away to town, and he wouldn’t have come back. And I’d have lost my chance for ever. But I wanted you most.”

The twisted smile that had come and gone was blotted out by that horrible grinding of teeth.

“He made love openly. You thought you did it so slyly I would never catch you. But you didn’t deceive me. You can’t deceive love like mine.”

He made a quick step toward me and I thought my time had come. But his mind glanced off at another angle and he commenced to walk excitedly up and down the free space in front of the apparatus that frowned on me with silent threat. At last he stopped beside me.

“But I got ahead of Dicky, after all. You think he’s in Medicine Hat, don’t you? You thought he’d got away, didn’t you?” He grinned at my look of horror as I pictured the probable end of poor Dicky.

“I attended to that. He’s dead! Do you hear?” He leaned over me to drive it in. “Dicky’s dead—killed! I left that to the Dreamers. Some day they’ll find his body in Bulberry Coulée. They’ll scarcely connect me with it, will they, eh? There are so many explanations for sudden death in this country. Did you think I came out here because I liked living alone? Do you think

there's anything in this life to appeal to me? I came because—well, you'll know in a minute.”

I had lost all sense of fear. Rather before me was the thought of this terrible calamity that had come on the dear, old boy. I forgot Dicky and everything but this deranged brain that was tearing itself with delusions. I looked steadily and pityingly up at him, and he shifted his eyes and looked away.

“Stop it!” he commanded with a shriek. “Or I'll end it right now. . . . It's a beautiful bit of scenery you're going to fall into. I'll give you a chance to take it all in before you go. There won't be enough of you left to give a clue that will threaten me.”

He chuckled softly, but would not look at me. Rather he seemed to be fascinated by the tree-tops below. Then he roused and came back to me. “Then it will be Aggie for me alone—alone—alone! For five years—five centuries—five æons—the Quintuplets have been my curse. Sometimes I thought I would go mad. Through unbearable torture I've lived, with you four hanging around the neck of our love, dragging—dragging, steadily killing it and me. Then there were only three—then two. Now I'll be free—free!”

He stretched his arms above his head and his eyes fell on the metal and machinery.

“That's what's done it for me,” he cried, sweeping his arm toward the apparatus.

Even as he spoke I was more interested in the use of all that tangled mass. I remembered the flashes we had seen and the running figure. Was it Jock?

“You fools! You thought I was wasting my time in that attic over bits of tin and mirror, didn't you? You're going to find out how terribly mistaken you were.” He stopped to chuckle. “The voice on the lake! The Blue Wolf!” Another chuckle. “The Dreamers' sermon!” He tramped rapidly up and down, laughing and gasping. “You didn't know that away up in that stuffy attic I discovered the secret of sound direction. And more. I found how to magnify sound ten—a hundred—an indefinite number of times as loud as the original.”

He stepped back and looked proudly at the contrivance.

“My reflectophone!” he said, bowing. “The reflectophone! Descriptive, isn't it? I'm not the first man to dabble in diacoustics. But the others have

merely touched its borders. Not one of them ever thought to apply the principles of light reflection, or refraction, to sound. There's nothing new in directing a ray of light by a shining surface. But nobody has passed the megaphone in the direction of sound, an instrument that scatters sound in a given direction without localising it. Nobody has stopped to ask why sound could not be treated like light. But I went further."

He paused to look triumphantly up at the thing he called the reflectophone.

"And I found I could. . . . The Blue Wolf!" he sneered.

Almost running to the back of the grotto he brought forward and flung contemptuously on the floor the skin of a huge wolf.

"There's the Blue Wolf. I bought it two years ago, a mere whelp, from the Indians, and raised it up here. I wanted it. When it grew large enough I put a knife in its throat. The graphophone did the rest."

He pointed to a contrivance in the centre front before the metal and gut sheets. It was a wooden affair with several sides. From where I lay I could see nothing, but he walked over to it and lifted out a graphophone.

"My sound collectors and magnifiers," he explained, pointing into the contrivance. "Listen!"

He dropped his head out of sight into the boxlike affair and sighed. The sound went up against the tin and gut like a rushing wind and came back to me in a tumult.

"Collected and magnified like a violin or a shell, and thrown against the reflectors. I can turn them in any direction I wish. Simple, isn't it?"

