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The COUNTRY GENTLEMAN

The OLDEST AGRICULTURAL JOURNAL in the WORLD



Painted by Paul Bransom

AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD M. BARUCH

TO THE LAST MAN

By Zane Grey

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK SPRADLING

XVIII

TWO weeks of lonely solitude in the forest worked incalculable change in Ellen Jorth.

Late in June her father and her two uncles had packed and ridden off with Daggs, Colter and six other men, all heavily armed, some somber with drink, others hard and grim with a foretaste of fight. Ellen had not been given any orders. Her father had forgotten to bid her good-by or had avoided it. Their mission was stamped on their faces.

They had gone; and keen as had been Ellen's pang, nevertheless their departure was a relief. She had heard them bluster and brag so often that she had her doubts of any great Jorth-Isbel war. Barking dogs did not bite. Somebody, perhaps on each side, would be badly wounded, possibly killed, and then the feud would go on as before, mostly talk. Many of her former impressions had faded. Development had been so rapid and continuous in her that she could look back to a day-by-day transformation. At night she had hated the sight of herself, and when the dawn came she would rise singing.

Jorth had left Ellen with the Mexican woman and Antonio. Ellen saw them only at meal-times, often not then, for she often visited Old John Sprague or came home late to do her own cooking.

IT WAS but a short distance up to Sprague's cabin, and since she had stopped riding the black horse, Spades, she walked. Spades was accustomed to having grain, and in the mornings he would come down to the ranch and whistle. Ellen had vowed she would never feed the horse and bade Antonio do it. But one morning Antonio was absent. She fed Spades herself. When she laid a hand on him and when he rubbed his nose against her shoulder she was not quite so sure she hated him. "Why should I?" she queried. "A horse can't help it if he belongs to—to —" Ellen was not sure of anything except that more and more it grew good to be alone.

A whole day in the lonely forest passed swiftly, yet it left a feeling of long time. She lived by her thoughts. Always the morning was bright, sunny, sweet, fragrant and colorful, and her mood was pensive, wistful and dreamy. And always, just as surely as the hours passed, thought intruded upon her happiness, and thought brought memory, and memory brought shame, and shame brought fight. Sunset after sunset she had dragged herself back to the ranch, sullen and sick and beaten. Yet she never ceased to struggle.

The July storms came, and the forest floor that had been so sear and brown and dry and dusty changed as if by magic. The green grass shot up, the flowers bloomed, and along the cañon beds of lacy ferns swayed in the wind and bent their graceful tips over the amber-colored water. Ellen haunted these cool dells, these pine-shaded, mossy-rocked ravines where the brooks tinkled and the deer came down to drink. She wandered alone. But there grew to be company in the aspens and the music of the little waterfalls. If she could have lived in that solitude always, never returning to the ranch home that reminded her of her name, she could have forgotten and have been happy.

She loved the storms. It was a dry country, and she had learned through years to welcome the creamy clouds that rolled from the southwest. They came



Day After Day Passed on the Wings of Suspense, of Ministering to Her Uncle, of Waiting for Some Hour That Seemed Fixed

sailing and clustering and darkening, at last to form a great, purple, angry mass that appeared to lodge against the mountain rim and burst into dazzling streaks of lightning and gray palls of rain. Lightning seldom struck near the ranch, but up on the Rim there was never a storm that did not splinter and crash some of the pines.

DURING the storm season sheep herders and woodsmen generally did not camp under the pines. Fear of lightning was inborn in the natives, but for Ellen the dazzling white streaks, or the tremendous, splitting, crackling shock, or the thunderous boom and rumble along the battlements of the Rim had no terrors. A storm eased her breast. Deep in her heart was a hidden, gathering storm. And, somehow, to be out when the elements were warring, when the earth trembled and the heavens seemed to burst asunder, afforded her strange relief.

The summer days became weeks, and farther and farther they carried Ellen on the wings of solitude and loneliness until she seemed to look back years at the self she had hated. Always, when the dark memory impinged upon peace, she fought and fought until she seemed to be fighting hatred itself. Scorn of scorn and hate of hate! Yet even her battles grew to be dreams. For when the inevitable retrospect brought back Jean Isbel and his love

and her cowardly falsehood, she would shudder a little and put an unconscious hand to her breast and utterly fail in her fight, and drift off down to vague and wistful dreams. The clean and healing forest, with its whispering wind and imperious solitude, had come between Ellen and the meaning of the squalid sheep ranch with its travesty of home, its tragic owner. And it was coming between her two selves, the one that she had been forced to be and the other that she did not know—the thinker, the dreamer, the romancer, the one who lived in fancy the life she loved.

THE summer morning dawned that brought Ellen strange tidings. They must have been created in her sleep and now were realized in the glorious burst of golden sun, in the sweep of creamy clouds across the blue, in the solemn music of the wind in the pines, in the wild screech of the blue jays and the noble bugle of a stag. These heralded the day as no ordinary day. Something was going to happen to her. She divined it. She felt it. And she trembled. Nothing beautiful, hopeful or wonderful could ever happen to Ellen Jorth. She had been born to disaster, to suffer, to be forgotten and die alone. Yet all Nature about her seemed a magnificent rebuke to her morbidness. The same spirit that came out there with the thick amber

light was in her. She lived, and something in her was stronger than mind.

Ellen went to the door of her cabin, where she flung out her arms, driven to embrace this nameless purport of the morning. A well-known voice broke in upon her rapture:

"Wal, lass, I like to see yu happy an' I hate myself fer comin'. Because I've been to Grass Valley fer two days an' I've got news."

OLD SPRAGUE stood there, with a smile that did not hide a troubled look.

"Oh, Uncle John, you startled me!" exclaimed Ellen, shocked back to reality. And slowly she added, "Grass Valley! News?"

She put out an appealing hand, which Sprague quickly took in his own as if to reassure her.

"Yes, an' not bad so far as yu Jorths are concerned," he replied. "The first Jorth-Isbel fight has come off. Reckon yu remember makin' me promise to tell yu if I heerd anythin'. Wal, I didn't wait fer yu to come up."

"So," Ellen heard her voice calmly saying. What was this lying calm when there seemed to be a stone hammer at her heart? The first fight—not so bad for the Jorths! Then it had been bad for the Isbels. A sudden, cold stillness fell upon her senses.

"Let's sit down—outdoors," Sprague was saying. "Nice an' sunny this—mawnin'. I declare, I'm out of breath. Not used to walkin'. An', besides, I left Grass Valley in the night, an' I'm tired. But excoose me from hangin' round the village last night. Thar was shore —"

"Who—who was killed?" interrupted Ellen, her voice breaking low and deep.

"GUY ISBEL an' Bill Jacobs on the Isbel side an' Daggs, Craig an' Greaves on yo' father's side," stated Sprague in awed haste.

"Ah!" breathed Ellen, and she relaxed, to sink back against the cabin wall.

Sprague seated himself on the log beside her, turning to face her, and he seemed burdened with grave and important matters.

"I heerd a good many conflictin' stories," he said earnestly. "The village folks is all skeered an' thar's no believin' their gossip. But I got what happened straight from Jake Evarts. The fight come off day before yestiddy. Yo' father's gang rode down to Isbel's ranch. Daggs was seen to be wantin' some of the Isbel hosses, so Evarts says. An' Guy Isbel an' Jacobs run out in the pasture. Daggs an' some others shot 'em down."

"Killed them—that way?" put in Ellen sharply.

"So Evarts says. He was on the ridge an' swears he seen it all. They killed Guy an' Jacobs in cold blood. No chance fer their lives—not even to fight! Wal, then they surrounded the Isbel cabin. The fight lasted all that day an' all night an' the next day. Evarts says Guy an' Jacobs laid out thar all this time. An' a herd of hogs broke in the pasture an' was eatin' the daid bodies."

"Terrible!" burst out Ellen. "Uncle John, you shore can't mean my father wouldn't stop fightin' long enough to drive the hogs off an' bury those daid men?"

"Evarts says they stopped fightin' all right, but it was to watch the hogs," declared Sprague. "An' then, what d'ye think? The wimminfolks come out—the red-headed one, Guy's wife, an' Jacobs'

wife. They drove the hogs away an' buried their husbands right thar in the pasture. Everts says he seen the graves."

