Garland Hamlin

Cavanagh, Forest Ranger: A Romance of the Mountain West

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I
THE DESERT CHARIOT

Lee Virginia Wetherford began her return journey into the mountain West with exultation. From the moment she opened her car-window that August morning in Nebraska the plain called to her, sustained her illusions. It was all quite as big, as tawny, as she remembered it – fit arena for the epic deeds in which her father had been a leader bold and free.

Her memories of Roaring Fork and its people were childish and romantic. She recalled, vividly, the stagecoach which used to amble sedately, not to say wheezily, from the railway to the Fork and from the Fork back to the railway, in the days when she had ridden away in it a tearful, despairing, long-limbed girl, and fully expected to find it waiting for her at Sulphur City, with old Tom Quentan still as its driver.

The years of absence had been years of growth, and though

she had changed from child to woman in these suns and moons, she could not think of the Fork as anything other than the romantic town she had left – a list wherein spurred and steel-girt cow-men strode lamely over uneven sidewalks, or swooped, like the red nomads of the desert, in mad troops through the starlit night.

The first hint of "the new West" came to her by way of the pretentious Hotel Alma, which stood opposite the station at Sulphur, and to which she was led by a colored porter of most elaborate and kindly manners.

This house, which furnished an excellent dinner and an absorbing mixture of types both American and European, was vaguely disturbing to her. It was plainly not of the old-time West – the West her father had dominated in the days "before the invasion." It was, indeed, distinctly built for the tourist trade, and was filled with all that might indicate the comfortable nearness of big game and good fishing.

Upon inquiry as to the stage, she was amazed to hear that an automobile now made the journey to the Fork in five hours, and that it left immediately after the midday meal.

This was still more disconcerting than the hotel, but the closer she came to the ride, the more resigned she became, for she began to relive the long hours of torture on the trip outward, during which she had endured clouds of dust and blazing heat. There were some disadvantages in the old stage, romantic as her conception of it had been. Furthermore, the coach had gone; so

she made application for her seat at once.

At two o'clock, as the car came to the door, she entered it with a sense of having stepped from one invading chariot of progress to another, so big and shining and up to date was its glittering body, shining with brass and glowing with brave red paint. It was driven, also, by a small, lean young fellow, whom the cowboys on her father's ranch would have called a "lunger," so thin and small were his hands and arms. He was quite as far from old Tom Quentan as the car was from the coach on which he used to perch.

The owner of the machine, perceiving under Virginia's veil a girl's pretty face, motioned her to the seat with the driver, and rode beside her for a few minutes (standing on the foot-board), to inquire if she were visiting friends in the Fork.

"Yes," she replied, curtly, "I am."

Something in her tone discouraged him from further inquiry, and he soon dropped away.

The seats were apparently quite filled with men, when at the last moment a middle-aged woman, with a penetrating, nasal, drawling utterance, inquired if she were expected to be "squoze in betwixt them two strange men on that there back seat."

Lee Virginia turned, and was about to greet the woman as an old acquaintance when something bold and vulgar in the complaining vixen's face checked the impulse.

The stage-agent called her "Miss McBride," and with exaggerated courtesy explained that travel was heavy, and that he had not known that she was intending to go.

One of the men, a slender young fellow, moved to the middle of the seat, and politely said, "You can sit on the outside, madam."

She clambered in with doleful clamor. "Well, I never rode in one of these pesky things before, and if you git me safe down to the Fork I'll promise never to jump the brute another time."

A chuckle went 'round the car; but it soon died out, for the new-comer scarcely left off talking for the next three hours, and Virginia was very glad she had not claimed acquaintanceship.

As they whirled madly down the valley the girl was astonished at the transformation in the hot, dry land. Wire fences ran here and there, enclosing fields of alfalfa and wheat where once only the sage-brush and the grease-wood grew. Painted farm-houses shone on the banks of the creeks, and irrigating ditches flashed across the road with an air of business and decision.

For the first half-hour it seemed as if the dominion of the cattle-man had ended, but as the swift car drew away from the valley of the Bear and climbed the divide toward the north, the free range was disclosed, with few changes, save in the cattle, which were all of the harmless or hornless variety, appearing tame and spiritless in comparison with the old-time half-wild broad-horn breeds.

No horsemen were abroad, and nothing was heard but the whirr of the motor and the steady flow of the garrulous woman behind. Not till the machine was descending the long divide to the west did a single cowboy come into view to remind the girl

of the heroic past, and this one but a symbol – a figure of speech. Leaning forward upon his reeling, foaming steed, he spurred along the road as if pursued, casting backward apprehensive glances, as if in the brassy eyes of the car he read his doom – the doom of all his kind.

Some vague perception of this symbolism came into Virginia's thought as she watched the swift and tireless wheels swallow the shortening distance between the heels of the flying pony and the gilded seat in which she sat. Vain was the attempt to outride progress. The rider pulled out, and as they passed him the girl found still greater significance in the fact that he was one of her father's old-time cowboys – a grizzled, middle-aged, light-weight centaur whom she would not have recognized had not the driver called him by his quaint well-known nickname.

Soon afterward the motor overhauled and passed the battered stage lumbering along, bereft of its passengers, sunk to the level of carrying the baggage for its contemptuous aristocratic supplanter; and as Lee Virginia looked up at the driver, she caught the glance of a simple-minded farm-boy looking down at her. Tom Quentan no longer guided the plunging, reeling broncos on their swift and perilous way – he had sturdily declined to "play second fiddle to a kerosene tank."

Lee began to wonder if she should find the Fork much changed – her mother was a bad correspondent.

Her unspoken question, opportunely asked by another, was answered by Mrs. McBride. "Oh, Lord, yes! Summer tourists are

crawlin' all over us sence this otto line began. 'Pears like all the bare-armed boobies and cross-legged little rips in Omaha and Denver has jest got to ride in and look us over. Two of them new hotels in Sulphur don't do a thing but feed these tenderfeet. I s'pose pro-hi-bition will be the next grandstand-play on the part of our town-lot boomers. We old cow-punchers don't care whether the town grows or not, but these hyer bankers and truck-farmers are all for raisin' the price o' land and taxin' us quiet fellers out of our boots."

Virginia winced a little at this, for it flashed over her that all the women with whom she had grown up spoke very much in this fashion – using breeding terms almost as freely as the ranchers themselves. It was natural enough. What else could they do in talking to men who knew nothing but cows? And yet it was no longer wholly excusable even to the men, who laughed openly in reply.

