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GENTLEMAN

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***In This Issue*—WAR WHEAT PLUNGERS—By Randall R. Howard**

THE MAN OF THE FOREST

XV (Continued)

SHORTLY after supper that day, when Helen was just recovering her composure, Carmichael presented himself at the open door. Bo was not there. In the dimming twilight Helen saw that the cowboy was pale, somber, grim.

"Oh, what's happened?" cried Helen. "Roy's been shot. It come off in Turner's saloon. But he ain't dead. We packed him over to Widow Cass's. An' he said for me to tell you he'd pull through."

"Shot! Pull through!" repeated Helen in slow, unrealizing exclamation. She was conscious of a deep internal tumult and a cold checking of blood in all her external body.

"Yes, shot," replied Carmichael fiercely. "An' whatever he says I reckon he won't pull through."

"Oh, how terrible!" burst out Helen. "He was so good—such a man! What a pity! Oh, he must have met that in my behalf. Tell me, what happened? Who shot him?"

"Wal, I don't know. An' thet's what's made me hoppin' mad. I wasn't there when it come off. An' he won't tell me."

"Why not?" "I don't know thet either. I reckoned first it was because he wanted to get even. But I guess he doesn't want me lookin' up anyone right now for fear I might get hurt. An' you're goin' to need your friends."

Then Helen hurriedly related the event of Beasley's call on her that afternoon and all that had occurred.

"Wal, the half-breed son-of-a-greaser!" ejaculated Carmichael in utter confoundment. "He wanted you to marry him!"

"He certainly did. I must say it was a—rather abrupt proposal."

Carmichael appeared to be laboring with speech that had to be smothered behind his teeth. At last he let out an explosive breath: "Miss Nell, I've shore felt in my bones thet I'm the boy slated to brand thet big bull."

"Oh, he must have shot Roy. He left here in a rage."

"I reckon you can coax it out of Roy. Fact is all I could learn was that Roy come in the saloon alone. Beasley was there an' Riggs —"

"Riggs!" interrupted Helen.

"Shore, Riggs. He come back again. But he'd better keep out of my way. . . . An' Jeff Mulvey with his outfit. Turner told me he heard an argument an' then a shot. The gang cleared out, leavin' Roy on the floor. I come in a little later. Roy was still layin' there. Nobody was doin' anythin' for him. An' nobody had. I hold thet against Turner. Wal, I got help an' packed Roy over to Widow Cass's. Roy seemed all right. But he was too bright an' talky to suit me. The bullet hit his lung, thet's shore. An' he lost a sight of blood before we stopped it. Thet skunk Turner might have lent a hand. An' if Roy croaks I reckon I'll —"

"Tom, why must you always be reckonin' to kill somebody?" demanded Helen.

"Cause somebody's got to be killed round here. Thet's why!" he snapped back.

"Even so, should you risk leavin' Bo and me without a friend?" she asked.

At that Carmichael wavered and lost something of his sullen deadliness. "Aw, Miss Nell, I'm only mad. If you'll just be patient with me—an' mebbe coax me. . . . But I can't see no other way out."

"Let's hope and pray," said Helen earnestly. "You spoke of my coaxin' Roy to tell who shot him. When can I see him?"

"To-morrow, I reckon. I'll come for you. Fetch Bo along with you. We've got to play safe from now on. An' what do you say to me an' Hal sleepin' here at the ranch house?"

"Indeed I'd feel safer," she replied.

"There are rooms. Please come."

"All right. An' now I'll be goin' to fetch Hal. Shore wish I hadn't made you pale an' scared like this."

About ten o'clock next morning Carmichael drove Helen and Bo in to Pine

and tied up the team before Widow Cass's cottage. The peach and apple trees were mingling blossoms of pink and white; a drowsy hum of bees filled the fragrant air; rich, dark-green alfalfa covered the small orchard flat; a wood fire sent up a lazy column of blue smoke; and birds were singing.

Helen could scarcely believe that amid all this tranquillity a man lay, perhaps fatally injured. Assuredly Carmichael had been somber and reticent enough to rouse the gravest fears.

Widow Cass appeared on the little porch—a gray, bent, worn but cheerful old woman whom Helen had come to know as her friend.

"My land! I'm thet glad to see you, Miss Helen," she said. "An' you've fetched the little lass as I've not got acquainted with yet."