"It is the women who can teach these bloody Texans a lesson," declared Ellen.

"Wal, Daggs was drunk, an' he got up from behind whar the gang was hidin' an' dared the Isbels to come out. They shot him to pieces. An' thet night some one of the Isbels shot Craig, who was alone on guard. An' last—this here's what I come to tell yu—Jean Isbel slipped up in the dark on Greaves an' knifed him."

"Why did you want to tell me that particularly?" asked Ellen slowly.

"Because I reckon the facts in the case are queer—an' because, Ellen, yo' name was mentioned," announced Sprague.

"My name—mentioned?" echoed Ellen. Her horror and disgust gave way to a quickening process of thought, a mounting astonishment. "By whom?"

"Jean Isbel," replied Sprague, as if the name and the fact were momentous.

ELLEN sat still as a stone, her hands between her knees. Slowly she felt the blood recede from her face, prickling her skin down below her neck. That name locked her thought.

"Ellen, it's a mighty queer story—too queer to be a lie," went on Sprague. "Now yu listen. Everts got this from Ted Meeker. An' Ted Meeker heerd it from Greaves, who didn't die till the next day after Jean Isbel knifed him. An' yo' dad shot Ted fer tellin' what he heerd. No, Greaves wasn't killed outright. He was cut somethin' terrible—in two places. They wrapped him all up an' next day packed him in a wagon back to Grass Valley. Everts says Ted Meeker was friendly with Greaves an' went to see him as he was layin' in his room next to the store. Wal, accordin' to Meeker's story Greaves came to an' talked. He said he was sittin' thar in the dark, shootin' occasionally at Isbel's cabin, when he heerd a rustle behind him in the grass. He knowed someone was crawlin' on him. But before he could gi' his gun round he was jumped by what he thought was a grizzly b'ar. But it was a man. He shut off Greaves' wind an' dragged him back in the ditch. An' he said, 'Greaves, it's the half-breed. An' I'm goin' to cut yu, first for Ellen Jorth an' then for Gaston Isbel!' Greaves said Jean ripped him with a bowie knife."

"THET was all Greaves remembered. He died soon after tellin' this story. He must hev fought awful hard. Thet second cut Isbel gave him went clear through him. Some of the gang was thar when Greaves talked, an' natcherly they wondered why Jean Isbel had said 'first for Ellen Jorth.' Somebody remembered thet Greaves had cast a slur on yo' good name, Ellen. An' then they had Jean Isbel's reason fer sayin' thet to Greaves. It caused a lot of talk. An' when Simm Bruce busted in, some of the gang haw-hawed him an' said as how he'd get the third cut from Jean Isbel's bowie. Bruce was half drunk, an' he began to cuss an' rave about Jean Isbel bein' in love with his girl. As bad luck would hev it a couple of more fellars come in an' asked Meeker questions. He jest got to thet part, 'Greaves, it's the half-breed, an' I'm goin' to cut yu, first for Ellen Jorth,' when in walked yo' father! Then it all had to come out—what Jean Isbel had said an' done, an' why. How Greaves had backed Bruce in slurrin' yu!"

Sprague paused to look hard at Ellen. "Oh! Then—what did dad do?" whispered Ellen.

"He said, 'By heaven, half-breed or not, thar's one Isbel who's a man!' An' he killed Bruce on the spot an' gave Meeker a nasty wound. Somebody grabbed him before he could shoot Meeker agin. They threw Meeker out, an' he crawled to a neighbor's house, whar he was when Everts seen him."

Ellen felt Sprague's rough but kindly hand shaking her.

"An' now, what do yu think of Jean Isbel?" he queried.

A GREAT insurmountable wall seemed to obstruct Ellen's thought. It seemed gray in color. It moved toward her. It was inside her brain.

"I tell yu, Ellen Jorth," declared the old man, "thet Jean Isbel loves yu—loves yu turribly—an' he believes yu're good."

"Oh, no, he doesn't!" faltered Ellen.

"Wal, he jest does."

"Oh, Uncle John, he cain't believe that," she cried.

"Of course he can. He does. Yu are godd—good as gold, Ellen—an' he knows it. What a queer deal it all is! Poor devil! To love yu thet turribly an' hev to fight yo' people! Ellen, yo' dad had it correct. Isbel or not, he's a man. An' I say what a damn shame yu two are divided by hate. Hate thet yu hed nothin' to do with."

Sprague patted her head and rose to go.

"Mebbe thet fight will end the trouble. I reckon it will. Don't cross bridges till yu come to 'em, Ellen. I must hurry back now."

to fly, to sail through space, to run and run and run.

On the moment the black horse, Spades, coming from the meadow, whinnied at sight of her. Ellen leaped up and ran swiftly, but her feet seemed to be stumbling. She hugged the horse and buried her hot face in his mane and clung to him. Then just as violently she rushed for her saddle and bridle, and carried the heavy weight as easily as if it had been an empty sack. Throwing them upon him, she buckled and strapped with strong, eager hands. It never occurred to her that she was not dressed to ride. Up she flung herself. The horse, sensing her spirit, plunged into a strong, free gait up the cañon trail.

THE ride, the action, the thrill, the sensations of violence were not all she needed. Solitude, the empty aisles of the forest, the far miles of lonely wilderness—were these the added all? Spades took a swinging, rhythmic lope up the winding trail. The wind fanned her hot face. The sting of whipping aspen branches was pleasant. A deep rumble of thunder shook the sultry air. Up beyond the green slope of the cañon massed the creamy clouds, shading darker and darker. Spades loped on the levels, leaped the washes, trotted over the rocky ground and took to a walk up the long slope. Ellen dropped the reins over the pommel. Her hands could not stay set on anything. They pressed her breast, flew out to caress the white aspens and to tear at the maple leaves, and came back again to her heart. Her heart that was going to burst or break! As it had swelled, so now it labored. It could not keep pace with her needs. All that was physical, all that was living in her had to be unleashed.

Spades gained the level forest. How the great brown-green pines seemed to bend their lofty branches over her, protectively, understandingly. Patches of a azure-blue sky flashed between the trees. The great white clouds sailed along with her, and shafts of golden sunlight, flecked with gleams of falling pine needles, shone down through the canopy overhead. Away in front of her, up the slow heave of forest land, boomed the heavy thunderbolts along the battlements of the Rim.

Was she riding to escape from herself? For no gait suited her until Spades was running hard and fast through the glades. Then the pressure of dry wind, the thick odor of pine, the flashes of brown and green and gold and blue, the soft, rhythmic thuds of hoofs, the feel of the powerful horse under her, the whip of spruce branches on her muscles, contracting and expanding in hard action—all these sensations seemed to quell for the time the mounting cataclysm in her heart.

THE oak swales, the maple thickets, the aspen groves, the pine-

shaded aisles and the miles of silver spruce all sped by her as if she had ridden the wind, and through the forest ahead shone the vast open of the basin, gloomed by purple and silver cloud, shadowed by gray storm and in the west brightened by golden sky.

Straight to the Rim she had ridden, and to the point where she had watched Jean Isbel that unforgettable day. She rode to the promontory behind the pine thicket and beheld a scene which stayed her restless hands upon her heaving breast.

The world of sky and cloud and earthly abyss seemed one of storm-sundered grandeur. The air was sultry and still, and smelled of the peculiar burnt-wood odor caused by lightning striking trees. A few heavy drops of rain were pattering down from the thin gray edge of clouds overhead. To the east hung the storm—a black cloud lodged against the Rim, from which long, misty veils of rain streamed down into the gulf. The roar of rain sounded like the steady roar of the rapids of a river. Then a blue-white, piercing, bright, ragged streak of lightning shot down out of the black cloud. It struck with a splitting report that shocked the very wall of rock under Ellen. Then the heavens seemed to burst open with thundering crash and close with mighty, thundering boom. Long roar and longer rumble rolled away to the eastward. The rain poured down in roaring cataracts.