The mountains, too, yielded their disappointment. For the first hour or two they seemed lower and less mysterious than of old. They neither wooed nor threatened – only the plain remained as vast and as majestic as ever. The fences, the occasional farms in the valleys could not subdue its outspread, serene majesty to prettiness. It was still of desert sternness and breadth.

From all these impersonal considerations the girl was brought back to the vital phases of her life by the harsh voice of one of the men. "Lize Wetherford is goin' to get jumped one o' these days for sellin' whiskey without a license. I've told her so, too.

Everybody knows she's a-doin' it, and what beats me is her goin' along in that way when a little time and money would set her straight with the law."

The shock of all this lay in the fact that Eliza Wetherford was the mother to whom Lee Virginia was returning after ten years of life in the East, and the significance of the man's words froze her blood for an instant. There was an accent of blunt truth in his voice, and the mere fact that a charge of such weight could be openly made appalled the girl, although her recollections of her mother were not entirely pleasant.

The young fellow on the back seat slowly said: "I don't complain of Lize sellin' bad whiskey, but the grub she sets up is fierce."

"The grub ain't so bad; it's the way she stacks it up," remarked another. "But, then, these little fly-bit cow-towns are all alike and all bad, so far as hotels are concerned."

Lee Virginia, crimson and burning hot, was in agony lest they should go further in their criticism.

She knew that her mother kept a boarding-house; and while she was not proud of it, there was nothing precisely disgraceful in it – many widowed women found it the last resort; but this brutal comment on the way in which her business was carried on was like a slash of mud in the face. Her joy in the ride, her impersonal exultant admiration of the mountains was gone, and with flaming cheeks and beating heart she sat, tense and bent, dreading some new and keener thrust.

Happily the conversation turned aside and fell upon the Government's forest policy, and Sam Gregg, a squat, wide-mouthed, harsh-voiced individual, cursed the action of Ross Cavanagh the ranger in the district above the Fork. "He thinks he's Secretary of War, but I reckon he won't after I interview him. He can't shuffle my sheep around over the hills at his own sweet will."

The young fellow on the back seat quietly interposed. "You want to be sure you've got the cinch on Cavanagh good and square, Sam, or he'll be a-ridin' *you*."

"He certainly is an arbitrary cuss," said the old woman. "They say he was one of Teddy's Rough-riders in the war. He sure can ride and handle a gun. 'Pears like he thinks he's runnin' the whole range," she continued, after a pause. "Cain't nobody so much as shoot a grouse since he came on, and the Supervisor upholds him in it."

Lee Virginia wondered about all this supervision, for it was new to her.

Gregg, the sheepman, went on: "As I tell Redfield, I don't object to the forest policy – it's a good thing for me; I get my sheep pastured cheaper than I could do any other way, but it makes me hot to have grazing lines run on me and my herders jacked up every time they get over the line. Ross run one bunch off the reservation last Friday. I'm going to find out about that. He'll learn he can't get 'arbitrary' with me."

Lee Virginia, glancing back at this man, felt sorry for any one

who opposed him, for she recalled him as one of the fiercest of the cattle-men – one ever ready to cut a farmer's fence or burn a sheep-herder's wagon.

The old woman chuckled: "'Pears like you've changed your tune since '98, Sam."

He admitted his conversion shamelessly. "I'm for whatever will pay best. Just now, with a high tariff, sheep are the boys. So long as I can get on the reserve at seven cents a head – lambs free – I'm going to put every dollar I've got into sheep."

"You're going to get thrown off altogether one of these days," said the young man on the back seat.

Thereupon a violent discussion arose over the question of the right of a sheepman to claim first grass for his flocks, and Gregg boasted that he cared nothing for "the dead-line." "I'll throw my sheep where I please," he declared. "They've tried to run me out of Deer Creek, but I'm there to stay. I have ten thousand more on the way, and the man that tries to stop me will find trouble."

The car was descending into the valley of the Roaring Fork now, and wire fences and alfalfa fields on either side gave further evidence of the change in the land's dominion. New houses of frame and old houses in fresh paint shone vividly from the green of the willows and cottonwoods. A ball-ground on the outskirts of the village was another guarantee of progress. The cowboy was no longer the undisputed prince of the country fair.

Down past the court-house, refurbished and deeper sunk in trees, Lee Virginia rode, recalling the wild night when three

hundred armed and vengeful cowboys surrounded it, holding three cattle-barons and their hired invaders against all comers, resolute to be their own judge, jury, and hangman. It was all as peaceful as a Sunday afternoon at this moment, with no sign of the fierce passions of the past.

There were new store-buildings and cement walks along the main street of the town, and here and there a real lawn, cut by a lawn-mower; but as the machine buzzed on toward the river the familiar little old battlemented buildings came to view. The Palace Hotel, half log, half battlement, remained on its perilous site beside the river. The triangle where the trails met still held Halsey's Three Forks Saloon, and next to it stood Markheit's general store, from which the cowboys and citizens had armed themselves during the ten days' war of cattle-men and rustlers.

The car crossed the Roaring Fork and drew up before two small shacks, one of which bore a faded sign, "The Wetherford House," and the other in fresher paint, "The Wetherford Café." On the sidewalk a group of Indians were sitting, and a half-dozen slouching white men stood waiting at the door.

At sight of her mother's hotel Virginia forgot every other building, every other object, and when the driver asked, respectfully, "Where will you want to get off, miss?" she did not reply, but rose unsteadily in her seat, blindly reaching for her bag and her wraps. Her slim, gray-robed figure, graceful even in her dismay, appealed to every onlooker, but Gregg was the one to offer a hand.

"Allow me, miss," he said, with the smile of a wolf.

Declining his aid, she took her bag from the driver and walked briskly up the street as if she were a resident and knew precisely where she wanted to go. "One o' those Eastern tourists, I reckon?" she heard the old woman say.

As she went past the hotel-porch her heart beat hard and her breath shortened. In a flash she divined the truth. She understood why her mother had discouraged her coming home. It was not merely on account of the money – it was because she knew that her business was wrong.

What a squalid little den it was! How cheap, bald, and petty the whole town seemed of a sudden. Lee Virginia halted and turned. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to make herself known. She retraced her steps, pulled open the broken screen door, and entered the café. It was a low, dingy dining-room filled with the odor of ham and bad coffee. At the tables ten or fifteen men, a motley throng, were busily feeding their voracious jaws, and on her left, behind a showcase filled with cigars, stood her mother, looking old, unkempt, and worried. The changes in her were so great that the girl stood in shocked alarm. At last she raised her veil. "Mother," she said, "don't you know me?"