"Good morning, Mrs. Cass. How—how is Roy?" replied Helen, scanning the wrinkled face.

"Roy? Now don't you look so scared. Roy's most ready to git on his hoss an' ride home, if I let him. He knowed you was a-comin'. An' he made me hold a lookin' glass for him to shave."

How's thet for a man with a bullet hole through him! You can't kill them Mormons, nohow."

She led them into a little sitting room, where on a couch, underneath a window, Roy Beeman lay. He was wide awake and smiling, but haggard. He lay partly covered with a blanket. His gray shirt was open at the neck, disclosing bandages.

"Mornin', girls," he drawled. "Shore is good of you now comin' down."

Helen stood beside him, bent over him in her earnestness as she greeted him. She saw a shade of pain in his eyes and his immobility struck her, but he did not seem badly off. Bo was pale, round-eyed, and apparently too agitated to speak. Carmichael placed chairs beside the couch.

"Wal, what's ailin' you this nice mornin'?" asked Roy, eyes on the cowboy.

"Huh! Would you expect me to be wearin' the smile of a fellar goin' to be married?" retorted Carmichael.

"Shore you haven't made up with Bo yet," returned Roy.

Bo blushed rosy red; and the cowboy's face lost something of its somber hue. "I allow it's none of your bizness if she ain't made up with me," he said.

"Las Vegas, you're a wonder with a hoss an' a rope, an' I reckon with a gun, but when it comes to girls you shore ain't there."

"I'm no Mormon, by golly. Come, Ma Cass, let's get out of here so they can talk."

"Folks, I was jest a-goin' to say thet Roy's got fever an' he oughtn't talk too much," said the old woman. Then she and Carmichael went into the kitchen and closed the door.

Roy looked up at Helen with his keen eyes, more kindly piercing than ever. "My brother John was here. He'd just left when you come. He rode home to tell my folks I'm not so bad hurt, an' then he's goin' to ride a bee line into the mountains."

Helen's eyes asked what her lips refused to utter. "He's goin' after Dale. I sent him. I reckoned we-all sorta needed sight of that dog-gone hunter."

Roy had averted his gaze quickly to Bo. "Don't you agree with me, lass?"

"I sure do," replied Bo heartily.

All within Helen had been stilled for the moment of her realization; and then came swell and beat of heart, and inconceivable chafing of a tide at its restraint. "Can John—fetch Dale out—when the snow's so deep?" she asked unsteadily.

"Shore. He's takin' two hosses up to the snow line. Then if necessary he'll go over the pass on snowshoes. But I bet him Dale would ride out. Snow's about gone except on the north slopes an' on the peaks."

"Then—when may I—we expect to see Dale?"

"Three or four days, I reckon. I wish he was here now. . . . Miss Helen, there's trouble afoot."

"I realize that. Did Las Vegas tell you about Beasley's visit to me?"

"No. You tell me," replied Roy.

Briefly Helen began to acquaint him with the circumstances of that visit, and before she had finished she made sure Roy was swearing to himself. "He asked you to marry him! Jerusalem! . . . Thet I'd never have reckoned. The low-down coyote of a greaser! . . . Wal, Miss Helen, when I met up with Señor Beasley last night he was shore spoilin' from somethin'; now I see what thet was. An' I reckon I picked out the bad time."

"For what? Roy, what did you do?"

"Wal, I'd made up my mind a while back to talk to Beasley the first chance I had. An' thet was it. I was in the store when I seen him go into Turner's. So I followed. It was most dark. Beasley an' Riggs an' Mulvey an' some more were

not only the oldest inhabitant hereabouts but the wisest too. An' he wouldn't tell a lie.

"Wal, I used all his sayin's in my argument to show Beasley thet if he didn't haul up short he'd end almost as short. Beasley's thick-headed an' powerful conceited. Vain as a peacock! He couldn't see, an' he got mad. I told him he was rich enough without robbin' you of your ranch, an'—wal, I shore put up a big talk for your side. By this time he an' his gang had me crowded in a corner, an' from their looks I begun to get cold feet. But I was in it an' had to make the best of it. The argument worked down to his pinnin' me to my word thet I'd fight for you when thet fight come off. An' I shore told him for my own sake I wished it come off quick. . . . Then—wal, then somethin' did come off quick!"

"Roy! Then he shot you!" exclaimed Helen passionately.

"Now, Miss Helen, I didn't say who done it," replied Roy with his engaging smile.