The south held a panorama of purple-shrouded range and cañon, cañon and range, on across the rolling leagues to the dim, lofty peaks, all canopied over with angry, dusky, low-drifting clouds, horizon wide, smoky and sulphurous. As Ellen watched, hands pressed to her breast, feeling incalculable relief at sight of this tempest and gulf that resembled her soul, the sun burst out from behind the long bank of purple cloud in the west and flooded the world there with golden lightning.

"IT IS for me!" cried Ellen. "My mind—my heart—my very soul. Oh, God! I know! I know now! I love him—love him—love him!"

She cried it out to the elements. "Oh, I love Jean Isbel, an' my heart will burst or break!"

The might of her passion was like the blaze of the sun. Before it all else retreated, diminished. The suddenness of the truth dimmed her sight. But she saw clearly enough to crawl into the pine thicket, through the clutching, dry twigs, over the mats of fragrant needles to the covert where she had once spied upon Jean Isbel. And here she lay face down for a while, hands clutching the needles, body pressed hard upon the ground, stricken and spent. But vitality was exceeding strong in her. It passed, that weakness of realization, and she awakened to the consciousness of love.

But in the beginning it was not consciousness of the man. It was new sensorial life, elemental, primitive, a liberation of a million inherited instincts, quivering and physical, over which Ellen had no more control than she had over the glory of the sun. If she thought at all, it was of her need to be hidden, like an animal, low down near the earth, covered by green thicket, lost in the wildness of Nature. She went to Nature, unconsciously seeking a mother. And love was a birth from the depths of her, like a rushing spring of pure water, long underground, and at last propelled to the surface by a convulsion.

ELLEN gradually lost her tense rigidity and relaxed. Her body softened. She rolled over until her face caught the lacy, golden shadows cast by sun and bough. Scattered drops of rain pattered round her. The air was hot, and its odor was that of dry pine and spruce fragrance penetrated by brimstone from the lightning. The nest where she lay was warm and sweet. No eye save that of Nature saw her in her abandonment. An ineffable and exquisite smile wreathed her lips, dreamy, sad, sensuous, the supremacy of unconscious happiness. Over her dark and eloquent eyes, as Ellen gazed upward, spread a luminous film—a veil.

She was looking intensely, yet she did not see. The wilderness enveloped her with its secretive, elemental sheaths of rock, of tree, of cloud, of sunlight. Through her thrilling skin poured the multiple and nameless sensations of the living organism stirred to supreme sensitiveness. She could not lie still, but all her movements were gentle, involuntary. The slow reaching out of her hand, to grasp at nothing visible, was similar to the lazy stretching of her limbs, to the heave of her breast, to the ripple of muscle.

Ellen knew not what she felt. To live that sublime hour was beyond thought. Such happiness was like the first dawn of the world to the sight of man. It had to do with bygone ages. Her heart, her blood, her flesh, her very bones were filled with instincts and emotions common to the race before intellect developed, when the savage lived only with his sensorial perceptions. Of all happiness, joy, bliss, rapture to which



Without Apparent Effort Colter Carried Her, Striding Into the Border of Spruce Trees at the Front of the Cañon Wall

I didn't take time to unpack my burros. Come up soon. An' say, Ellen, don't think hard any more of thet Jean Isbel."

Sprague strode away, and Ellen neither heard nor saw him go. She sat perfectly motionless, yet had a strange sensation of being lifted by invisible and mighty power. It was like movement felt in a dream. She was being impelled upward when her body seemed immovable as stone. When her blood beat down this deadlock of all her physical being and rushed on and on through her veins, it gave her an irresistible impulse



She Cried it Out to the Elements: "Oh, I Love Jean Isbel, an' My Heart Will Burst or Break"

man was heir, that of the intense and exquisite preoccupation of the senses, unhindered and unburdened by thought, was the greatest. Ellen felt that which life meant with its inscrutable design. Love was only the realization of her mission on the earth.

THE dark storm cloud with its white ragged ropes of lightning and down-streaming gray veils of rain, the purple gulf rolling like a colored sea to the dim mountains, the glorious golden light of the sun—these had enchanted her eyes with the beauty of the universe. They had burst the windows of her blindness. When she crawled into the green-brown covert it was to escape too great perception. She needed to be encompassed by close, tangible things. Shock, convulsion, pain, relaxation, and then unutterable and insupportable sensing of her environment and the heart! In one way she was a wild animal alone in the woods, the mating instinct uppermost. In another she was an infinitely higher being shot through and through with the most resistless and mysterious transport that life could give.

When that spell slackened its hold there wedged into her mind a consciousness of the man she loved—Jean Isbel. Then emotion and thought strove for mastery over her. It was not herself or love that she loved, but a living man. Suddenly he existed so clearly for her that she could see him, hear him, almost feel him. Her whole soul, her very life cried out to him. No denial, no doubt marred the white blaze of her realization. From the instant that she had looked up into Jean Isbel's dark face she had loved him. Only she had not known.

SHE bowed and bent and humbly quivered under the mastery of something beyond her ken. Thought clung to the beginnings of her romance—to the three times she had seen him. Every look, every word, every act of his returned to her now in the light of the truth. Love at first sight! He had sworn it, bitterly, eloquently, scornful of her doubts. And now a blind, sweet, shuddering ecstasy swayed her. How weak and frail seemed her body, too small, too slight for this monstrous and terrible engine of fire and lightning and fury and glory—her heart! It must burst or break. Relentlessly memory pursued Ellen, her thoughts whirled, and emotion conquered her.

At last she quivered up to her knees as if lashed to action. It seemed that first kiss of Isbel's, cool and gentle and timid, was on her lips. And her eyes closed and hot tears welled from under her lids. Her groping hands found only the dead twigs and the pine boughs of the trees. Had she reached out to clasp him? Then hard and violent on her mouth and cheek and neck burned those other kisses of Isbel's; and with the flashing, stinging memory came the truth that now she would have bartered her soul for them. Utterly she surrendered to the resistlessness of this love. Her loss of mother and friends, her wandering from one wild place to another, her lonely life among bold and rough men had developed her for violent love. It overthrew all pride; it engendered humility; it killed hate. Ellen wiped the tears from her eyes, and as she knelt there she swept to her breast a fragrant spreading bough of pine needles.

"I'll go to him," she whispered. "I'll tell him of—of my—my love. I'll tell him to take me away—away to the end of the world—away from heah—before it's too late!"

It was a solemn, beautiful moment. But the last spoken words lingered hauntingly. "Too late?" she whispered.

And suddenly it seemed that death itself shuddered in her soul. Too late! It was too late. She had killed his love. That Jorth blood in her, that poisonous hate, had chosen the only way to strike this noble Isbel to the heart. Basely, with an abandonment of womanhood, she had mockingly perjured her soul with a vile lie. She writhed; she shook under the whip of this inconceivable fact. Lost! Lost! She wailed her misery. She might as well be what she had made Jean Isbel think she was. If she had been shamed before, she was now abased, degraded, lost in her own sight; and if she would have given her soul for his kisses, she now would have killed herself to earn back his respect. Jean Isbel had given her at sight the deference that she had unconsciously craved and the love that would have been her salvation. What a horrible mistake she had made of her life! Not her mother's blood, but her father's—the Jorth blood—had been her ruin.

Again Ellen fell upon the soft, pine-needle mat, face down, and she groveled and burrowed there in an agony that could not bear the sense of light. All she had

suffered was as nothing to this. To have awakened to a splendid and uplifting love for a man whom she had imagined she hated, who had fought for her name and had killed in revenge for the dishonor she had avowed; to have lost his love and, what was infinitely more precious to her now in her ignominy, his faith in her purity—this broke her heart.

XIX

WHEN Ellen, utterly spent in body and mind, reached home that day, a melancholy, sultry twilight was falling. Fitful flares of sheet lightning swept across the dark horizon to the east. The cabins were deserted. Antonio and the Mexican woman had gone. The circumstances made Ellen wonder, but she was too tired and too sunken in spirit to think long about it or to care. She fed and watered her horse and left him in the corral. Then, supperless, she threw herself upon the bed and at once sank into heavy slumber.

Sometime during the night she awoke. Coyotes were yelping, and from that sound she concluded it was near dawn. Her body ached; her mind seemed dull. Drowsily she was sinking into slumber again, when she heard the rapid clip-clop of trotting horses. Startled, she raised her head to listen. The men were coming back. Relief and dread seemed to clear her stupor.