I was forgetting even his insanity in the intense interest of his invention.

"The Blue Wolf!" he laughed. "See! I turn the planes a certain way,"—picking up and consulting a card,—"33, 4, 36!" He seized the three levers and pulled them slowly. "Then I set the graphophone going."

From the instrument came the usual grinding sound, like machinery. The record produced the howl of the wolf, and a few seconds later there came from far below on the prairie the same howl and dying gasp. I listened in bewilderment.

"So very simple! Never thought of it, they didn't! I turn the reflectors again—let's see—2, 16, 31—and I get the range of the place where the Dreamers meet. You heard that last night and the night before. You see, I

intended the Dreamers to get rid of you and Dicky if I failed. Only this is so much better.” He smiled sardonically. “I have the range of every place I could want—the lake, the Dreamers’ settlement, three or four places on the prairie, the cliff, the house. I haven’t used the house yet. Here it is—18, 12, 5. . . . I could kill her if I wanted to, right now. But I won’t—just yet. Later, maybe. There are other ways of killing her. Ha—ha—he.”

The awful laugh rang and rattled through the grotto until I tried to roll on one side to cover an ear. My movement attracted his attention.

“Don’t get impatient, Count. Am I not interesting you? Don’t you think the world would be glad to have my invention? I—guess—it—would. But it’s going to be denied that pleasure. Now I’ve got you and Dicky, I’ve no more use for it. You should feel grateful for being the only living thing to know my reflectophone. You can revel in that for the few minutes you have left.”

He stepped over beside the box and graphophone in the front.

“Good-bye, Reflectophone! It’s not the end you are worthy of, but you have done your work nobly. Good-bye!”

Bundling it hastily to the edge he pushed the box over. The graphophone followed. The nearest plane was jerked down with a rattle and tossed out of sight over the cliff. With a knife he slashed viciously at the gut and threw the torn shreds after the metal. When the machine had been dismantled he pushed the mass of levers and wheels to the edge and I heard the clang of falling iron from ledge to ledge. Only one tiny thing was left. He picked it up and looked at it reflectively.

“This clock attachment I used for the first time last night, so that I could be there to see what you were doing. And see how it paid me!” He threw it over. “I didn’t need it for the Dreamers. Maskin and I planned that voice in the clearing together. It was the only way to keep his followers down. He was just as anxious to get rid of you and Dicky as I was.”

He came slowly to my side.

“And now it’s your turn, Count. You’ll find a lot of valuable tin and wheels down there to receive you. And don’t forget to give my love to Dicky.”

As he spoke he rolled me to the edge. For an instant he held me there, my eyes looking down the awful precipice. Never before had I gazed from such a height. And yet I had not the slightest fear of it at that moment. With that firm hand of death on me I can remember thinking only of the pitiful

friend behind me, of the madness that had warped poor Jock's brain to do this thing.

"How does it look, Count? Think you it's good for completing my work?"

My feet slid slowly sideways nearer the edge—nearer—nearer.

Then just as I felt myself slipping into the unknown, turning for the final plunge that would end away below on those tree-tops, an arm seized me convulsively. With a great heave I was jerked back, roughly, with nervous strength. Bewildered, I looked up to my rescuer.

Above me stood Jock, tottering, with his hands before his eyes and his face convulsed in agony. Pain, surprise, awe, anxiety, thankfulness, were all blended in the look he gave me over his bent arm—something of the same look I had seen there when Dicky clambered to safety from the snakes.

"Count! Count!" he whispered hoarsely, the cords of his neck standing out as if he were choking. "You're still alive? Tell me, are you? Speak to me! My God!"

With a heart-rending groan he sank limply to the rocky floor and hid his face in his arms. Great sobs tore his body, and his limbs worked convulsively.

"Jock, old man!" I said, looking on this suffering that was greater than mine had been.

Before I could say more there came drifting up from the slopes below the shout of an angry mob, of men thirsting with that unreasoning madness that makes beasts of human beings.

I was too confused to think what that cry might mean. But Jock raised himself on his arm and listened in terror.

Again the shout came, a fanatical, blood-thirsty cry:

"The strangers! The strangers! Avenge! Avenge! Slay! Slay!"

"The Dreamers!" Jock hissed, struggling to his feet. For a moment he stood listening, a figure of breathless dread. The shout rolled up to us again. "Maskin at their head. We've got to fight for it, Count. I have no revolver. Have you?"