"Tell me then—who did?"

"Wal, I reckon I shan't tell you unless you promise not to tell Las Vegas. Thet cowboy is plumb off his head. He thinks he knows who shot me, an' I've been lyin' somethin' scandalous. You see, if he learns, then he'll go gunnin'. An', Miss Helen, thet Texan is bad. He might get plugged as I did—an' there would be another man put off your side when the big trouble comes."

"Roy, I promise you I will not tell Las Vegas," replied Helen earnestly.

"Wal, then, it was Riggs!" Roy grew still paler as he confessed this, and his voice, almost a whisper, expressed shame and hate. "Thet four-flush did it. Shot me from behind Beasley! I had no chance. I couldn't even see him draw. But when I fell an' lay there an' the others dropped back, then I seen the smokin' gun in his hand. He looked powerful important. An' Beasley began to cuss him an' was cussin' him as they all run out."

"Oh, coward! the despicable coward!" cried Helen.

"No wonder Tom wants to find out!" exclaimed Bo, low and deep. "I'll bet he suspects Riggs."

"Shore he does. But I wouldn't give him no satisfaction."

"Roy, you know that Riggs can't last out here."

"Wal, I hope he lasts till I get on my feet again."

"There you go! Hopeless, all you boys! You must spill blood!" murmured Helen shudderingly.

"Dear Miss Helen, don't take on so. I'm like Dale—no man to hunt up trouble. But out here there's a sort of unwritten law—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Killin' is against my religion. But Riggs shot me—the same as shootin' me in the back."

"Roy, I'm only a woman—faint-hearted and unequal to this West."

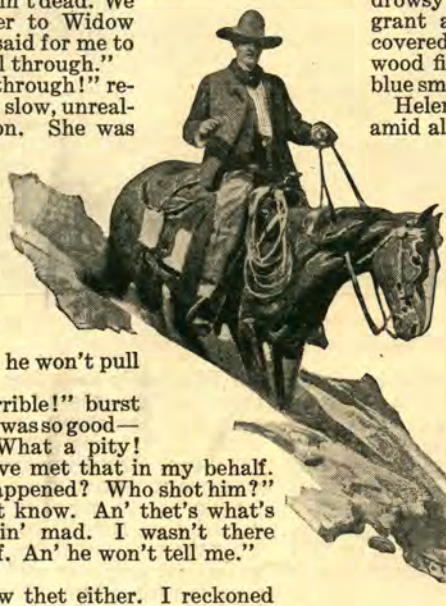
"Wait till somethin' happens to you. Supposin' Beasley comes an' grabs you with his own dirty big paws an' after maulin' you some throws you out of your home! Or supposin' Riggs chases you into a corner!"

Helen felt the start of all her physical being—a violent leap of blood. But she could only judge of her looks from the grim smile of

the wounded man as he watched her with his keen, intent eyes.

"My friend, anythin' can happen," he said. "But let's hope it won't be the worst."

He had begun to show signs of weakness, and Helen, rising at once, said that she and Bo would leave him then, but would come to see him the next day.



Dale's Sharp Eyes
Caught a Track Where
Shod Horses Had Passed

At her call Carmichael entered again with Mrs. Cass, and after a few remarks the visit was terminated. Carmichael lingered in the doorway.

"Wal, cheer up, you old Mormon!" he called.

"Cheer up yourself, you cross old bachelor!" retorted Roy, quite unnecessarily loud. "Can't you raise enough nerve to make up with Bo?"

Carmichael evacuated the doorway as if he had been spurred. He was quivered in the face while he unhitched the team and silent during the ride up to the ranch house. There he got down and followed the girls into the sitting room. He appeared still somber, though not sullen, and had fully regained his composure.

"Did you find out who shot Roy?" he asked abruptly of Helen.

"Yes. But I promised Roy I wouldn't tell," replied Helen nervously. She averted her eyes from his searching gaze, intuitively fearing his next query.

"Was it the Riggs?"

"Las Vegas, don't ask me. I won't break my promise."

He strode to the window and looked out a moment, and presently when he turned toward Bo he seemed a stronger, loftier, more impelling man, with all his emotions under control.

"Bo, will you listen to me—if I swear to speak the truth as I know it?"

"Why certainly," replied Bo, with the color coming swiftly to her face.