The trotting horses stopped across the lane from her cabin, evidently at the corral where she had left Spades. She heard him whistle. From the sound of hoofs she judged the number of horses to be six or eight. Low voices of men mingled with thuds and cracking of straps and flopping of saddles on the ground. After that the heavy tread of boots sounded on the porch of the cabin opposite. A door creaked on its hinges. Next a slow footstep, accompanied by clinking of spurs, approached Ellen's door, and a heavy hand banged upon it. She knew this person could not be her father.

"HULLO, Ellen." She recognized the voice as belonging to Colter. Somehow its tone, or something about it, sent a little shiver down her spine. It acted like a revivifying current. Ellen lost her dragging lethargy.

"Hey, Ellen, are yu thar?" added Colter in a louder voice.

"Yes. Of course I'm heah," she replied. "What do you want?"

"Wal, I'm shore glad yu're home," he replied. "Antonio's gone with his squaw. An' I was some worried about yu."

"Who's with you, Colter?" queried Ellen, sitting up.

"Rock Wells an' Springer. Tad Jorth was with us, but we had to leave him over heah in a cabin."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Wal, he's hurt tol'able bad," was the slow reply. Ellen heard Colter's spurs jangle as if he had uneasily shifted his feet.

"Where's dad an' Uncle Jackson?" asked Ellen.

A silence pregnant enough to augment Ellen's dread finally broke to Colter's voice, somehow different. "Shore they're back on the trail. An' we're to meet 'em whar we left Tad."

"Are you goin' away again?"

"I reckon. An', Ellen, yu're goin' with us."

"I am not," she retorted.

"Wal, yu are, if I hev to pack yu," he replied forcibly. "It's not safe heah any more. Thet damned half-breed Isbel with his gang are on our trail."

That name seemed like a red-hot blade at Ellen's leaden heart. She wanted to fling a hundred queries at Colter, but she could not utter one.

"ELLEN, we've got to hit the trail an' hide," continued Colter anxiously. "Yu mustn't stay heah alone. Suppose them Isbels would trap yu! They'd tear yo' clothes off an' rope yu to a tree. Ellen, shore yu're goin'. Yu heah me?"

"Yes—I'll go," she replied, as if forced.

"Wal, thet's good," he said quickly. "An' rustle tol'able lively. We've got to pack."

The slow jangle of Colter's spurs and his slow steps moved away out of Ellen's hearing. Throwing off the blankets, she put her feet to the floor and sat there a moment staring at the blank nothingness of the cabin interior in the obscure gray of dawn. Cold, gray, dreary, obscure—like her life, her future. And she was compelled to do what was hateful to her. As a Jorth she must take to the unfrequented trails and hide like a rabbit in the thickets. But the interest of the moment, a premonition of events to be, quickened her into action.

Ellen unbarred the door to let in the light. Day was breaking with an intense,

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"Colter, I'll Not Go Off Into the Woods With Just the Clothes I Have on My Back"

TO THE LAST MAN

(Continued from Page 15)

clear, steely light in the east through which the morning star still shone white. A ruddy flare betokened the advent of the sun. Ellen unbraid her tangled hair and brushed and combed it. A queer, still pang came to her at sight of pine needles tangled in her brown locks. Then she washed her hands and face. Breakfast was a matter of considerable work, and she was hungry.

The sun rose and changed the gray world of forest. For the first time in her life Ellen hated the golden brightness, the wonderful blue of sky and the screech of the jay, and the squirrels she had always loved to feed were neglected that morning.

COLTER came. Either Ellen had never before looked attentively at him or he had changed. Her scrutiny of his lean, hard features accorded him more Texan attributes than formerly. His gray eyes were as light, as clear, as fierce as those of an eagle. The sandy gray of his face, the long, drooping, fair mustache hid the secrets of his mind but not its strength. The instant Ellen met his gaze she sensed a power in him that she instinctively opposed. Colter had not been so bold or so rude as Daggs, but he was the same kind of man, perhaps the more dangerous for his secretiveness, his cool, waiting inscrutableness.

"Mawnin', Ellen," he drawled. "Yu shore look good fer sore eyes."

"Don't pay me compliments, Colter," replied Ellen. "An' your eyes are not sore."

"Wal, I'm shore sore from fightin' an' ridin' an' layin' out," he said bluntly.

"Tell me—what's happened," returned Ellen.

"Girl, it's a tol'able long story," replied Colter. "An' we've no time now. Wait till we git to camp."

"Am I to pack my belongin's or leave them heah?" asked Ellen.

"Reckon yu'd better leave 'em heah."

"But if we did not come back —"

"Wal, I reckon it's not likely we'll come—soon," he said rather evasively.

"Colter, I'll not go off into the woods with just the clothes I have on my back."

"ELLEN, we shore got to pack all the grub we can. This shore ain't goin' to be a visit to neighbors. We're shy pack hosses. But yu make up a bundle of belongin's yu care for an' the things yu'll need bad. We'll throw it on somewheres."

Colter stalked away across the lane, and Ellen found herself dubiously staring at his tall figure. Was it the situation that struck her with a foreboding perplexity or was her intuition steeling her against this man? Ellen could not decide. But she had to go with him. Her prejudice was unreasonable at this portentous moment. And she could not feel that she was solely responsible to herself.

When it came to making a small bundle of her belongings she was in a quandary. She discarded this and put in that and then reversed the order. Next in preciousness to her mother's things were the long-hidden gifts of Jean Isabel. She could part with neither.

While she was selecting and packing this bundle Colter again entered and, without speaking, began to rummage in the corner where her father kept his possessions. This irritated Ellen.

"What do you want there?" she demanded.

"Wal, I reckon yo' dad wants his papers an' the gold he left heah an' a change of clothes. Now doesn't he?" returned Colter coolly.

"Of course. But I supposed you would have me pack them."

COLTER vouchsafed no reply to this, but deliberately went on rummaging, with little regard of how he scattered things. Ellen turned her back on him. At length, when he left, she went to her father's corner and found that, as far as she was able to see, Colter had taken neither papers nor clothes, but only the gold. Perhaps, however, she had been mistaken, for she had not observed Colter's departure closely enough to know whether or not he carried a package. She missed only the gold. Her father's papers, old and musty, were scattered about, and these she gathered up to slip into her own bundle.

Colter, or one of the men, had saddled Spades, and he was now tied to the corral fence, champing his bit and pawing the sand. Ellen wrapped bread and meat inside her coat, and after tying this behind her saddle she was ready to go. But evidently she would have to wait; and, preferring to remain outdoors, she stayed by her horse. Presently, while watching the men pack, she noticed that Springer wore a bandage round his head under the brim of his sombrero. His motions were slow and lacked energy. Shuddering at the sight, Ellen refused to conjecture. All too soon she would learn what had happened, and all too soon, perhaps, she herself would be in the midst of another fight.

XX

ELLEN watched the men. They were making a hurried, slipshod job of packing food supplies from both cabins. More than once she caught Colter's gray gleam of gaze on her, and she did not like it. "I'll ride up an' say good-by to Sprague," she called to Colter.

"Shore yu won't do nothin' of the kind," he called back.

There was authority in his tone that angered Ellen, and something else which inhibited her anger. What was there about Colter with which she must reckon? The other two Texans laughed aloud, to be suddenly silenced by Colter's harsh and lowered curses. Ellen walked out of hearing and sat upon a log, where she remained until Colter hailed her.

"Git up an' ride," he called.

ELLEN complied with this order; and, riding up behind the three mounted men, she soon found herself leaving what for years had been her home. Not once did she look back. She hoped she would never see the squalid, bare pretension of a ranch again.

Colter and the other riders drove the pack horses across the meadow, off the trails and up the slope into the forest. Not very long did it take Ellen to see that Colter's object was to hide their tracks. He zigzagged through the forest, avoiding the bare spots of dust, the dry, sun-baked flats of clay where water lay in spring, and he chose the grassy, open glades, the long, pine-needle-matted aisles. Ellen rode at their heels, and it pleased her to watch for their tracks. Colter manifestly had been long practiced in this game of hiding his trail, and he showed the skill of a rustler. But Ellen was not convinced that he could ever elude a real woodsman. Not improbably, however, Colter was only aiming to leave a trail difficult to follow and which would allow him and his confederates ample time to forge ahead of pursuers. Ellen could not accept a certainty of pursuit. Yet Colter must have expected it, and Springer and Wells also, for they had a dark, sinister, furtive demeanor that strangely contrasted with the cool, easy manner habitual to them.