He suddenly remembered how I had been disarmed, and for one brief instant he tottered with his hands before his face. Then he drew a deep breath of determination and cut my bonds.

“Stay there,” he ordered. “This is my fight. Please God, I may yet pull through.”

He threw his shoulders back, looked down upon the scene spread hundreds of feet below us, and stepped out on the narrow ledge the Dreamers would have to cross to get to me. So quickly had this new danger developed on the heels of the old that I still could not grasp the significance of it. I sat limply down on the rocky floor.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE STRUGGLE ON ABBOT'S

Louder and louder came the frenzied cries of the Dreamers. Their progress up the mountain side was much faster than ours had been, for in their minds was no thought of the view or dizziness of height. Sustained by the one idea of destruction, they climbed steadily upwards, each succeeding cry closer than the last. A chant drifted up to us, now louder, and again deadened by the twists and turns of the path they had to follow. In and out they were climbing, the varying sound of their chant picturing to us the winding course and the obstructing rocks. The slow, deliberate cadences were much more portentous and menacing than had been the fierceness of the earlier cries.

The appalling seriousness of their purpose had time to sink into my muddled brain before a sudden loudness in the chant made me aware that they were already on the wider ledge just out of sight around the face of the rocky wall.

Jock turned and looked at me for a moment, his whole heart in his eyes. Then he moved forward on the narrow ledge. An abrupt silence told me that he had been seen.

From where I sat, leaning against the rock, I could see nothing of what was going on beyond Jock, but I followed his movements with fascination and knew that he was standing in full sight of the maddened Dreamers. A dozen steps out on the shallow platform he stood, his right hand extended for support against the straight wall of rock that rose beside him; his left arm was slightly raised to forbid further advance. Straight he stood, steady with indomitable determination, the poise of the resolute, calculating martyr in his attitude, fully aware that he alone stood between me and certain death. That unflinching firmness had its immediate effect.

Without advancing Maskin spoke:

“Where are the strangers, the scoffers? It is for them we have come.”

Jock realised the hopelessness of a struggle against such odds and tried to turn them away.

“They are not here, Maskin. Why did you come here to find them? One of them is in your power by this time, I suppose. The other is at the house, I think. There are things here you would not wish to be seen, Maskin.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then a deep voice of uncontrolled passion answered.

“McTavish, you lie!”

A murmur from the other men showed approval. I saw Jock’s figure stiffen, and he took a step forward.

“We saw you coming up the path. You’re trying to shield one of them. You’re a coward.”

Again came that menacing cry:

“Avenge! Avenge! Slay! Slay!”

“The words of the High God,” Maskin said, almost with a sneer in his voice, “We’re going to see if you speak the truth. We are commanded by the God Almighty.”

“Commanded by the God Almighty!” echoed the crowd behind him.

I heard the sound of advancing steps. Jock stepped forward eagerly to meet them. I leaned out to see all I could, and rose to be ready.

Maskin alone came into sight. As he saw me he called back to his followers:

“The unbelievers! The unbelievers!”

With teeth tight clinched and lips pulled apart in a glare of fury, he moved slowly forward, crouching low for the struggle that could only end in one or the other of them going over that dizzy height. There was but room for the two on that narrow platform. The rest of us must stand and look on helpless to assist.

Jock glanced momentarily over his shoulder.

“Collect all the rocks you can, Count,” he advised, as coolly as he would ask me to look at the scenery. “It’s your only chance. If I—miss, use them without mercy. It’s blood they’re after. Please God, it won’t be yours. If I—go over—” he hesitated just a moment as he braced himself—“you forgive me, Count, old man, don’t you?”

“She never loved any one but you, Jock,” I called back. “And none of the old Quintuplets ever forgot his honour.”

“One of them has,” he replied sadly. “Perhaps he may be allowed to retrieve a little of it now.”

Then on that narrow strip of rock, hanging over a drop of five hundred feet to the tree-tops, they locked arms.

It was a dreadful sight, those two men struggling with carefully controlled efforts like fencers. There were no frantic grips or wild straining. Behind every move was cool calculation, since one false effort would mean the end. Maskin was the larger and stronger, but Jock was sustained by a coolness that measured accurately each push and strain, that foresaw every move of the Dreamer.