"Roy doesn't want me to know because he wants to meet that fellow himself. An' I want to know because I want to stop him before he can do more dirt to us or our friends. That's Roy's reason an' mine. An' I'm askin' you to tell me."

"But, Tom—I oughtn't," replied Bo haltingly.

"Did you promise Roy not to tell?"

"No."

"Or your sister?"

"No. I didn't promise either."

"Wal, then you tell me. I want you to trust me in this here matter. But not because I love you an' once had a wild dream you might care a little for me—"

"Oh, Tom!" faltered Bo.

"Listen: I want you to trust me because I'm the one who knows what's best. I wouldn't lie an' I wouldn't say so if I didn't know shore. I swear Dale will back me up. But he can't be here for some days. An' thet gang has got to be bluffed. You ought to see this. I reckon you've been quick in savvin' Western ways. I couldn't pay you no higher compliment, Bo Rayner. . . . Now will you tell me?"

"Yes, I will," replied Bo, with the blaze leaping to her eyes.

"Oh, Bo—please don't—please don't—wait!" implored Helen.

"Bo, it's between you an' me," said Carmichael.

"Tom, I'll tell you," whispered Bo. "It was a low-down cowardly trick. . . . Roy was surrounded and shot from behind Beasley by that four-flush Riggs!"

XVI

THE memory of a woman had ruined Milt Dale's peace, had confounded his philosophy of self-sufficient, lonely happiness in the solitude of the wilds, had forced him to come face to face with his soul and the fatal significance of life.

When he realized his defeat, that things were not as they seemed, that there was no joy for him in the coming of spring, that he had been blind in his free, Indian relation to existence, he fell into an inexplicably strange state, a despondency, a gloom as deep as the silence of his home. He grew lax. He did not want to move.

But spring, coming early to Paradise Park, brought a fever to Dale's blood—a fire of unutterable longing. He seemed driven to work, climb, tramp and keep ceaselessly on the move from dawn till dark. That action strengthened his lax

muscles and kept him from those motionless, senseless hours of brooding. He at least need not be ashamed of longing for that which could never be his—the sweetness of a woman; a home full of light, joy, hope; the meaning and beauty of children. But those dark moods were sinkings into a pit of hell.

One bright morning, while he was at his camp fire, the tame cougar gave low, growling warning. Dale was startled. Tom did not act like that because of a prowling

early? Look at thet hoss!" John slid off and waved a hand at the drooping beast, then began to unsaddle him. "Wal, he done great. We boggled some comin' over. An' I climbed the pass at night on the frozen snow."

"You're as welcome as the flowers in May. John, what month is it?"

"By spades, are you as bad as thet? . . . Let's see. It's the twenty-third of March."

"March! Well, I'm beat. I've lost my reckonin', an' a lot more maybe."

"Wal, he's been hangin' out at Pine all winter, watchin' for some chance to get at Miss Helen or Bo. Everybody's seen thet. An' jest lately he chased Bo on hossback—gave the kid a nasty fall. Roy says Riggs was after Miss Helen. But I think one or tother of the girls would do thet varmint. Wal, thet sorta started goin's on. Carmichael beat Riggs an' drove him out of town. But he come back. Beasley called on Miss Helen an' offered to marry her so's not to take the ranch from her, he said."

Dale awoke with a thundering curse.

"Shore!" exclaimed John.

"I'd say the same, only I'm religious. Don't thet beady-eyed greaser's gall make you want to spit all over yourself? Roy was mad! Roy's powerful fond of Miss Helen an' Bo. . . . Wal, then Roy, first chance he got, braced Beasley an' give him some straight talk. Beasley was foammin' at the mouth, Roy said. It was then Riggs shot Roy. Shot him from behind Beasley when Roy wasn't lookin'! An' Riggs brags of bein' a gunfighter. Mebbe thet wasn't a bad shot for him!"

"I reckon," replied Dale as he swallowed hard. "Now just what was Roy's message to me?"

"Wal, I can't remember all Roy said," answered John dubiously. "But Roy shore was excited an' dead in earnest. He says: 'Tell Milt what's happened. Tell him Helen Rayner's in more danger than she was last fall. Tell him I've seen her look away toward Paradise Park with her heart in her eyes. Tell him she needs him most of all!'"

Dale shook all over as with an attack of ague. "Roy's crazy!" he panted.

"Wal now, Milt, thet's downright surprisin' of you. Roy's the level-headed of any fellars I know."