THEY were not seeking the level routes of the forest land, that was sure. They rode straight across the thick-timbered ridge down into another cañon, up out of that and across rough, rocky bluffs and down again. These riders headed a little to the northwest, and every mile brought them into wilder, more rugged country, until Ellen, losing count of cañons and ridges, had no idea where she was. No stop was made at noon to rest the laboring, sweating pack animals.

Under circumstances where pleasure might have been possible Ellen would have reveled in this hard ride into a wonderful forest, ever thickening and darkening. But the wild beauty of glade and the spruce slopes and the deep, bronze-walled cañons

left her cold. She saw and felt, but had no thrill, except now and then a thrill of alarm when Spades slid to his haunches down some steep, damp, piny declivity.

All the woodland, up and down, appeared to be richer and greener as they traveled farther west. Grass grew thick and heavy. Water ran in all ravines. The rocks were bronze and copper and russet, and some had green patches of lichen.

Ellen felt the sun now on her left cheek and knew that the day was waning and that Colter was swinging farther to the northwest. She had never before ridden through such heavy forest and down and up such wild cañons. Toward sunset the deepest and ruggedest cañon halted their advance. Colter rode to the right, searching for a place to get down through a spruce thicket that stood on end. Presently he dismounted, and the others followed suit. Ellen found she could not lead Spades, because he slid down upon her heels, so she looped the end of her reins over the pommel and left him free. She herself managed to descend by holding to branches and sliding all the way down that slope. She heard the horses cracking the brush, snorting and heaving. One pack slipped and had to be removed from the horse, and rolled down.

At the bottom of this deep, green-walled notch roared a stream of water. Shadowed, cool, mossy, damp, this narrow gulch seemed the wildest place Ellen had ever seen. She could just see the sunset-flushed, gold-tipped spruces far above her. The men repacked the horse that had slipped his burden and once more resumed their progress ahead, now turning up this cañon. There was no horse trail, but deer and bear trails were numerous. The sun sank and the sky darkened, but still the men rode on, and the farther they traveled the wilder grew the aspect of the cañon.

AT LENGTH Colter broke a way through a heavy thicket of willows and entered a side cañon, the mouth of which Ellen had not even descried. It turned and widened and at length opened out into a round pocket, apparently inclosed, and as lonely and isolated a place as even pursued rustlers could desire. Hidden by jutting wall and thicket of spruce were two old log cabins joined together by roof and attic floor, the same as the double cabin at the Jorth ranch.

Ellen smelled wood smoke, and presently, on going round the cabins, saw a bright fire. One man stood beside it, gazing at Colter's party, which evidently he had heard approaching.

"Hullo, Queen," said Colter. "How's Tad?"

"He's holdin' on fine," replied Queen, bending over the fire, where he turned pieces of meat.

"Where's dad?" suddenly asked Ellen, addressing Colter. As if he had not heard her he went on wearily loosening a pack.

Queen looked at her. The light of the fire only partly shone on his face. Ellen could not see its expression. But from the fact that Queen did not answer her question

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she got further intimation of an impending catastrophe. The long, wild ride had helped to prepare her for the secrecy and taciturnity of men who had resorted to flight. Perhaps her father had been delayed or was still off on the deadly mission that had obsessed him; or there might, and probably was, darker reason for his absence. Ellen shut her teeth and turned to the needs of her horse. And presently, returning to the fire, she thought of her uncle.

"Queen, is my Uncle Tad heah?" she asked.

"Shore. He's in thar," replied Queen, pointing at the nearer cabin.

ELLEN hurried toward the dark doorway. She could see how the logs of the cabin had moved awry and what a big, dilapidated hovel it was. As she looked in Colter loomed over her and placed a familiar and somehow masterful hand upon her. Ellen let it rest on her shoulder a moment. Must she forever be repulsing these rude men among whom her lot was cast? Did Colter mean what Daggs had always meant? Ellen felt herself weary, weak in body, and her spent spirit had not rallied. Yet whatever Colter meant by his familiarity, she could not bear it. So she slipped out from under his hand.

"Uncle Tad, are you heah?" she called into the blackness. She heard the mice scamper and rustle, and she smelled the musty old woody odor of a long-unused cabin.

"Hello, Ellen," came a voice she recognized as her uncle's, yet it was strange. "Yes. I'm heah—bad luck to me! How're you buckin' up, girl?"

"I'm all right, Uncle Tad, only tired an' worried. I ——" "Tad, how's yo' hurt?" interrupted Colter.

"Reckon I'm easier," replied Jorth wearily, "but shore I'm in bad shape. I'm still spittin' blood. I keep tellin' Queen thet bullet lodged in my lungs, but he says it went through."

"Wal, hang on, Tad," replied Colter, with a cheerfulness Ellen sensed was really indifference.

"Oh, what's the use!" exclaimed Jorth. "It's all—up with us."

"Wal, shut up then," tersely returned Colter. "It ain't doin' you or us any good to holler."

Tad Jorth did not reply to this. Ellen heard his breathing, and it did not seem natural. It rasped a little, came hurriedly, then caught in his throat. Then he spat. Ellen shrank back against the door. He was breathing through blood.

"Uncle, are you in pain?" she asked.

"Yes, Ellen—it burns terribly," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Isn't there something I can do?"

"I reckon not. Queen did all anybody could do fer me—now—unless it's pray."

COLTER laughed at this, the slow, easy, drawling laugh of a Texan. But Ellen felt pity for this wounded uncle. She had always hated him. He had been a drunkard, a gambler, a waster of her father's property—and now he was a rustler and a fugitive, lying in pain, perhaps mortally hurt.

"Yes, uncle, I will pray for you," she said softly. The change in his voice held a note of sadness.

"Ellen, you're the only good Jorth—in the whole damned lot," he said. "I see it all now. We've dragged you to hell!"

"Yes, Uncle Tad, I've shore been dragged some—but not yet—to hell," she responded with a break in her voice.

"You will be—Ellen—unless ——" "Aw, shut up thet kind of gab, will you," broke in Colter harshly.

It amazed Ellen that Colter should dominate her uncle, even though he was wounded. Tad Jorth had been the last man to take orders from anyone, much less a rustler of the Hash Knife Gang. This Colter began to loom up in Ellen's estimate as he loomed physically over her, a lofty figure, dark, motionless and menacing.

"Ellen, has Colter told you yet—about—about Lee an' Jackson?" inquired the wounded man.

The pitch-black darkness of the cabin seemed to help fortify Ellen to bear further trouble.

"Colter told me dad an' Uncle Jackson would meet us heah," she rejoined hurriedly.

Jorth could be heard breathing in difficulty, and he coughed and spat again and seemed to hiss.

"Ellen, he lied to you. They'll never meet us—heah!"

"Why not?" whispered Ellen.

"Because—Ellen," he replied, in husky pants, "yo' dad an' Uncle Jackson—are daid—an' buried!"

If Ellen suffered a terrible shock, it was a blankness, a deadness and a slow-creeping failure of sense in her knees. They gave way under her, and she sank on the grass against the cabin wall. She did not faint or grow dizzy or lose her sight, but for a while there was no process of thought in her mind. Suddenly, then, it was there—the quick spiritual rending of her heart, followed by a profound emotion of intimate and irretrievable loss, and after that grief and bitter realization.

An hour later Ellen found strength to go to the fire and partake of the food and drink her body sorely needed.

than I am. Ellen, heah, she must hev got another strain in her blood."

To Ellen their words had no meaning. She rose and asked, "Where can I sleep?"

"I'll fetch a light presently an' you can make yo' bed in thar by Tad," replied Colter.