I watched spellbound as the two men swayed and staggered on the edge of the precipice. Twice the Dreamer saved himself only by seizing Jock before he could draw away, and for the next second both had to brace themselves to keep from falling over. Once Maskin dropped quickly to his knees, and plunged for Jock’s legs. But the latter saw the move in time to drop in front of him, and their arms interlocked at the same level. Maskin dare not use his strength with such a quick antagonist, and the relentless opposition that met each effort began to wear through the blind fury that had driven him to this mortal combat.

He retreated slowly, and Jock pressed close upon him. A cry of anger burst from the crowd beyond, and goaded Maskin to keep his ground.

For minutes that seemed eternity to me the struggle continued, only the panting of the men breaking the steady grind of boot on rock. In sheer weariness they fell apart for a moment. Then a cry of warning broke from me. Maskin had drawn a knife and was advancing on my defenceless friend. Jock tried to retreat before him, but backwards he dared not go as fast as the oncoming Dreamer. As a last resort he jumped forward and clutched at the arm that held the knife, but even as he did so the arm was drawn back and shot forward.

A long, lightning flash came down over Jock’s shoulder, and where it struck a flow of crimson spread.

I staggered out on the ledge. But Jock had dived under the arm and had seized Maskin around the thighs. With strength that was superhuman he raised the Dreamer from the rock and with a mighty heave flung him far over the edge. Then with a sharp gasp he turned weakly toward me.

Never will I be able to blot that sight from my memory. Turning loosely and lifelessly through the air in a short curve, with waving, twisting arms and legs, the Dreamer sank out of sight without a sound. I could imagine a look of diabolical content in the doomed face, that he had at least done his work. Jock, with blanched face, set teeth, and a far-away look in his eyes that made me cry out in agony, felt his way slowly back.

With one arm extended between him and the precipice I stepped back in front of him, prepared at any risk to leap to his support if he faltered. Thus we regained the wider ledge before the grotto. At the first step on it his eyes closed wearily and he sank limply at my feet.

As I stooped over him the rattle of stones came from above, as of something falling rapidly toward me. I turned to take up the fight Jock had so valiantly waged for me.

Then I staggered against the rocky wall in terrified amazement as there dropped beside me—Dick. y.

It was really he. Dick. y, whom I had thought to be lying dead in a coulée. Dick. y, armed and horror-stricken.

Without even looking at me he knelt beside the fallen man and spoke to him. Jock's eyes opened wildly at the sound of his voice. He raised himself on his elbow, looking like one in a dream. Then over his face came a look of infinite joy and peace.

"Dick. y! Dick. y!" he cried tremulously, the tears running down his cheeks, and his free arm going up to circle Dick. y's neck. "Dick. y! Your face, boy! Thank God! There's hope—a little hope for me yet—maybe."

He sank on his side, drawing Dick. y's head down with him as if he would never let it free again. But the doctor in Dick. y was too anxious to allow anything to delay. He pulled his head away, gently turned the stricken man on his face and began to cut away the clothing around the wounded shoulder.

I had forgotten about the Dreamers until a shout from the rocks above drew my attention. I moved out on the ledge in time to see Corporal Humby, unarmed but as cool as if out for a stroll, drop from the rocks above right into the midst of the uncertain Dreamers.

"In the name of His Majesty I arrest you, Torrance, and you, Morton, and you, Fairman. The rest of you go. I'll attend to you later."

He pointed down the path, and without waiting to see if they obeyed, drew three pair of handcuffs from his coat pocket and advanced to one of the men he had arrested.

For a moment the silence was intense. Then, as the first pair of handcuffs clicked around the wrists of the surprised Dreamer an angry murmur burst forth. Without hesitation he stepped toward the second man, but the Dreamers suddenly moved together and presented a threatening front. The Corporal stopped with the handcuffs open in his hand, and pointed up among the rocks above.

“One more move from any of you and I raise my hand. Do you see those rocks up there? A signal from me and arrests won’t be necessary.”

Every eye followed the direction of his arm. Up there a rifle protruded from between two rocks, and over the top of another showed the barrel of a revolver.

The Corporal calmly proceeded to snap the handcuffs. The others, thoroughly cowed, started dejectedly down the mountain side, glad to have escaped. I stepped out to Humby as he snapped the third pair of handcuffs.