"Man, if he made me believe him—an' it turned out untrue—I'd—I'd kill him," replied Dale.

"Untrue! Do you think Roy Beeman would lie?"

"But, John, you fellows can't see my case. Nell Rayner wants me—needs me!—It can't be true!"

"Wal, my love-sick pard, it jest is true!" exclaimed John feelingly. "You can believe Roy Beeman about women as quick as you'd trust him to track your lost hoss. Roy's married three girls. I reckon he'll marry some more. Roy's only twenty-eight an' he has two big farms. He said he'd seen Nell Rayner's heart in her eyes, lookin' for you—an' you can jest bet your life thet's true. An' he said it because he means you to rustle down there an' fight for thet girl."

"I'll go," said Dale in a shaky whisper as he sat down on a pine log near the fire. He stared unseeingly at the bluebells in the grass by his feet while storm after storm possessed his breast. And when he stood erect again it seemed that the old earth had a stirring, electrifying impetus for his feet. Something black, bitter, melancholy and morbid, always unreal to him, had passed away forever. The great moment had been forced upon him.

Mounted on Dale's strongest horses, with only a light pack, an ax and their weapons, the two men had reached the snow line on the pass by noon that day. Tom, the tame cougar, trotted along in the rear.

The crust of the snow, now half thawed by the sun, would not hold the weight of a horse, though it upheld the men on foot. They walked, leading the horses. Travel was not difficult until the snow began to deepen; then progress slackened materially.

John had not been able to pick out the line of the trail, so Dale did not follow his tracks. An old blaze on the trees enabled Dale to keep fairly well to the trail; and at length the height of the pass was reached, where the snow was deep. Here the horses labored, plowing through foot by foot.

(Continued on Page 36)



The Cougar Gave Low, Growling Warning. Dale Was Startled

grizzly or a straying stag. Presently Dale espied a horseman riding slowly out of the straggling spruces. And with that sight Dale's heart gave a leap, recalling to him a divination of his future relation to his kind. Never had he been so glad to see a man!

This visitor resembled one of the Beemans, from the way he sat his horse, and presently Dale recognized him to be John. The jaded horse was spurred into a trot, soon reaching the pines and the camp.

"Howdy, there, you ole bar hunter!" called John, waving his hand.

For all his hearty greeting his appearance checked a like response from Dale. The horse was mud to his flanks, and John was mud to his knees, wet, bedraggled, worn and white. This hue of his face meant more than fatigue.

"Howdy, John," replied Dale.

They shook hands. John wearily swung his leg over the pommel, but did not at once dismount. His clear gray eyes were wonderingly riveted upon the hunter.

"Milt, what's wrong?" he queried.

"Why?"

"Bust me if you ain't changed so I hardly knowed you. You've been sick—all alone here!"

"Do I look sick?"

"Wal, I should smile. Thin an' pale an' down in the mouth! Milt, what ails you?"

"I've gone to seed."

"You've gone off your head, jest as Roy said, livin' alone here. You overdid it, Milt. An' you look sick."

"John, my sickness is here," replied Dale soberly as he lay a hand on his heart.

"Lung trouble!" ejaculated John. "With thet chest an' up in this air? . . . Get out!"

"No—not lung trouble," said Dale.

"I savvy. Had a hunch from Roy, anyhow."

"What kind of a hunch?"

"Easy now, Dale, ole man. . . . Don't you reckon I'm ridin' in on you pretty

"Thar!" declared John, slapping the mustang. "You can jest hang up here till my next trip. Milt, how're your hosses?"

"Wintered fine."

"Wal, thet's good. We'll need two big strong hosses right off."

"What for?" queried Dale sharply. He dropped a stick of wood and straightened up from the camp fire.

"You're goin' to ride down to Pine with me—thet's what for."

Dale's thought of Pine gave slow birth to a strange sensation, as if he had been dead and was vibrating back to life. "Tell what you got to tell!" he broke out.

Quick as a flash the Mormon replied: "Roy's been shot. But he won't die. He sent for you. Bad deal's afoot. Beasley means to force Helen Rayner out an' steal her ranch."

A tremor ran all through Dale. It seemed another painful yet thrilling connection between his past and this vaguely calling future. His emotions had been broodings, dreams. This had the sting of real life.

"Then old Al's dead?" he asked.

"Long ago—I reckon round the middle of February. The property went to Helen. She's been doin' fine. An' many folks say it's a pity she'll lose it."