A look of surprise went over the older woman's flabby face – a glow which brought back something of her other self, as she cried: "Why, Lee Virginny, where did you come from?"

The boarders stopped chewing and stared in absorbed interest, while Virginia kissed her blowsy mother.

"By the Lord, it's little Virginny!" said one old fellow. "It's her daughter."

Upon this a mutter of astonishment arose, and the waiter-girls, giggling, marvelling, and envious, paused, their platters in hand, to exchange comment on the new-comer's hat and gown. A cowboy at the washing-sink in the corner suspended his face-polishing and gaped over his shoulder in silent ecstasy.

For a full minute, so it seemed, this singular, interesting, absorbed immobility lasted; then a seedy little man rose, and approached the girl. His manner was grotesquely graceful as he said: "We are all glad to greet you home again, Miss Virginia."

She gave her hand hesitatingly. "It's Mr. Sifton, isn't it?"

"It is," he replied; "the same old ha'penny, only a little more worn – worn, not polished," he added, with a smile.

She remembered him then – an Englishman, a remittance man, a "lord," they used to say. His eyes were kind, and his mouth, despite its unshaved stubble of beard, was refined. A harmless little man – his own worst enemy, as the saying goes.

Thereupon others of the men came forward to greet her, and though she had some difficulty in recognizing one or two of them (so hardly had the years of her absence used them), she eventually succeeded in placing them all.

At length her mother led her through the archway which connected the two shanties, thence along a narrow hall into a small bedroom, into which the western sunset fell. It was a shabby place, but as a refuge from the crowd in the restaurant it was

grateful.

Lize looked at her daughter critically. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with a girl like you. – Why, you’re purty – purty as a picture. You were skinny as a child – I’m fair dazed. Great snakes, how you have opened out! – You’re the living image of your dad. – What started you back? I told you to stay where you was.”

The girl stared at her helplessly, trying to understand herself and her surroundings. There was, in truth, something singularly alien in her mother’s attitude. She seemed on the defensive, not wishing to be too closely studied. “Her manner is not even affectionate – only friendly. It is as if I were only an embarrassing visitor,” the girl thought. Aloud she said: “I had no place to go after Aunt Celia died. I had to come home.”

“You wrote they was willing to keep you.”

“They were, but I couldn’t ask it of them. I had no right to burden them, and, besides, Mrs. Hall wrote me that you were sick.”

“I am; but I didn’t want you to come back. Lay off your things and come out to supper. We’ll talk afterward.”

The eating-house, the rooms and hallways, were all of that desolate shabbiness which comes from shiftlessness joined with poverty. The carpets were frayed and stained with tobacco-juice, and the dusty windows were littered with dead flies. The curtains were ragged, the paper peeling from the walls, and the plastering cracked into unsightly lines. Everything on which the girl’s eyes

fell contrasted strongly with her aunt's home on the Brandywine – not because that house was large or luxurious, but because it was exquisitely in order, and sweet with flowers and dainty arrangement of color.

She understood now the final warnings uttered by her friends. "You will find everything changed," they had said, "because you are changed."

She regretted bitterly that she had ever left her Eastern friends. Her mother, in truth, showed little pleasure at her coming, and almost nothing of the illness of which a neighbor had written. It was, indeed, this letter which had decided her to return to the West. She had come, led by a sense of duty, not by affection, for she had never loved her mother as a daughter should – they were in some way antipathetic – and now she found herself an unwelcome guest.

Then, too, the West had called to her: the West of her childhood, the romantic, chivalrous West, the West of the miner, the cattle-man, the wolf, and the eagle. She had returned, led by a poetic sentiment, and here now she sat realizing as if by a flash of inward light that the West she had known as a child had passed, had suddenly grown old and commonplace – in truth, it had never existed at all!

One of the waitresses, whose elaborately puffed and waved hair set forth her senseless vanity, called from the door: "You can come out now, your ma says! Your supper's ready!"

With aching head and shaking knees Virginia reentered the

dining-room, which was now nearly empty of its "guests," but was still misty with the steam of food, and swarming with flies. These pests buzzed like bees around the soiled places on the table-cloths, and one of her mother's first remarks was a fretful apology regarding her trials with those insects. "Seems like you can't keep 'em out," she said.

Lee Virginia presented the appearance of some "settlement worker," some fair lady on a visit to the poor, as she took her seat at the table and gingerly opened the small moist napkin which the waiter dropped before her. Her appetite was gone. Her appetite failed at the very sight of the fried eggs and hot and sputtering bacon, and she turned hastily to her coffee. A fly was in that! She uttered a little choking cry, and buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed.

Lize turned upon the waitress and lashed her with stinging phrases. "Can't you serve things better than this? Take that cup away! My God, you make me tired – fumblin' around here with your eyes on the men! Pay more attention to your work and less to your crimps, and you'll please me a whole lot better!"

With desperate effort Lee conquered her disgust. "Never mind, I'm tired and a little upset. I don't need any dinner."

"The slob will go, just the same. I've put up with her because help is scarce, but here's where she gits off!"

In this moment Virginia perceived that her mother was of the same nature with Mrs. McBride – not one whit more refined – and the gulf between them swiftly widened. Hastily sipping her

coffee, she tried hard to keep back the tears, but failed; and no sooner did her mother turn away than she fled to her room, there to sob unrestrainedly her despair and shame. “Oh, I can’t stand it,” she called. “I can’t! I can’t!”

Outside, the mountains deepened in splendor, growing each moment more mysterious and beautiful under the sunset sky, but the girl derived no comfort from them. Her loneliness and her perplexities had closed her eyes to their majestic drama. She felt herself alien and solitary in the land of her birth.

Lize came in half an hour later, pathetic in her attempt at “slicking up.” She was still handsome in a large-featured way, but her gray hair was there, and her face laid with a network of fretful lines. Her color was bad. At the moment her cheeks were yellow and sunken.

She complained of being short of breath and lame and tired. “I’m always tired,” she explained. “’Pears like sometimes I can’t scarcely drag myself around, but I do.”

A pang of comprehending pain shot through Virginia’s heart. If she could not love, she could at least pity and help; and reaching forth her hand, she patted her mother on the knee. “Poor old mammy!” she said. “I’m going to help you.”

Lize was touched by this action of her proud daughter, and smiled sadly. “This is no place for you. It’s nothin’ but a measly little old cow-town gone to seed – and I’m gone to seed with it. I know it. But what is a feller to do? I’m stuck here, and I’ve got to make a living or quit. I can’t quit. I ain’t got the grit to eat a

dose, and so I stagger along."