“Now sit down,” he commanded to the three men. They sat down against the rock. From a pocket he drew a length of small, but strong rope and bound the extended feet of the men. Then he loosened the handcuffs, pulled their arms behind their backs and snapped them again. The Dreamers were helpless.

“Keep an eye on them for a minute, Arthurs,” he said to me, and leaped up to the rocks from which the rifle and revolver showed. He picked them up and came down. He had faced those angry Dreamers unarmed and alone, but the daring of it had saved him, as it had done many a time before.

“Are you all right, Arthurs?” he asked. “And where’s McTavish?”

I pointed silently back. Seeing that something serious had happened, he passed me quickly and crossed to the grotto. Dicky was stooping over Jock, trying to stop the flow of blood.

“Dicky, too!” I heard the Corporal mutter in surprise as he knelt beside the wounded man. “Who did this?” he whispered.

“Maskin,” I replied, and pointed over the edge. He nodded understandingly.

Carefully he examined the wound, while Dicky, not content with his own conclusions, watched the policeman in silence. The latter placed his ear to

the wound, and slowly raising his face looked at Dicky with shaking head. Dicky turned away with twitching mouth.

“I guess you’re right,” he said. “It got to the lung. Poor old Jock!”

The eyes of the dying man opened.

“Yes, I know I’m going, boys.” He looked around until he saw me. “Count, will you take my hand now?”

I knelt at his side and grasped the limp, white hand in both of mine. It responded almost imperceptibly to my pressure. I dared not speak.

“Dicky, since I’ve seen you I can die happier than I ever hoped to be again.”

He turned his eyes from the one to the other. A spasm flitted over his face, but it was the pain of memory, not of body. I think he was past feeling any suffering from the wound.

“Poor Morris! . . . Poor simple old Field! I can’t tell it all to you, boys, but the Count knows enough for you to piece it together. . . . Sometimes I went mad . . . I couldn’t help it. . . . But there are two Quintuplets left. Thank God for that!”

His eyes closed, but reopened again.

“I’m glad you know how it happened. It was love did it. I couldn’t stand so much love. . . . But it’s Aggie I’m thinking of now—Aggie. She suspected, I think. But she never knew her Jock was a—a—I can’t say it.”

He raised himself weakly on his elbow and looked anxiously in our faces.

“I couldn’t help it, boys, could I, if I went mad—crazy? Will my love help me to forgiveness, do you think?”

Dicky lowered him gently, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Jock, Jock!” he cried. “Dear old fellow! We understand. You know now she was only yours.”

“As long . . . as she doesn’t . . . know all. . . . Because she loved me, boys, more than I deserved. . . . She loves me now . . . and I love . . . her.”

With the last quiver of life he tried to raise himself where he could look down over the house. His arms stretched out toward it.

“Aggie!” he called in a hoarse whisper.

A rattling, hissing gasp, and Dicky reverently lowered the lifeless form.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST OF THE QUINTUPLETS

We carried him down, the three of us, with difficulty, making the Dreamers walk ahead of us, and Dicky told me how he came to be there to brighten Jock's last moments. Instead of going to Medicine Hat, he had come up the mountain side to investigate on his own account the flashes we had seen. With the glasses that day he had convinced himself that the figure on the rocks was Jock, but he was unwilling to take another into his confidence until he had found out for himself what it meant. He had gained the grotto, and had waited among the rocks above until we had come up. Only the edge of the rock was visible from where he lay, and he had been unable to see Jock or me until I was hanging over the precipice. Then he had covered Jock with his rifle, reading the madness of his brain. But he could not bring himself to shoot.

"If I had fired, Count!" he groaned. "God! That would have been terrible."

The Corporal had waited outside the Dreamers' village until he was convinced that they did not intend to return. Then he had ridden to the house, only to find I was not there. A short time after he had heard the cry of the Blue Wolf. Making his way to the Dreamers' clearing, the shouts of the Dreamers had led him up the mountain side in haste, fearful that he would arrive too late.

It was a trying, nerve-racking climb down the mountain, but we managed it between us by relieving each other. Even at the last of the trees, where the Corporal's horse might have afforded us a rest, Dicky and I would not let the last of our friend out of our hands. It seemed now the only loving tribute we could pay the Quintuplet we had understood only at his death.