"She won't lose it," declared Dale. How strange his voice sounded to his own ears! It was hoarse and unreal, as if from disuse.

"Wal, we-all have our idees. I says he will. My father says so. Carmichael says so."

"Who's he?"

"Reckon you remember thet cow-puncher who came up with Roy an' Auchincloss after the girls last fall?"

"Yes. They called him Las—Las Vegas. I liked his looks."

"Humph! You'll like him a heap when you know him. He's kept the ranch goin' for Miss Helen all along. But the deal's comin' to a head. Beasley's got thick with thet Riggs. You remember him?"

"Yes."

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The Man of the Forest

(Continued from Page 19)

When finally they sank to their flanks they had to be dragged and goaded on, and helped by thick flat bunches of spruce boughs placed under their hoofs. It took three hours of back-breaking toil to do the few hundred yards of deep snow on the height of the pass. The cougar did not have great difficulty in following, though it was evident he did not like such traveling.

The pass behind them, the horses gathered heart and worked on to the edge of the steep descent. Then began a dense forest with snow still deep in places and windfalls hard to locate. They reached bare and solid ground just before dark.

Camp was made in an open wood.

In the morning they were on the move before sunrise, leaving snow and bog behind.

The men talked but little. Dale led the way, with Tom trotting noiselessly beside his horse. John followed close behind. They loped the horses across parks, trotted through the forests, walked slowly up what few inclines they met, and slid down the soft, wet, pine-matted descents. So they averaged from six to eight miles an hour. The horses held up well under that steady travel, and this without any rest at noon.

"I smell smoke," said Dale suddenly as he reined in, and turned for corroboration from his companion.

John sniffed the warm air. "Wal, you're more of an Injun than me," he replied.

They traveled on and presently came out upon the rim of the last slope. A long league of green slanted below them, and the village of Pine appeared to nestle in a curve of the edge of the great forest.

"Look there," said Dale, pointing.

Some miles to the right a gray escarpment of rock cropped out of the slope, forming a promontory; and from it a thin, pale column of smoke curled upward, to be lost from sight as soon as it had no background of green.

"Thet's your smoke, shore enough," replied John thoughtfully. "Now I jest wonder who's campin' there. No water near or grass for hosses."

"John, that point's been used for smoke signals many a time."

"Was jest thinkin' of thet same. Shall we ride round there an' take a peek?"

"No. But we'll remember that. If Beasley's got his deep scheme goin' he'll have Snake Anson's gang somewhere close. But let's rest half an hour an' watch that smoke before movin' on. We can make Pine before sundown."

When travel had been resumed, halfway down the slope Dale's sharp eyes caught a broad track where shod horses had passed, climbing in a long slant toward the promontory. He dismounted to examine them.

"Some hosses an' a pony went along here yesterday, an' to-day a single horse made that fresh track," Dale said.

"Wal, Milt, for a hunter you ain't so bad at hoss tracks," observed John. "But how many hosses went yesterday?"

"I couldn't make out—several, maybe four or five."

"Six hosses an' a colt or little mustang, unshod, to be strict correct. Wal, suppose'n they did. What's it mean to us?"

"I don't know as I'd thought anythin' unusual if it hadn't been for that smoke we saw off the rim, an' then this here fresh track made to-day. Looks queer to me."

"Wish Roy was here," replied John, scratching his head. "Milt, I've a hunch, if he was, he'd folter them tracks."

"Maybe. But we haven't time for that. We can back-trail them, though, if they keep clear as they are here. An' we'll not lose any time either."

That broad track led straight toward Pine, down to the edge of the cedars, where amid some jagged rocks evidences showed that men had camped there for days. Here it ended as a broad trail. But from the north

came the single fresh track made that very day, and from the east, more in a line with Pine, came two tracks made the day before. And these were imprints of big and little hoofs. Manifestly these interested John more than they did Dale, who had to wait for his companion.

"Milt, it ain't a colt's—thet little track," avowed John.

"Why not? An' what if it isn't?" queried Dale.

"Wal, it ain't, because a colt always straggles back an' from one side to t'other. This little track keeps close to the big one. An' it was made by a led mustang."

Dale's reply was to spur his horse into a trot and call sharply to the lagging cougar.