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Wal, if you reckon you can coax him to talk you're shore wrong," declared Colter, with that cold timbre of voice that struck like steel on Ellen's nerves. "I cussed him good an' told him he'd keep his mouth shet. Talkin' makes him cough, an' thet fetches up the blood. Besides, I reckon I'm the one to tell you how yo' dad an' uncle got killed. Tad didn't see it done, an' he was bad hurt when it happened. Shore all the fellars hev their idee aboot it. But I've got it straight."

"Colter, tell me now," cried Ellen.

"Wal, all right, come over heah," he replied, and drew her away from the camp fire out in the shadow of gloom. "Poor kid! I shore feel bad aboot it."

He put a long arm around her waist and drew her against him. Ellen felt it, yet did not offer any resistance. All her faculties seemed absorbed in a morbid and sad anticipation.

Mrs. Dave Preeny Rests

ONE day last week Mrs. Dave Preeny told her husband she couldn't go any longer without a rest. "I am tired out and half sick," she said, "and nothing but complete rest will do me any good. I feel that if I could get in a room by myself and lie down for a day it would help me wonderfully."

Mr. Preeny told his own sister and Mrs. Preeny's sister about it, and they agreed to come over and do all the work for one day or for a longer time if Mrs. Preeny wished. Both of these women arrived early in the morning and the first thing they did was to tell Mrs. Preeny that they would do everything and for her to go straight to bed. "Well, I'll go," Mrs. Preeny said, "but first of all I want to fix Dave's shirt so it will be ready for him to put on in the morning." The two who had come to do the work went to the kitchen and didn't see Mrs. Preeny again for an hour, and when they did see her she was carrying a mattress to the back yard. She explained that she just had to sun the bed, but that she would go lie down that very minute.

In a short time Mr. Preeny's sister slipped into the room to see if Mrs. Preeny was asleep, but found her taking the cover off a comfort. She said she just couldn't use it any longer without washing it. Mrs. Preeny's sister was called, and the two succeeded in getting Mrs. Preeny to lie down. Then they went to the back yard to do the washing. When one of them went into the house a few minutes later she found Mrs. Preeny putting up the curtains in May's room. Later in the day she came for some of the suds to wash the back porch, and she continued working until night. When Mr. Preeny came home he asked how she had gotten along and she said, "Well, Mary and Fanny have been here all day and I guess they tried to help me, but I had to keep going anyway, and now I suppose I'll have a lot of extra work straightening up after them."

Colter and the men waited on her solicitously and in silence, now and then stealing furtive glances at her from under the shadows of their black sombreros. The dark night settled down like a blanket. There were no stars. The wind moaned fitfully among the pines, and all about that lonely hidden recess was in harmony with Ellen's thoughts.

"Gal, you're shore game," said Colter admiringly. "An' I reckon you never got it from the Jorths."

"Tad in thar—he's game," said Queen in mild protest.

"Not to my notion," replied Colter. "Any man can be game when he's croakin' with somebody round. But Lee Jorth an' Jackson—they always was yellow clear to their gizzards. They was born in Louisiana, not Texas. Shore they're no more Texans

Mrs. Joe Preeny used to want to live in the city, but since she has had her home fixed up the way she always wanted it she doesn't care to move. She now realizes that you can't take the country to the city but that you can bring to the country almost everything in the city that is worth while.

Mrs. Dave Preeny's children seldom find fault with their mother for neglecting her work. They will step over their things in the middle of the floor for half a day without once getting after her for not picking them up.

Father can put up a shelf if he has a full set of carpenter's tools and two or three people to wait on him, but mother can do any ordinary job of carpenter work without tools and with the baby pulling at her dress.

Wife sometimes becomes so angry that she says she wishes husband's friends knew just what kind of man he is, but she never really wants the dreadful truth known.

When son sees the examination questions on the blackboard he just can't believe the teacher got them out of the book the class has been studying.

In most families it takes two drought years in succession to make the children so hungry that they will humble themselves by eating turnips.

Bob Preeny is noted for being kind to his stock. On his place you see no evidence of overwork except in Mrs. Preeny.

Mother has selfish spells, when she will eat things she wants instead of eating what is about to go to waste.

In a large family there always is one child small enough to like dad's singing.

"Ellen, you shore know I always loved you; now don't you?" he asked with suppressed breath.

"No, Colter. It's news to me, an' not what I want to heah."

"Wal, you may as well heah it right now," he said. "It's true. An' what's more—yo' dad gave you to me before he died."

"What? Colter, you must be a liar."

"Ellen, I swear I'm not lyin'," he returned. "I was with yo' dad last an' heerd him last. He shore knew I'd loved you for years. An' he said he'd rather you be left in my care than anybody's."

"My father gave me to you in marriage!" ejaculated Ellen in bewilderment.

Colter's ready assurance did not carry him over this point. It was evident that her words somewhat surprised and disconcerted him for the moment.

"To let me marry a rustler—one of the Hash Knife Gang!" exclaimed Ellen with weary incredulity.

"Wal, yo' dad belonged to Daggs' gang, same as I do," replied Colter, recovering his cool ardor.

"No!" cried Ellen.

"Yes, he shore did, for years," declared Colter positively. "Back in Texas. An' it was yo' dad thet got Daggs to come to Arizona."

Ellen tried to fling herself away. But her strength and her spirit were ebbing, and Colter increased the pressure of his arm. All at once she sank limp. Could she escape her fate? Nothing seemed left to fight with or for.

"ALL right. Don't hold me—so tight," she panted. "Now tell me how dad was killed—an' who—who —"

Colter bent over so he could peer straight into her face. In the darkness Ellen just caught the gleam of his eyes. She felt the virile force of the man in the strain of his body as he pressed her close to him. It all seemed unreal—a hideous dream—the gloom, the moan of the wind, the weird solitude and this rustler with hand and will like cold steel.

"We'd come back to Greaves' store," Colter began. "An' as Greaves was daid we all got free with his liquor. Shore some of us got drunk. Bruce was drunk, an' Tad in thar—he was drunk. Yo' dad put away more'n I ever seen him. But shore he wasn't exactly drunk. He got one of 'em weak an' shaky spells. He cried an' he wanted some of us to git the Isbels to call off the fightin'. He shore was ready to call it quits. I reckon the killin' of Daggs, an' then the awful way Greaves was cut up by Jean Isbel, took all the fight out of yo' dad. He said to me, 'Colter, we'll take Ellen an' leave this heah country an' begin life all over agin where no one knows us.'"

"Did he really say that? Did he—really mean it?" murmured Ellen with a sob.

"I'll swear it by the mem'ry of my daid mother," protested Colter. "Wal, when night come the Isbels rode down on us in the dark an' began to shoot. They smashed in the door, tried to burn us out an' hollered round for a while. Then they left, an' we reckoned thar'd be no more trouble thet night. All the same we kept watch. I was the soberest one an' I bossed the gang. We had some quarrels aboot the drinkin'. Yo' dad said if we kept it up it'd be the end of the Jorths. An' he planned to send word to the Isbels next mawnin' thet he was ready for a truce. An' I was to go fix it up with Gaston Isbel. Wal, yo' dad went to bed in Greaves' room, an' a little while later yo' Uncle Jackson went in thar too. Some of the men laid down in the store an' went to sleep. I kept guard till aboot three in the mawnin'. An' I got so sleepy I couldn't hold my eyes open. So I waked up Wells an' Slater an' set 'em on guard, one at each end of the store. Then I laid down on the counter to take a nap."

COLTER'S low voice, the strain and breathlessness of him, the agitation with which he appeared to be laboring and especially the simple, matter-of-fact detail of his story carried absolute conviction to

Ellen Jorth. Her vague doubt of him had been created by his attitude toward her. Emotion dominated her intelligence. The images, the scenes called up by Colter's words were as true as the gloom of the wild gulch and the loneliness of the night solitude—as true as the strange fact that she lay passive in the arm of a rustler.