"I've come back to help you, mother. You must let me relieve you of some of the burden."

"What can you do, child?" Lize asked, gently.

"I can teach."

"Not in this town you can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, there's a terrible prejudice against – well, against me. And, besides, the places are all filled for the next year. The Wetherfords ain't among the first circles any more."

This daunted the girl more than she could express, but she bravely made advance. "But there must be other schools in the country."

"There are – a few. But I reckon you better pull out and go back, at least, to Sulphur; they don't know so much about me there, and, besides, they're a little more like your kind."

Lee Virginia remembered Gregg's charge against her mother. "What do you mean by the prejudice against you?" she asked.

Lize was evasive. "Since I took to running this restaurant my old friends kind o' fell off – but never mind that to-night. Tell me about things back East. I don't s'pose I'll ever get as far as Omaha again; I used to go with Ed every time I felt like it. He was good to me, your father. If ever there was a prince of a man, Ed Wetherford was him."

The girl's thought was now turned into other half-forgotten channels. "I wish you would tell me more about father. I don't

remember where he was buried."

"Neither do I, child – I mean I don't know exactly. You see, after that cattle-war, he went away to Texas."

"I remember, but it's all very dim."

"Well, he never came back and never wrote, and by-and-by word came that he had died and was buried; but I never could go down to see where his grave was at."

"Didn't you know the name of the town?"

"Yes; but it was a new place away down in the Pan Handle, and nobody I knew lived there. And I never knew anything more."

Lee sighed hopelessly. "I hate to think of him lying neglected down there."

"'Pears like the whole world we lived in in them days has slipped off the map," replied the older woman; and as the room was darkening, she rose and lighted a dusty electric globe which dangled from the ceiling over the small table. "Well, I must go back into the restaurant; I hain't got a girl I can trust to count the cash."

Left alone, Lee Virginia wept no more, but her face settled into an expression of stern sadness. It seemed as if her girlhood had died out of her, and that she was about to begin the same struggle with work and worry which had marked the lives of all the women she had known in her childhood.

Out on the porch a raw youth was playing wailing tunes on a mouth-organ, and in the "parlor" a man was uttering silly jokes to a tittering girl. The smell of cheap cigars filled the hallway and

penetrated to her nostrils. Every sight and sound sickened her. "Can it be that the old town, the town of my childhood, was of this character – so sordid, so vulgar?" she asked herself. "And mother – what is the matter with her? She is not even glad to see me!"

Weary with her perplexities, she fastened her door at last, and went to bed, hoping to end – for a few hours, at least – the ache in her heart and the benumbing whirl of her thought.

But this respite was denied her. Almost at once she began to fancy that a multitudinous minute creeping and stirring was going on about her – in her hair, over her neck, across her feet. For a time she explained this by reference to her disordered nerves, but at last some realization of the truth came to her, and she sprang out upon the floor in horror and disgust. Lighting the lamp, she turned to scrutinize her couch. It swarmed with vermin. The ceiling was spattered with them. They raced across the walls in platoons, thin and voracious as wolves.

With a choking, angry, despairing moan she snatched her clothing from the chair and stood at bay. It needed but this touch to complete her disillusionment.

II
THE FOREST RANGER

From her makeshift bed in the middle of the floor Lee Virginia was awakened next morning by the passing of some one down the hall calling at each door, "Six o'clock!" She had not slept at all till after one. She was lame, heart-weary, and dismayed, but she rose and dressed herself as neatly as before. She had decided to return to Sulphur. "I cannot endure this," she had repeated to herself a hundred times. "I *will* not!"

Hearing the clatter of dishes, she ventured (with desperate courage) into the dining-room, which was again filled with cowboys, coal-miners, ranchers and their tousled families, and certain nondescript town loafers of tramp-like appearance. The flies were nearly as bad as ever – but not quite, for under Mrs. Wetherford's dragooning the waiters had made a nerveless assault upon them with newspaper bludgeons, and a few of them had been driven out into the street.

Slipping into a seat at the end of the table which offered the cleanest cloth, Lee Virginia glanced round upon her neighbors with shrinking eyes. All were shovelling their food with knife-blades and guzzling their coffee with bent heads; their faces scared her, and she dropped her eyes.

At her left, however, sat two men whose greetings were frank

and manly, and whose table-manners betrayed a higher form of life. One of them was a tall man with a lean red face against which his blond mustache lay like a chalk-mark. He wore a corduroy jacket, cut in Norfolk style, and in the collar of his yellow shirt a green tie was loosely knotted. His hands were long and freckled, but were manifestly trained to polite usages.

The other man was younger and browner, and of a compact, athletic figure. On the breast of his olive-green coat hung a silver badge which bore a pine-tree in the centre. His shirt was tan-colored and rough, but his head was handsome. He looked like a young officer in the undress uniform of the regular army. His hands were strong but rather small, and the lines of his shoulders graceful. Most attractive of all were his eyes, so brown, so quietly humorous, and so keen.

In the rumble of cheap and vulgar talk the voices of these men appealed to the troubled girl with great charm. She felt more akin to them than to any one else in the room, and from time to time she raised her eyes to their faces.

They were aware of her also, and their gaze was frankly admiring as well as wondering; and in passing the ham and eggs or the sugar they contrived to show her that they considered her a lady in a rough place, and that they would like to know more about her.

She accepted their civilities with gratitude, and listened to their talk with growing interest. It seemed that the young man had come down from the hills to meet his friend and take him

back to his cabin.

"I can't do it to-day, Ross," said the older man. "I wish I could, but one meal of this kind is all I can stand these days."

"You're getting finicky," laughed the younger man.

"I'm getting old. Time was when my fell of hair would rise at nothing, not even flies in the butter, but now – "

"That last visit to the ancestral acres is what did it."

"No, it's age – age and prosperity. I know now what it is to have broiled steak."

Mrs. Wetherford, seizing the moment, came down to do the honors. "You fellers ought to know my girl. Virginny, this is Forest Supervisor Redfield, and this is Ross Cavanagh, his forest ranger in this district. You ought to know each other. My girl's just back from school, and she don't think much of the Fork. It's a little too coarse for her."

Lee flushed under this introduction, and her distress was so evident that both men came to her rescue.

The older man bowed, and said: "I didn't know you had a daughter, Mrs. Wetherford," and Cavanagh, with a glance of admiration, added: "We've been wondering who you might be."