When they turned into the broad blossom-bordered road that was the only thoroughfare of Pine, the sun was setting red and gold behind the mountains. Dale and his comrade dismounted in front of Widow Cass' cottage. And Dale called as he strode up the little path. Mrs. Cass came out. She was white and shaking, but appeared calm. At sight of her John Beeman drew a sharp breath.

"Wal now —" he began hoarsely.

"I'm glad to see you, boys. Milt, you're thin an' strange-lookin'. Roy's had a little setback. He got a shock to-day an' it threw him off. Fever—an' now he's out of his head. It won't do no good for you to waste time seein' him. Take my word for it, he's all right. But there's others as— For the land's sakes, Milt Dale, you fetched thet cougar back! Don't let him near me!"

"Tom won't hurt you, mother," said Dale. "You were sayin' somethin'—about others. Is Miss Helen safe? Hurry!"

"Ride up to see her—an' waste no more time here."

The ride up to Auchincloss' ranch house seemed endless to Dale. But no matter what awaited—or what fateful events might hinge upon this nameless circumstance about to be disclosed—the wonderful and glorious fact of the present was that in a moment he would see Helen Rayner.

He stepped upon the porch, knocked sharply and stepped over the threshold.

Then Dale heard a voice in another room, a step, a creak of the door. It opened. A woman in white appeared. He recognized Helen. But instead of the rich brown bloom and dark-eyed beauty so hauntingly lined on his memory, he saw a white, beautiful face, strained and quivering in anguish, and eyes that pierced his heart. He could not speak.

"Oh, my friend—you've come!" she whispered.

Dale put out a shaking hand. But she did not see it. She clutched his shoulders, as if to feel whether or not he was real, and then her arms went up round his neck. "Oh, I knew you would come!" she said, and her head sank to his shoulder.

Dale divined what he had suspected. Helen's sister had been carried off. Yet while his quick mind grasped Helen's broken spirit—the unbalance that was reason for this marvelous and glorious act—he did not take other meaning of the embrace to himself. He just stood there, transported.

"It's—Bo," he said unsteadily.

"She went riding yesterday—and—never—came—back!" replied Helen brokenly.

"I've seen her trail. She's been taken into the woods. I'll find her. I'll fetch her back," he replied rapidly.

With his words it seemed to Dale she realized how she was standing. He felt

her shake as she dropped her arms and stepped back, while the white anguish of her face was flooded out by a wave of scarlet. But she was brave in her confusion. Her eyes never fell, though they changed swiftly, darkening with shame, amaze, and with feelings he could not read.

"I'm almost—out of my head," she faltered.

"No wonder. I saw that. . . . Your meetin' me as if I was your brother. . . . But now you must get clear-headed. I've no time to lose."

He led her to the door. "John, it's Bo that's gone," he called. "Since yesterday. . . . Send the boy to get me a bag of meat an' bread. You run to the corral an' get me a fresh horse. My old horse Ranger if you can find him quick."

Then he turned to Helen and asked: "Where's Carmichael? Out huntin' Bo?"

"Yes. It was he who missed her first. He rode everywhere yesterday. Last night when he came back he was wild. I've not seen him to-day."

"Miss Helen, I found Bo's tracks way southeast of Pine, up on the slope of the mountain. There were seven other horses makin' that trail when we run across it. On the way down we found a camp where men had waited. An' Bo's pony, led by a rider on a big horse, come into that camp from the east—maybe north a little. An' that tells the story."

"Riggs ran her down—made off with her!" cried Helen passionately. "Oh, the villain! He had men in waiting. That's Beasley's work. They were after me."

Dale trembled under the clasp of her hands. Loosing his own from her clinging hold he stepped out on the porch. At that moment John appeared on Ranger, coming at a gallop.

"Nell, I'll never come back without her," said Dale.

"Suppose Beasley comes here!" exclaimed Helen, and again her hand went out toward him.

"If he does, you refuse to get off," replied Dale. "But don't let him or his greasers put a dirty hand on you. Should he threaten force, why, pack some clothes an' your valuables an' go down to Mrs. Cass'. An' wait till I come back."

"Wait—till you—come back!" she faltered, slowly turning white again. Her dark eyes dilated. "Milt—you're like Las Vegas! You'll kill Beasley!"

Dale heard himself laugh, very cold and strange. Abruptly he stalked off the porch. Tom followed him. The black horse whinnied his recognition of Dale and snorted at sight of the cougar. Just then the Mexican boy returned with a bag. Dale tied this, with the small pack, behind the saddle. "John, you stay here with Miss Helen," said Dale. "An' if Carmichael comes back, keep him too! An' to-night if anyone rides in to Pine from the way we come you be sure to spot him."