Within sight of the house Dicky quietly handed over his place to the Corporal. I understood. He had not the heart to face Aggie, bringing to her the greatest of all griefs. I pitied him now because I thought I understood him better. I knew why he had accepted a commission in South America, far from all his friends and the life he loved. I knew that he would consider it

desecration for a love that had not died to witness with aught else than the thought of her loss the grief of Aggie's affection.

So he remained at the edge of the woods up the trail where I could signal him when we had broken the news. We left the body with him while the Corporal and I started on our mission.

We had scarcely passed from the shadow of the trees when the door of the house opened hastily and the German servant girl rushed up the trail to meet us, wringing her hands and crying loudly.

In a flash Dicky was past us, and at the door of the house yards ahead of the running Corporal. But his courage failed him at the threshold. I saw him turn the knob and hesitate. He drew to one side, and with his hand to his head waited until the Corporal had opened the door and disappeared. Then, without waiting to see what was inside, he strode past me toward the Hills.

I found Margaret and the Corporal bending over the form of Aggie stretched on the sofa, chafing her hands and arms. When I entered Margaret looked toward me with a stifled cry of relief. But she did not stop in her rubbing until I had gently pushed her aside and taken her place. The Corporal shook his head at me—the same shake I had seen when he rose from examining Jock. For the second time that day the tears came to my eyes; but I think they were tears more of joy than sorrow.

Aggie had gone to join Jock.

She had been dead some hours, the Corporal said, and all we could do was to fold the hands reverently and cover the face. The workings of a Supreme Providence were vivid to me at that moment. The Corporal lowered the blind with a sigh of relief, but it was I who turned to soothe the sobbing sister.

When Margaret could speak she told us of the tragedy that had occurred in the house while we were passing through another up on Abbot's. They had been working in the kitchen, holding breakfast until Jock and I had returned from some early excursion they thought we had taken together. Suddenly they heard the cry of the Blue Wolf, but in the broad daylight it carried little terror. Margaret had gone to the front of the house to see if anything could be seen, when the frenzied words of a maniac roared over the house. At the first sound Aggie clasped her hands over her heart, weakened by the strain of mystery and knowledge, and staggered to the sofa as the voice spoke.

I could hear the words still as if I were listening to them up in the grotto:

“I could kill her if I wanted to, right now. But I won’t—just yet. Later, maybe. There are other ways of killing her. Ha—ha—he!”

The planes of the reflectophone turned to the house had sent every word there as surely as if Jock had spoken at the door.

White and tottering, Aggie had called “Jock” once, and collapsed on the sofa. She had revived but a little, in spite of the skilful treatment of the anxious sister. And later she had opened her eyes, stretched her arms toward Abbot’s, and, calling “Jock” once more, fell back into her sister’s arms. It was a kind Providence that had kept back the full knowledge of her death until we arrived.

I walked out to look for Dicky. I found him at the stable saddling his horse. He looked up when I neared him, with such a look of dumb agony in his face that I could not speak.

“Don’t tell me anything, Count,” he pleaded. “I think I know—I feel it.”

He completed the fastening of the buckle with steady hand, but the strain showed in his ghastly face. Then he spoke again, calmly and lifelessly.

“I’m going back to work, dear boy. Perhaps I can live it down—perhaps I can’t. Who knows?”

Then he straightened up beside the horse and threw his shoulders back like the old, unconquered Dicky.

“But I’m not going to funk.”

With a powerful spring he was in the saddle, sitting proud and upright to hide a bursting heart, with the grim determination of the big man he always was. He turned in his saddle as he rode away and waved his hand sadly.

“Good-bye, old man!—the last of the Quintuplets! I’ll drop you a line if I succeed.”

I am still waiting for the line.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

O YE OF LITTLE FAITH!

My holiday was over. All that was left me was to pack up and return to my office. At my desk there would be the possibility of drowning the tragedies of my visit in the hard work that would be waiting for me. I had come West with hopes too bright, with plans too complete, with anticipation too keen. To these had been added the greatest hope of all when my eyes fell on that pair of little feet, a hope I had not dared dwell upon in the old college days when the future looked so indefinite.