Lize went on: "I thought I'd got rid of her. She's been away now for about ten years. I don't know but it was a mistake – look's like she's grown a little too fine-haired for us doughies out here."

"So much the worse for us," replied Redfield.

This little dialogue gave the girl time to recover herself, but as Cavanagh watched the blush fade from her face, leaving it

cold and white, he sympathized with her – pitied her from the bottom of his heart. He perceived that he was a chance spectator of the first scene in a painful domestic drama – one that might easily become a tragedy. He wondered what the forces might be which had brought such a daughter to this sloven, this virago. To see a maid of this delicate bloom thrust into such a place as Lize Wetherford's "hotel" had the reputation of being roused indignation.

"When did you reach town?" he asked, and into his voice his admiration crept.

"Only last night."

"You find great changes here?"

"Not so great as in my mother. It's all – " She stopped abruptly, and he understood.

Lize being drawn back to her cash-register, Redfield turned to say: "My dear young lady, I don't suppose you remember me, but I knew you when you were a tot of five or six. I knew your father very well."

"Did you?" Her face lighted up.

"Yes, poor fellow, he went away from here rather under a cloud, you know."

"I remember a little of it. I was here when the shooting took place."

"So you were. Well, since then much has happened to us all," he explained to the ranger. "There wasn't room for a dashing young blood such as Ed Wetherford was in those days." He

turned to Lee. "He was no worse than the men on the other side – it was dog eat dog; but some way the people rather settled on him as a scapegoat. He was forced out, and your mother has borne the brunt of it since. Those were lawless days."

It was a painful subject, and Redfield's voice grew lower and more hesitant as he went on. Looking at this charming girl through the smoke of fried ham, with obscene insects buzzing about her fair head, made him feel for the thousandth time, and more keenly than ever before, the amazing combinations in American society. How could she be the issue of Edward and Eliza Wetherford?

More and more Lee Virginia's heart went out in trust toward these two men. Opposed to the malodorous, unshaven throng which filled the room, they seemed wondrously softened and sympathetic, and in the ranger's gaze was something else – something which made her troubles somehow less intolerable. She felt that he understood the difficult situation in which she found herself.

Redfield went on. "You find us horribly uncivilized after ten years' absence?"

"I find *this* uncivilised," she replied, with fierce intensity, looking around the room. Then, on the impulse, she added: "I can't stand it! I came here to live with my mother, but this is too – too horrible!"

"I understand your repulsion," replied Redfield. "A thousand times I repeat, apropos of this country, 'Where every prospect

pleases and only man is vile.'"

"Do you suppose it was as bad ten years ago?" she asked. "Was everything as dirty – as mean? Were the houses then as full of flies and smells?"

"I'm afraid they were. Of course, the country isn't all like this, and there are neat homes and gentle people in Sulphur; but most cattle-men are – as they've always been – a shiftless, happy-go-lucky lot at best – and some of them have been worse, as you know."

"I never dreamed of finding my mother in such a place," she went on. "I don't know what to do or say. She isn't well. I ought to stay and help her, and yet – oh, it is disheartening!"

Lize tapped Redfield on the shoulder. "Come over here, Reddy, if you've finished your breakfast; I want to talk with you."

Redfield rose and followed his landlady behind the counter, and there sat in earnest conversation while she made change. The tone in which her mother addressed the Supervisor, her action of touching him as one man lays hand upon another, was profoundly revealing to Lee Virginia. She revolted from it without realizing exactly what it meant; and feeling deeply but vaguely the forest ranger's sympathy, she asked:

"How *can* you endure this kind of life?"

"I can't, and I don't," he answered, cautiously, for they were being closely observed. "I am seldom in town; my dominion is more than a mile above this level. My cabin is nine thousand feet above the sea. It is clean and quiet up there."

"Are all the other restaurants in the village like this?"

"Worse. I come here because it is the best."

She rose. "I can't stand this air and these flies any longer. They're too disgusting."

He followed her into the other house, conscious of the dismay and bitterness which burst forth the instant they were alone. "What am I to do? She is my mother, but I've lost all sense of relationship to her. And these people – except you and Mr. Redfield – are all disgusting to me. It isn't because my mother is poor, it isn't because she's keeping boarders; it's something else." At this point her voice failed her.

The ranger, deeply moved, stood helplessly silent. What could he say? He knew a great deal better than she the essential depravity of her mother, and he felt keenly the cruelty of fate which had plunged a fine young spirit into this swamp of ill-smelling humanity.

"Let us go out into the air," he suggested, presently. "The mountain wind will do you good."

She followed him trustfully, and as she stepped from the squalor of the hotel into the splendor of the morning her head lifted. She drank the clear, crisp wind as one takes water in the desert.

"The air is clean, anyway," she said.

Cavanagh, to divert her, pointed away to the mountains. "There is my dominion. Up there I am sole ruler. No one can litter the earth with corruption or poison the streams."

She did not speak, but as she studied the ranger her face cleared. "It *is* beautiful up there."

He went on. "I hate all this scrap-heap quite as heartily as you do, but up there is sweetness and sanity. The streams are germless, and the forest cannot be devastated. That is why I am a ranger. I could not endure life in a town like this."

He turned up the street toward the high hill to the south, and she kept step with him. As she did not speak, he asked: "What did you expect to do out here?"

"I hoped to teach," she replied, her voice still choked with her emotion. "I expected to find the country much improved."

"And so it is; but it is still a long way from an Eastern State. Perhaps you will find the people less savage than they appear at first glance."

"It isn't the town or the people, it is my mother!" she burst forth again. "Tell me! A woman in the car yesterday accused my mother of selling whiskey unlawfully. Is this so? Tell me!"

She faced him resolutely, and perceiving that she could not be evaded, he made slow answer. "I don't *know* that she does, but I've heard it charged against her."

"Who made the charge?"

"One of the clergymen, and then it's common talk among the rough men of the town."

"Is that the worst they say of her? Be honest with me – I want to know the worst."

He was quite decisive as he said: "Yes, that is the worst."

She looked relieved. “I’m glad to hear you say so. I’ve been imagining all kinds of terrifying things.”

“Then, too, her bad health is some excuse for her housekeeping,” he added, eager to lessen the daughter’s humiliation, “and you must remember her associations are not those which breed scrupulous regard for the proprieties.”

“But she’s my mother!” wailed the girl, coming back to the central fact. “She has sent me money – she has been kind to me – what am I to do? She needs me, and yet the thought of staying here and facing her life frightens me.”