"Wal, after a while I woke up," went on Colter, clearing his throat. "It was gray dawn. All was as still as death. An' something shore was wrong. Wells an' Slater had got to drinkin' agin an' now laid daid drunk or asleep. Anyways, when I kicked 'em they never moved. Then I heerd a moan. It came from the room whar yo' dad an' uncle was. I went in. It was just light enough to see. Yo' Uncle Jackson was layin' on the floor—cut half in two—daid

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as a door nail. Yo' dad lay on the bed. He was alive, breathin' his last. He says, 'Thet half-breed Isbel—knifed us—while we slept!' The winder shutter was open. I seen whar Jean Isbel had come in an' gone out. I seen his moccasin tracks in the dirt outside, an' I seen whar he'd stepped in Jackson's blood an' tracked it to the winder. Yu shore can see them bloody tracks yo'-self, if yu go back to Greaves' store.

"Yo' dad was goin' fast. He said, 'Colter—take care of Ellen,' an' I reckon he meant a lot by thet. He kept sayin', 'My God, if I'd only seen Gaston Isbel before it was too late,' an' then he raved a little, whisperin' out of his haid. An' after thet he died. I woke up the men, an' 'bout sunup we carried yo' dad an' uncle out of town an' buried 'em. An' them Isbels shot at us while we were buryin' our daid! That's whar Tad got his hurt. Then we hit the trail for Jorth's ranch. An' now, Ellen, thet's all my story. Yo' dad was ready to bury the hatchet with his old enemy. An' thet Nez Percé, Jean Isbel, like the sneakin' savage he is, murdered yo' uncle an' yo' dad. Cut him horrible—made him suffer tortures—all for Isbel revenge!"

WHEN Colter's husky voice ceased Ellen whispered through lips as cold and still as ice: "Let me go. Leave me—heah—alone!"

"Why, shore. I reckon I understand," replied Colter. "I hated to tell yu. But yu had to heah the truth 'bout thet half-breed. I'll carry yo' pack in the cabin an' unroll yo' blankets."

Releasing her, Colter strode off in the gloom. Like a dead weight, Ellen began to slide until she slipped down full length beside the log. And then she lay in the cool, damp shadow, inert and lifeless so far as outward physical movement was concerned. She saw nothing and felt nothing of the night, the wind, the cold, the falling dew. For the moment or hour she was crushed by despair and seemed to see herself sinking down and down into a black, bottomless pit, into an abyss where murky tides of blood and furious gusts of passion contended between her body and her soul. In her despair she longed, she ached for death, for release.

Cursed by a taint of evil blood, further cursed by higher instinct for good and happy life, dragged from one lonely and wild and sordid spot to another, never knowing love or peace or joy or home, left to the companionship of violent and vile men, driven by a strange fate to love with unquenchable and insupportable love a half-breed, a savage, an Isbel, the hereditary enemy of her people and at last the ruthless murderer of her father—what had she left to live for? Revenge! An eye for an eye! A life for a life! But she could not kill Jean Isbel. Woman's love could turn to hate, but not the love of Ellen Jorth. He could drag her by the hair in the dust, beat her, make her a thing to loathe, cut her mortally in his savage and implacable thirst for revenge; but with her last gasp she would whisper she loved him and that she had lied to him to kill his faith. It was that, his strange faith in her purity, which had won her love. Of all men, that he should be the one to recognize the truth of her, the womanhood yet unsullied—how strange, how terrible, how overpowering! False, indeed, was she to the Jorths! False as her mother had been to an Isbel! This agony and destruction of her soul was the bitter Dead Sea fruit—the sins of her parents visited upon her.

"I'll end it all," she whispered to the night shadows that hovered over her. No coward was she—no fear of pain or mangled flesh or death or the mysterious hereafter could ever stay her. It would be easy, it would be a last thrill, a transport of self-abasement and supreme self-proof of her love for Jean Isbel to kiss the Rim rock where his feet had trod and then fling herself down into the depths. She was the last Jorth. So the wronged Isbels would be avenged.

"But he would never know—never know—I lied to him!" she wailed to the night wind.

She was lost—lost on earth and to hope of heaven. She had neither right to live nor die. She was nothing but a little weed along the trail of life, trampled upon, buried in the mud. She was nothing but a single rotten thread in a tangled web of love and hate and revenge. And she had broken.

Lower and lower she seemed to sink. Was there no end to this gulf of despair? If Colter had returned, he would have found her a rag and a toy, a creature degraded, fit for his vile embraces, to be thrust deeper into the mire; to be punished fittingly for her betrayal of a man's noble love and her own womanhood; to be made an end of, body, mind and soul!

But Colter did not return.

THE wind mourned, the owls hooted, the leaves rustled, the insects whispered their melancholy night song, the camp fire flickered and faded. Then the wild forest land seemed to close imponderably over Ellen. All that she wailed in her despair, all that she confessed in her abasement was true and hard as life could be, but she belonged to Nature. If Nature had not failed her, had God failed her? It was there—the lonely land of tree and fern and flower and brook, full of wild birds and beasts, where the mossy rocks could speak and the solitude had ears, where she had always felt herself unutterably a part of creation. Thus a wavering spark of hope quivered through the blackness of her soul and gathered light.

The gloom of the sky, the shifting clouds of dull shade, split asunder to show a glimpse of a radiant star, piercingly white, cold, pure, a steadfast eye of the universe, beyond all understanding and illimitable with its meaning of the past, the present and the future. Ellen watched it until the drifting clouds once more hid it from her strained sight.

What had that star to do with hell? She might be crushed and destroyed by life, but was there not something beyond? Just to be born, just to suffer, just to die—could that be all? Despair did not loose its hold on Ellen; the strife and pang of her breast did not subside. But with the long hours and the strange closing in of the forest around her and the fleeting glimpse of that wonderful star; with a subtle divination of the meaning of her beating heart and throbbing mind; and lastly, with a voice thundering at her conscience that a man's faith in a woman must not be greater, nobler than her faith in God and eternity—with these she checked the dark flight of her soul toward destruction.

XXI

ACHILL, gray, somber dawn was breaking when Ellen dragged herself into the cabin and crept under her blankets, there to sleep the sleep of exhaustion.

When she awoke the hour appeared to be late afternoon. Sun and sky shone through the sunken and decayed roof of the old cabin. Her uncle, Tad Jorth, lay upon a blanket bed upheld by a crude couch of boughs. The light fell upon his face—pale, lined, cast in a still mold of suffering. He was not dead, for she heard his respiration.

The floor underneath Ellen's blankets was bare clay. She and Jorth were alone in this cabin. It contained nothing besides their beds and a rank growth of weeds along the decayed lower logs. Half of the cabin had a rude ceiling of rough-hewn boards, which formed a kind of loft. This attic extended through to the adjoining cabin, forming the ceiling of the porchlike space between the two structures. There was no partition. A ladder of two aspen saplings, and with braces between for steps, led up to the attic.

Ellen smelled wood smoke and the odor of frying meat, and she heard the voices of men. She looked out to see that Slater and Somers had joined their party, an addition that might have strengthened it for defense but did not lend her own situation anything favorable. Somers had appeared the one best to avoid.

Colter espied her and called her to "come an' feed yo' pale face." His comrades laughed, not loudly but guardedly, as if noise was something to avoid. Nevertheless, they awoke Tad Jorth, who began to toss and moan on the bed.

Ellen hurried to his side and at once ascertained that he had a high fever and was in a critical condition. Every time he tossed he opened a wound in his right breast, rather high up. For all she could see, nothing had been done for him except the binding of a scarf round his neck and under his arm. This scant bandage had worked loose. Going to the door, she called out, "Fetch me some water."

WHEN Colter brought it Ellen was rummaging in her pack for some clothing or towel that she could use for bandages. "Weren't any of you decent enough to look after my uncle?" she queried.

"Huh! Wal, we shore did all we could," rejoined Colter. "I reckon yu think it wasn't a tough job to pack him up the Rim. He was done for then, an' I said so."

"I'll do all I can for him," said Ellen. "Shore; go ahead. When I get plugged or knifed by thet half-breed I shore hope yu'll be round to nurse me."

"Yu seem to be pretty shore of your fate, Colter."

"Shore I am!" he bit out darkly. "Somers saw Isbel an' his gang trailin' us to the Jorth ranch."

"Are yu goin' to stay heah—an' wait for them?"

"Shore I've been quarrelin' with the fellars out thar over thet very question. I'm fer leavin' the country. But Queen, the damn gun fighter, is daid set to kill thet cowman, Blue, who swore he was King Fisher, the old Texas outlaw. None but Queen are spoilin' fer another fight. All the same they won't leave Tad Jorth heah alone."