I was returning with this newest hope gone for ever. Added to the loss of two of my dearest friends it was making my departure a time of depression to me. Jock had died a man, loving and loved; and with him had gone the wife whose only thought had been of him. There was consolation in remembering this. But in the farewell to Margaret there was no relief save the knowledge of the worthiness of the man she loved—unless my first thoughts of his treatment of Rosa were correct. I had not yet received the explanation, but it was not hard to believe where Corporal Humby and Margaret Crawford were concerned.

Since the terrible events Rosa and her mother had been with us. With them I was leaving Margaret. I had already bade her a private farewell, wherein I had tried to conceal the pain I could not forget; but that farewell scene had not been a success either as a private expression of my good wishes or as a vehicle for a display of her sorrow for me. Secretly I think I had looked forward to that, and had arranged the interview in the hope that she would give me some little word to carry back with me to brighten my bachelor days. She had been too distraught to say more than a few words. I had told her of my belief in her future happiness with the Corporal, of my faith in him; and I had worked in, I thought, a trifle of the hopelessness of the years before me. She had stood silently while I talked, wrapped in thought, a sad, somewhat hopeless expression on her own face. But at the end she had not even turned to me.

“I’ll see you again, Count, I hope,” she faltered; “some day back there where we used to know each other better.”

It occurred to me that she referred to the misunderstandings since I came. I commenced to explain, but my awkwardness stood up before me in all its crudeness. She did not wait for me to finish, but laid her hand on my sleeve, half caressingly, to tell me I was forgiven.

“I don’t suppose we need forget all about each other, need we?” There were tears in her eyes as she spoke, tears she struggled to conceal with a smile.

“Those words,” I said gratefully, “I will never forget. That you will remember will be my happiest memory.”

Her tears came more freely and her mouth opened as if she would say more, but just then the Corporal came out on the verandah and a red flush spread over her face.

“I beg your pardon,” Humby said humbly, seeing that his arrival had been inopportune.

But I would not allow him to retire.

“You never have to do that, Corporal,” I protested. “I wanted to gaze at the moon once more before my sky was clouded for ever. That was all.”

He understood me and looked hastily at Margaret with an appeal in his eyes.

“I must go in to Rosa,” she muttered hastily, and withdrew.

And then I was upstairs packing my trunk.

It is when we are packing our trunks we realise the events of the past in their proper proportions. It is then we see, as in a moving picture scene, the failure we have been, the irretrievable blunders we have committed. We fold our clothes to the chant of direful omissions. We lay them carefully in the bottom of the trunk to the dirge of sinful commissions. And to the turning of the lock the fugue is continued with every garment.

We lie helpless with our life behind us, before the eyes of friends sad for the future; and all the time we mourn for what has passed. At that moment there comes a vivid grasp of where we have fallen so short of our plans. The sympathising faces hover above us a monument to their own powers of forgiveness; that more are not crowding to show respect is our own fault.

Our life has been full of intolerance, of harshness, of selfishness. And it all passes before our recoiling eyes—when we are packing our trunks.

I was packing my trunk.

From a handful of handkerchiefs fluttered down a slip of paper—then another. I stooped to pick them up. They were the slips I was to dream over with the wedding-cake. Perhaps I would amuse myself on the long trip home by reading the names Rosa had written there to decide for me the personnel of my breakfast-table. There was but one—the blank—that could read the future. I shoved them into my pocket and continued with my packing—and my thoughts.

Chastened in spirit, and filled with the self-consciousness of personal bankruptcy, I crept softly and humbly down the stairs, driving home the failure I had been by rubbing the trunk key in my pocket. The darkness of the stair passage suited my reflections, and the sudden brightness of the front window ahead of me, while I was still wrapped in obscurity, brought me to an embarrassed pause before presenting myself in the light of day.

My pause was continued perforce. I looked through the front window upon two figures standing with their faces to the prairie. One was the Corporal; and, with no attempt at concealment, he stood with his left arm around Rosa's waist. As I gazed he looked down into her upturned eyes, and even I knew what was in that look.

I pushed back against the wall, feeling guilty to have come upon a scene that was surely for no eyes in that house, overcome that I should be the resting-place of a secret I dare not reveal for the sake of every one. And as I leaned thoughtfully there a pair of daintily booted feet in the room before me came within my view.