The rotten board walks, the low rookeries, the unshaven, blear-eyed men sitting on the thresholds of the saloons, the slattern squaws wandering abroad like bedraggled hens, made the girl stare with wonder and dismay. She had remembered the town street as a highway filled with splendid cavaliers, a list wherein heroic deeds were done with horse and pistol.

She recognized one of those “knights of the lariat” sitting in the sun, flabby, grizzled, and inert. Another was trying to mount his horse with a bottle in his hand. She recalled him perfectly. He had been her girlish ideal of manly beauty. Now here he was, old and mangy with drink at forty. In a most vivid and appealing sense he measured the change in her as well as the decay of the old-time cowboy. His incoherent salutation as his eyes fell upon her was like the final blasphemous word from the rear-guard of a savage tribe, and she watched him ride away reeling limply in his saddle as one watches a carrion-laden vulture take its flight.

She perceived in the ranger the man of the new order, and with this in her mind she said: "You don't belong here? You're not a Western man."

"Not in the sense of having been born here," he replied. "I am, in fact, a native of England, though I've lived nearly twenty years of my life in the States."

She glanced at his badge. "How did you come to be a ranger – what does it mean? It's all new to me."

"It is new to the West," he answered, smilingly, glad of a chance to turn her thought from her own personal griefs. "It has all come about since you went East. Uncle Sam has at last become provident, and is now 'conserving his resources.' I am one of his representatives with stewardship over some ninety thousand acres of territory – mostly forest."

She looked at him with eyes of changing light. "You don't talk like an Englishman, and yet you are not like the men out here."

"I shouldn't care to be like some of them," he answered. "My being here is quite logical. I went into the cattle business like many another, and I went broke. I served under Colonel Roosevelt in the Cuban War, and after my term was out, naturally drifted back. I love the wilderness and have some natural taste for forestry, and I can ride and pack a horse as well as most cowboys, hence my uniform. I'm not the best forest ranger in the service, I'll admit, but I fancy I'm a fair average."

"And that is your badge – the pine-tree?"

"Yes, and I am proud of it. Some of the fellows are not, but so

far as I am concerned I am glad to be known as a defender of the forest. A tree means much to me. I never mark one for felling without a sense of responsibility to the future."

Her questions came slowly, like those of a child. "Where do you live?"

"Directly up the South Fork, about twenty miles."

"What do you do?"

He smiled. "Not much. I ride the trails, guard the game, put out fires, scale lumber, burn brush, build bridges, herd cattle, count sheep, survey land, and a few other odd chores. It's supposed to be a soft snap, but I can't see it that way."

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes, for the larger part of the time. I have an assistant who is with me during part of the summer months. Mostly I am alone. However, I am supposed to keep open house, and I catch a visitor now and then."

They were both more at ease now, and her unaffected interest pleased him.

She went on, steadily: "Don't you get very lonely?"

"In winter, sometimes; in summer I'm too busy to get lonely. In the fire season I'm in the saddle every day, and sometimes all night."

"Who cooks for you?"

"I do. That's part of a ranger's job. We have no 'servant problem' to contend with."

"Do you expect to do this always?"

He smiled again. “There you touch my secret spring. I have the hope of being Chief Forester some time – I mean we all have the prospect of promotion to sustain us. The service is so new that any one with even a knowledge of forestry is in demand; by and by real foresters will arise.”

She returned abruptly to her own problem. “I dread to go back to my mother, but I must. Oh, how I hate that hotel! I loathe the flies, the smells, the people that eat there, the waiters – everything!” She shuddered.

“Many of the evils you mention could be reformed – except, of course, some of the people who come to eat. I fear several of them have gone beyond reformation.”

As they started back down the street she saw the motor-stage just leaving the door of the office. “That settles one question,” she said. “I can’t get away till to-morrow.”

“Where would you go if you broke camp – back to the East?”

“No; my mother thinks there is a place for me in Sulphur City.”

“Your case interests me deeply. I wish I could advise you to stay, but this is a rough town for a girl like you. Why don’t you talk the problem over with the Supervisor?” His voice became firmer. “Mrs. Redfield is the very one to help you.”

“Where does she live?”

“Their ranch lies just above Sulphur, at the mouth of the Canon. May I tell him what you’ve told me? He’s a good sort, is Redfield – much better able to advise than I am.”

Cavanagh found himself enjoying the confidence of this girl so strangely thrown into his care, and the curious comment of the people in the street did not disturb him, except as it bore upon his companion's position in the town.

At the door of the hotel some half-a-dozen men were clustered. As the young couple approached they gave way, but a short, powerful man, whom Lee Virginia recognized as Gregg the sheepman, called to the ranger:

"I want to see you before you leave town, Mr. Ranger."

"Very well. I shall be here all the forenoon," answered Cavanagh, in the tone of a man accepting a challenge; then, turning to the girl, he said, earnestly: "I want to help you. I shall be here for lunch, and meanwhile I wish you would take Redfield into your confidence. He's a wise old boy, and everybody knows him. No one doubts his motives; besides, he has a family, and is rich and unhurried. Would you like me to talk with him?"

"If you will. I want to do right – indeed I do."

"I'm sure of that," he said, with eyes upon her flushed and quivering face. "There's a way out, believe me."

They parted on the little porch of the hotel, and her eyes followed his upright figure till he entered one of the shops. He had precisely the look and bearing of a young lieutenant in the regular army, and she wondered what Gregg's demand meant. In his voice was both menace and contempt.

She returned to her own room, strangely heartened by her talk with the ranger. "If I stay here another night this room must

be cleaned," she decided, and approached the bed as though it harbored venomous reptiles. "This is one of the things that must be reformed," she decided, harking back to the ranger's quiet remark.

She was still pondering ways and means of making the room habitable when her mother came in.

"How'd you sleep last night?"

Lee Virginia could not bring herself to lie. "Not very well," she admitted.

"Neither did I. Fact of the matter is your coming fairly upset me. I've been kind o' used up for three months. I don't know what ails me. I'd ought to go up to Sulphur to see a doctor, but there don't seem to be any free time. I 'pear to have lost my grip. Food don't give me any strength. I saw you talking with Ross Cavanagh. There's a man – and Reddy. Reddy is what you may call a fancy rancher – goes in for alfalfy and fruit, and all that. He isn't in the forest service for the pay or for graft. He's got a regular palace up there above Sulphur – hot and cold water all through the house, a furnace in the cellar, and two bath-rooms, so they tell me; I never was in the place. Well, I must go back – I can't trust them girls a minute." She turned with a groan of pain. "'Pears like every joint in me is a-creakin' to-day."