Then Colter leaned in at the door and whispered:

"Ellen, I cain't boss this outfit. So let's yu an' me shake 'em. I've got yo' dad's gold. Let's ride off to-night an' shake this country."

Ellen shook her head. "Neither would I leave my uncle heah alone."

Colter, muttering under his breath, left the door and returned to his comrades. Ellen had received her first intimation of his cowardice; and his mention of her father's gold started a train of thought that persisted in spite of her efforts to put all her mind to attending to her uncle. He grew conscious enough to recognize her and her working over him and thanked her with a look that touched Ellen deeply. It changed the direction of her mind. His suffering and imminent death, which she was able to alleviate and retard somewhat, worked upon her pity and compassion so that she forgot her own plight. Half the night she was tending him, cooling his fever, holding him quiet. Well she realized that but for her ministrations he would have died. At length he went to sleep.

ELLEN, sitting beside him in the lonely, silent darkness of that late hour, received again the intimations of Nature, those vague and nameless stirrings of her innermost being, those whisperings out of the night and the forest and the sky. Something great would not readily let go of her soul. She pondered.

Attention to the wounded man occupied Ellen, and soon she redoubled her activities in this regard, finding in them protection against Colter.

He had waylaid her as she went to a spring for water, and with a lunge like that of a bear he had tried to embrace her. But Ellen had been too quick for him.

"Wal, are yu goin' away with me?" he demanded in a menacing way that for the moment frightened her.

"No. I'll stick by my uncle," she replied.

That motive of hers seemed to obstruct his will. Ellen was keen to see that Colter and his comrades were at a last stand and disintegrating under a severe strain. Nerve and courage of the open and the wild they possessed, but only in a limited degree. Colter seemed obsessed by his passion for her, and though Ellen in her stubborn pride did not yet fear him, she realized she ought to. After that incident she watched closely, never leaving her uncle's bedside except when Colter was absent. One or more of the men kept constant lookout somewhere down the cañon.

Day after day passed on the wings of suspense, of watching, of ministering to her uncle, of waiting for some hour that seemed fixed.

COLTER was like a hound upon her trail. At every turn he was there to importune her to run off with him, to frighten her with the menace of the Isbels, to beg her to give herself to him. It came to pass that the only relief she had from the objectionable advances of the man was when she ate with the other men or barred the cabin door at night. Not much relief, however, was there in the shut and barred door. With one thrust of his powerful arm Colter could have caved it in. He knew this as well as Ellen. Still she did not have the fear she should have had. There was her rifle beside her, and though she did not allow her mind to run darkly on its possible use, still the fact of its being there at hand somehow strengthened her. At any rate, she might, in an emergency, have recourse to its use. Colter was a cat playing with a mouse, but not yet sure of his quarry.

Ellen came to know hours when she was weak—weak physically, mentally, spiritually, morally—when under the sheer weight of this frightful and growing burden of suspense she was not capable of fighting her misery, her abasement, her low ebb of vitality, and at the same time wholly withstanding Colter's advances.

He would come into the cabin and, utterly indifferent to Tad Jorth, he would try to make bold and unrestrained love to Ellen. When he caught her in one of her unresisting moments and was able to hold her in his arms and kiss her he seemed to be beside himself with the wonder of her. At such moments, if he had any softness or gentleness in him, it expressed itself in his sooner or later letting her go, when apparently she was just about to faint. So it must have become fascinatingly fixed in Colter's mind that at times Ellen repulsed him with scorn and at others could not resist him.

ELLEN had escaped two crises in her relations with this man; and as a morbid doubt, like a poisonous fungus, began to strangle her mind, she instinctively divined that there was an approaching and final crisis. No uplift of her spirit came this time—no intimations, no whisperings. How horrible it all was! To long to be good and noble; to realize that she was neither; to sink lower day by day! Must she decay there like one of these rotting logs? Worst of all, then, was the insinuating and ever-growing hopelessness. What was the use? What did it matter? Who would ever think of Ellen Jorth?

"Oh, God," she whispered in her distraction, "is there nothing left—nothing at all?"

A period of several days of less torment to Ellen followed. Her uncle apparently took a turn for the better, and Colter let her alone. This last circumstance nonplused Ellen. She was at a loss to understand it, unless the Isbel menace now encroached upon Colter so formidably that he had forgotten her for the present.

Then one bright August morning, when she had just begun to relax her eternal vigilance and breathe without oppression, Colter encountered her and, darkly silent and fierce, he grasped her and drew her off her feet. Ellen struggled violently, but the total surprise had deprived her of strength. And that paralyzing weakness assailed her as never before. Without apparent effort Colter carried her, striding rapidly away from the cabin into the border of spruce trees at the foot of the cañon wall.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



CHAFF

His Luck

THE fan indicated a passing man. "That fellow Bibbs must have been born with a horse-shoe in his mouth!" he said.

"Lucky, is he?"

"Lucky! Why, listen. He decided he'd have to have a front tooth pulled, it was hurting him so, but he only had one dollar and wanted to go to the ball game.

On his way to the dentist's he passed the ball park, and a foul came over the fence, hit him in the mouth and knocked out his aching tooth. Then he turned in the ball at the gate, was passed in to see the game and finally went home with his dollar still in his pocket."

His High Reward

ROUND and round the rugged rocks
The stubborn farmer plowed.
He dragged a bit and seeded it
And then, "By jinks," he vowed,
"I've done a pile of work round here,
But now I guess I'll stop;
And if the weather holds out good
I'll bet I make a crop."

And then it rained, and then it blew,
And then dried up a spell.
The bugs came in and took their share,
And smut and rust as well.
When harvest time came boiling round,
He put the grain in sacks,
And found that there was just enough
To pay his income tax.

—W. L. H.

It Was Doubtful

A YOUNG fellow took his elderly father to a football match. "Father," he said as they took their seats, "you'll see more excitement for your five dollars than you ever saw before."

"Oh, I don't know," grunted the old man; "five dollars was all I paid for my marriage license."

The Constable's Mistake

"WHAT was the cause of the ruckus at the dance in the township hall last night?" inquired old Abner Peabody. "Thet dern fool constable, Absalom Caraway," answered Ezra Perkins. "Jerushy Salamander, old Deacon Salamander's girl, has the St. Vitus dance, and that there Caraway put her out of the hall. Claimed she was shimmyin'!"



THE PUP: Aw, Come On and Throw the Stick—I'll Fetch it Back to You!

Her Handicap

IT ALL happened in the kindergarten. The diminutive Katherine, despite the pleadings of teacher, persistently lagged during the march that opened up the proceedings.

Finally teacher called Katherine to her side. "Katherine dear," she said, "can't you keep up with the music and the little boy in front of you?"

"Yessum," said Katherine, with a beaming and obliging smile. "I can, but my new shoes can't."

Not Particular

THE head of one of the government scientific bureaus at Washington felt somewhat flattered at receiving one day a letter from a gentleman in the West, asking him to send a copy of his report.

The scientist replied promptly, asking to which particular report his correspondent referred. The answer came: "Am not particular which one you send. I want it for a scrapbook."

Ever Thus

"I SE DAT onlucky," said Mose, "dat ef I wuz ter wake up settin' in de middle er a patch er ripe watermelluns, I'd have so' th' oat."

His Definition

"WHO can tell what a hypocrite is?" asked the teacher. "A boy that comes to school with a smile on his face," promptly returned Johnny.

Bewildered Broadway

THE surging crowd along Broadway
Was stirred so strangely yesterday.
It stood on tiptoe, eyes aglow,
It stared, and turned to whisper low
Of wonders such as seldom pass
That way. What swayed the living mass?
What marvel from the fabled isles
That drew the eye from Paris styles?
A street car left the track perhaps?
Two bootblacks nabbed for shooting craps?
A fire to call the engines out?
A skidding auto turned about?
A homebrew Bacchus' raisin dance?
At these perhaps the crowd with glance,
But never act like this at all.
Amazed, I asked a copper tall
And broad, and heard at last;
A horse and buggy just went past.

—Roland D. Johnson.

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