"I'll do thet, Milt," responded John.

Then Ranger started and Dale heard no more. He could not look back.

He did not ride down through the village, but skirted the northern border and worked round to the south, where, coming to the trail he had made an hour past, he headed on it straight for the slope, now darkening in the twilight. A night, and perhaps a day, separated him from the gang that held Bo Rayner prisoner.

Far up on the slope, in a little hollow where water ran and there was a little grass for Ranger to pick, Dale halted him and made ready to spend the night. He was sparing with his food, giving Tom more than he took himself. Curled close up to Dale the big cat went to sleep.

For a time Dale lay awake. Then his mind stilled, with his last conscious thought a portent that he would awaken to accomplish his desperate task.

(TO BE CONTINUED)





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CHAFF



"Don't You Want to Sign This Petition, Mr. Turkey, to Have Christmas Dinner Declared a Meatless Meal?"

Merry Christmas!

FOLLOWING the Department of Agriculture's advice about keeping a flock of hens in the back yard, Jimson bought a dozen birds and installed them in a coop on his suburban lot. Unfortunately the birds were in the midst of their molt when he got them, and cold weather came without their ever laying an egg. Still he did not despair, though Mrs. Jimson joked and jibed at his unproductive flock.

On Christmas morning he went as usual to the poultry yard, and there to his surprise and joy he found four beautiful white eggs in a nest. Triumphant gathering them up he started to the house; at last he would turn the tables on friend wife. But as he reached the door and looked at them more closely he stopped; for on each egg was neatly penciled:

"Merry Christmas, from the hens."

A Hard Life

A FARMER in Iowa, returning home one evening from a rural banquet, dropped lazily into a chair and addressed his wife as follows:

"I am all tired out. Are the cows all in the barn?"

"Yes, Henry."

"Horses all fed and bedded down?" he asked as he produced a cigar with a gilt band round it.

"Yes, Henry."

"Chickens aren't locked up, though, are they?"

"Yes, Henry; long ago."

"Wood chopped for morning?"

"Yes."

"Ducks picked and wagon wheel mended for to-morrow's market?"

"Yes, Henry."

The farmer lighted the cigar, yawned and said:

"Well, then, just hand me the farm paper and draw me a jug of cider, Mary. I'll turn in soon. Farming's beginning to tell on me."

Liars!

"HORSES!" said the Yankee. "Guess you can't talk to me about horses. I once had an old mare that licked the fastest express train on a thirty-five-mile run."

"That's nothing!" said the Canuck. "I was out about fifty miles from my house on my farm one day when a frightful storm came up. I turned the pony's head for home and, do you know, he raced the

storm so close for the last ten miles that I didn't feel a drop, while my dog, only ten yards behind, had to swim the whole distance."

Moving Some

A NEGRO was trying to saddle a mule, when a bystander asked: "Does that mule ever try to kick you?" "No, suh, but he kicks sometimes whar Ise jes been."

The Old Farm Sled

WHEN Winter smooths the wrinkles from the face of Mother Earth, And city ways with smoke and gloom are shrouded, We "isolated farmers" find the season full of mirth, The genial sun and twinkling stars unclouded; For the year's hard work's completed And in barns and "caves" secreted Are the sweet rewards of labor, plenty for the months ahead, And we've health in fullest measure, And we've time for friendly pleasure, So we give the car a respite and hitch up the good old sled.

The miles slip by like minutes when a fellow's with his girl, When on the sled we get a jolly party, The team is full of ginger and their hoofs kick up a swirl, And everyone's so rosy cheeked and hearty! And how the sleighbells jingle! And how we thrill and tingle! And how the stars smile at us and wink at us overhead! Oh, the motor car for sporting, But for frolicking or courting There is nothing yet invented beats the good old-fashioned sled!

There's something in the echo of the bells across the snow, There's something in the crispness of the breezes, There's something in the snugness of the straw you burrow so (And the little hand which yours beneath it squeezes), And the smoothness of the gliding Which makes this the true joy riding—The kind which puts a fellow in a glow from heels to head. Oh, the motor car's a blessing, But (old foggy!) I'm confessing When it's snowtime in the country I prefer the old farm sled! —Lee Shippey.

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