"Can't I take your place?" asked Lee Virginia, pity deepening in her heart as she caught the look of suffering on her mother's face.

"No; you better keep out o' the caffy. It ain't a fit place for

you. Fact is, I weren't expecting anything so fine as you are. I laid awake till three o'clock last night figurin' on what to do. I reckon you'd better go back and give this outfit up as a bad job. I used to tell Ed you didn't belong to neither of us, and you don't. I can't see where you *did* come from – anyhow, I don't want the responsibility of havin' you here. Why, you'll have half the men in the county hitchin' to my corral – and the males out here are a fierce lot o' brutes." She studied the girl again, finding her so dainty, so far above herself, that she added: "It would be a cruel shame for me to keep you here, with all these he-wolves roamin' around. You're too good to be meat for any of them. You just plan to pack up and pull out to-morrow."

She went out with a dragging step that softened the girl's heart. It was true there was little of real affection between them. Her memories of Eliza up to this moment had been rather mixed. As a child she had seldom been in her arms, and she had always been a little afraid of the bold, bright, handsome creature who rode horses and shot pistols like a man. It was hard to relate the Eliza Wetherford of those days with this flabby, limping old woman, and yet her daughter came nearer to loving her at this moment than at any time since her fifth year.

III
LEE VIRGINIA WAGES WAR

In truth, Lize had risen that morning intending "to whirl in and clean up the house," being suddenly conscious to some degree of the dirt and disorder around her, but she found herself physically unequal to the task. Her brain seemed misted, and her food had been a source of keen pain to her. Hence, after a few half-hearted orders, she had settled into her broad chair behind the counter and there remained, brooding over her maternal responsibilities.

She gave sharp answers to all the men who came up to ask after her daughter, and to one who remarked on the girl's good looks, and demanded an introduction, she said: "Get along! I'd as soon introduce her to a goat. Now you fellers want to understand I'll kill the man that sets out to fool with my girl, I tell you that!"

While yet Lee Virginia was wondering how to begin the day's work, some one knocked on her door, and in answer to her invitation a woman stepped in – a thin blond hag with a weak smile and watery blue eyes. "Is this little Lee Virginy?" she asked.

The girl rose. "Yes."

"Well, howdy!" She extended her hand, and Lee took it. "My name's Jackson – Mrs. Orlando Jackson. I knew yore pa and you before 'the war.'"

Lee Virginia dimly recalled such a family, and asked: "Where

do you live?"

"We hole up down here on a ranch about twenty miles – stayed with yore ma last night – thought I'd jest nacherly look in and say howdy. Are ye back fer to stay?"

"No, I don't think so. Will you sit down?"

Mrs. Jackson took a seat. "Come back to see how yore ma was, I reckon? Found her pretty porely, didn't ye?" She lowered her voice. "I think she's got cancer of the stummick – now that's my guess."

Virginia started. "What makes you think so?"

"Well, I knew a woman who went just that way. Had that same flabby, funny look – and that same distress after eatin', I told her this mornin' she'd better go up to Sulphur and see that new doctor. You see, yore ma has always been a reckless kind of a critter – more like a man than a woman, God knows – an' how she ever got a girl like you I don't fairly understand. I reckon you must be what the breedin' men call 'a throw-back,' for yore pa wa'n't much to brag of, 'ceptin' for looks – he certainly was good-lookin'. He used to sober down when he got where you was; but my – good God! – weren't they a pair to draw to? I've heard 'Lando tell tales of yore ma's doin's that would 'fright ye. Not that she fooled with men," she hastened to say. "Lord, no! For her the sun rose and set in Ed Wetherford. She'd leave you any day, and go on the round-up with him. It nigh about broke her up in business when Ed hit the far-away trail."

The girl perceived that in her visitor she had one of these

self-oiled human talking-machines "with tongue hung in the middle," as the old saying goes, and she was dimly conscious of having heard her many times before. "You don't look very well yourself," she said.

"Me? Oh, I'm like one o' these Injun dawgs – can't kill me. I've been on the range so long I'm tough as dried beef. It's a fierce old place for a woman – or it was before 'the war' – since then it's kind o' softened down a hair."

"What do you mean by 'the war'?"

"Why, you remember the rustler war? We date everything out here from that year. You was here, for I saw ye – a slob of a child."

"Oh!" exclaimed Virginia. "I understand now. Yes, I was here. I saw my father at the head of the cowboys."

"They weren't cowboys; they were hired killers from Texas. That's what let yore pa out o' the State. He were on the wrong side, and if it hadn't 'a' been for the regular soldiers he'd 'a' been wiped out right hyer. As it was he had to skip the range, and hain't never been back. I don't s'pose folks will lay it up agin you – bein' a girl – but they couldn't no *son* of Ed Wetherford come back here and settle, not for a minute. Why, yore ma has had to bluff the whole county a'most – not that *I* lay anything up agin her. I tell folks she was that bewitched with Ed she couldn't see things any way but his way. She fought to save his ranch and stawk and – but hell! she couldn't do nothin' – and then to have him go back on her the way he did – slip out 'twixt two days, and never write;

that just about shot her to pieces. I never could understand that in Ed, he 'peared so mortally fond of you and of her, too. He sure was fond of you!" She shook her head. "No, can't anybody make me believe Ed Wetherford is alive."

Lee Virginia started. "Who says he's alive?"

"Now don't get excited, girl. He ain't alive; but yet folks say we don't *know* he's dead. He jest dropped out so far as yore ma is concerned, and so far as the county is concerned; but some thought you was with him in the East."

The girl was now aware that her visitor was hoping to gain some further information, and so curtly answered: "I've never seen my father since that night the soldiers came and took him away to the fort. And my mother told me he died down in Texas."

Mrs. Jackson seemed a little disappointed, but she smoothed the dress over her sharp knees, and continued: "Right there the good old days ended for yore ma – and for us. The cattle business has been steadily on the chute – that is, the free-range business. I saw it comin', an' I says to Jackson, 'Camp on some river-bottom and chuck in the alfalfy,' I says. An' that's what we did. We got a little bunch o' cattle up in the park – Uncle Sam's man is lookin' after 'em." She grinned. "Jackson kicked at the fee, but I says: 'Twenty cents a head is cheap pasture. We're lucky to get any grass at all, now that everybody's goin' in for sheep. 'Pears like the sheepmen air gettin' bolder and bolder in this free-range graft, and I'm a-bettin' on trouble.'" She rose. "Well, I'm glad to 've had a word with ye; but you hear me: yore ma has got to have

doctor's help, or she's a-goin' to fall down some day soon."