I leaned farther over and saw Margaret look out and withdraw suddenly, as if she, too, had disturbed a secret. But the sadness in her face did not deepen at the sight. There was no start of sudden understanding, no flush of anger, no blanching of blighted hopes. The shoes lay crossed in languid pathos, unmoving, drooping, lifeless. She needed comfort—Margaret did. I could read the feet, and knew that some one must act. I was not the one to do it, but I would use my last chance to leave her as happy as my weak efforts could accomplish.

I moved out quietly into the room. Although her head was not turned from me, she did not see me until I was close upon her, so deep were her thoughts. When she did, her first move was to uncross her feet and infuse

into them a forced life. I believe she was beginning then to know that I could read her thoughts there.

I came close beside her and placed a sympathetic hand on her arm. She did not move it from the touch that must have been almost a caress.

“You saw them, Margaret?”

“I did.”

“And you are not — —” I wanted to say “broken-hearted,” but I reflected in time to change it — “you do not realise what that means?”

“I do. Oh, yes!”

This was no broken-hearted girl. I passed my hand across my brow in bewilderment.

“You have no brother. Shouldn’t I—shouldn’t I demand an explanation from Humby for you? Isn’t there something—I should do to—to punish some one?”

“I don’t want a brother,” she answered petulantly. . . . “And you’ve done enough punishing.”

I sat down helplessly in a chair, my head sunk in my collar, and one hand toying with the key of the packed trunk. After a moment I drew it out. A slip of paper came with it. Something flashed across me. I did not wait to follow it out in my brain, but spoke my thoughts instead. It seemed the quickest way of forestalling foolish ideas that came flocking faster than I could speak.

“Did you know of this, then, before?” I glowered over her, demanding quick replies.

“Certainly.”

That was too concise for me to follow. I sat still to get it into my head in more understandable completeness.

“Then—why—why—why?” I thought I had asked the questions that flocked into my head.

“Why what?” she asked with a coolness that sent me further floundering until I saw the tell-tale feet clinched across each other. Then I knew that she was no calmer than I was, but with superb control was bringing to her assistance the only protection she had under conditions that were the most delicate in which a modest girl could be placed. She had read all my

thoughts before I had expressed them even to myself. That I could place her in such a position was the thought that calmed me.

“Why,” I asked more calmly, “did both you and the Corporal act in the way you did?”

“What way?”

“I could not be blamed for thinking what I did—that you loved each other. You used to meet him at night. No one could misunderstand your pleasure when he was around. You— —”

She stopped me with a smile.

“I know all you would say, Count. Whatever misunderstanding there was was your own. I was helping the Corporal—you need ask nothing more, I think. I suspected the truth.”

Her face had saddened as she spoke. I grasped her meaning.

“But why did you let me misunderstand? Why didn’t— —”

I lifted my hand thoughtfully and looked at the slip. Suddenly an idea came to me.

“These are the slips I was to dream on, Margaret. I wonder what names are on them.”

She reached forward with delaying hand as I commenced to unfold the one in my hand.

“Don’t, Count,” she pleaded. “Give them to me, please, please!”

“Never, never!” I exclaimed dramatically.

Another fold opened. She rose quickly and went to the side window, where she stood silently while I unfolded them all, one after the other.

A slip lay open in my hand. For a reason I could not understand I was reluctant to look at it, now that the name must be looking up at me. At last I dropped my eyes to it.

The name was—“Margaret Crawford.”

Hastily I looked at the others. On each was the same name—Margaret Crawford. There was not even a blank.

I rose weakly from my chair and went over to her. She trembled as I approached, but did not try to escape; nor did she look at me.

“And you knew this, Margaret—these names? And Rosa—your best friend—knew it? Every one knew—but me.”

She turned a smiling face toward me then. All the despair I had seen there had fled. There was only the tinge of sadness of the last few days—and a great love that made my head whirl.

“O ye of little faith!” she murmured.

Outside the shadows lay thick beneath the trees, but we saw only the greater stretches of sunlight. The air was heavy with a midsummer heat, but only our emotions stifled us. The voices of two happy lovers drifted in from the verandah, but Margaret and I needed not words. A little enclosure of fresh mounds broke the flat slope of the hillside; but to Margaret and me the world was but commencing, full of life and promise.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Blue Wolf: A Tale of the Cypress Hills* by William Lacey
Amy]