Every word the woman uttered, every tone of her drawling voice, put Lee Virginia back into the past. She heard again the swift gallop of hooves, saw once more the long line of armed ranchers, and felt the hush of fear that lay over the little town on that fateful day. The situation became clearer in her mind. She recalled vividly the words of astonishment and hate with which the women had greeted her mother on the morning when the news came that Edward Wetherford was among the invading cattle-barons – was, indeed, one of the leaders.

In Philadelphia the Rocky Mountain States were synonyms of picturesque lawlessness, the theatre of reckless romance, and Virginia Wetherford, loyal daughter of the West, had defended it; but in the coarse phrase of this lean rancheress was pictured a land of border warfare as ruthless as that which marked the Scotland of Rob Roy.

Commonplace as the little town looked at the moment, it had been the scene of many a desperate encounter, as the girl herself could testify, for she had seen more than one man killed therein. Some way the hideousness of these scenes had never shown itself to her – perhaps because she had been a child at the time, and had thrilled to the delicious excitement of it; but now, as she imagined it all happening again before her eyes, she shivered with horror. How monstrous, how impossible those killings now seemed!

Then her mind came back to her mother's ailment. Eliza Wetherford had never been one to complain, and her groans

meant real suffering.

Her mind resolved upon one thing. "She must see a doctor," she decided. And with this in mind she reentered the café, where Lize was again in violent altercation with a waitress.

"Mother," called Lee, "I want to see you."

With a parting volley of vituperation, Mrs. Wetherford followed her daughter back into the lodging-house.

"Mother," the girl began, facing her and speaking firmly, "you must go to Sulphur City and see a doctor. I'll stay here and look after the business."

Mrs. Wetherford perceived in her daughter's attitude and voice something decisive and powerful. She sank into a chair, and regarded her with intent gaze. "Hett Jackson's been gabblin' to you," she declared. "Hett knows more fool things that ain't so than any old heffer I know. She said I was about all in, didn't she? Prophesied I'd fall down and stay? I know her."

Lee Virginia remained firm. "I'm not going by what she said, I've got eyes of my own. You need help, and if the doctor here can't help you, you must go to Sulphur or to Kansas City. I can run the boarding-house till you get back."

Eliza eyed her curiously. "Don't you go to countin' on this 'chivalry of the West' which story-writers put into books. These men out here will eat you up if you don't watch out. I wouldn't dare to leave you here alone. No, what I'll do is sell the place, if I can, and both of us get out."

"But you need a doctor this minute."

"I'll be all right in a little while; I'm always the worst for an hour or two after I eat. This little squirt of a local doctor gave me some dope to ease that pain, but I've got my doubts – I don't want any morphine habit in mine. No, daughter Virginny, it's mighty white of you to offer, but you don't know what you're up against when you contract to step into my shoes."

Visions of reforming methods about the house passed through the girl's mind. "There must be something I can do. Why don't you have the doctor come down here?"

"I might do that if I get any worse, but I hate to have you stay in the house another night. It's only fit for these goats of cowboys and women like Hett Jackson. Did the bugs eat you last night?"

Virginia flushed. "Yes."

Eliza's face fell. "I was afraid of that. You can't keep 'em out. The cowboys bring 'em in by the quart."

"They can be destroyed – and the flies, too, can't they?"

"When you've bucked flies and bugs as long as I have, you'll be less 'peart about it. I don't care a hoot in Hades till somebody like you or Reddy or Ross comes along. Most of the men that camp with me are like Injuns, anyway – they wouldn't feel natural without bugs a ticklin' 'em. No, child, you get ready and pull out on the Sulphur stage to-morrow. I'll pay your way back to Philadelphy."

"I can't leave you now, mother. Now that I know you're ill, I'm going to stay and take care of you."

Lize rose. "See here, girl, don't you go to idealizin' me,

neither. I'm what the boys call an old battle-axe. I've been through the whole war. I'm able to feed myself and pay your board besides. Just you find some decent boarding-place in Sulphur, and I'll see that you have ten dollars a week to live on, just because you're a Wetherford."

"But I'm your daughter!"

Again Eliza fixed a musing look upon her. "I reckon if the truth was known your aunt Celia was nigher to being your mother than I ever was. They always said you was all Wetherford, and I reckon they were right. I always liked men better than babies. So long as I had your father, you didn't count – now that's the God's truth. And I didn't intend that you should ever come back here. I urged you to stay – you know that."

Lee Virginia imagined all this to be a savage self-accusation which sprang from long self-bereavement, and yet there was something terrifying in its brutal frankness. She stood in silence till her mother left the room, then went to her own chamber with a painful knot in her throat. What could she do with elemental savagery of this sort?

The knowledge that she must spend another night in the bed led her to active measures of reform. With disgustful desperation, she emptied the room and swept it as with fire and sword. Her change of mind, from the passive to the active state, relieved and stimulated her, and she hurried from one needed reform to another. She drew others into the vortex. She inspired the chambermaid to unwilling yet amazing effort, and the lodging-

house endured such a blast from the besom that it stood in open-windowed astonishment uttering dust like the breath of a dragon. Having swept and garnished the bed-chambers, Virginia moved on the dining-room. As the ranger had said, this, too, could be reformed.

Unheeding her mother's protests, she organized the giggling waiters into a warring party, and advanced upon the flies. By hissing and shooing, and the flutter of newspapers, they drove the enemy before them, and a carpenter was called in to mend screen doors and windows, thus preventing their return. New shades were hung to darken the room, and new table-cloths purchased to replace the old ones, and the kitchen had such a cleaning as it had not known before in five years.

In this work the time passed swiftly, and when Redfield and Cavanagh came again to lunch they exclaimed in astonishment – as, indeed, every one did.

"How's this?" queried Cavanagh, humorously. "Has the place 'changed hands?""

Lize was but grimly responsive. "Seem's like it has."

"I hope the price has not gone up?"

"Not yet."

Redfield asked: "Who's responsible for this – your new daughter?"

"You've hit it. She's started right in to polish us all up to city standards."

"We need it," commented Cavanagh, in admiration of the

girl's prompt action. "This room is almost civilized, still we'll sort o' miss the flies."

Lize apologized. "Well, you know a feller gits kind o' run down like a clock, and has to have some outsider wind him up now and again. First I was mad, then I was scared, but now I'm cheerin' the girl on. She can run the whole blame outfit if she's a mind to – even if I go broke for it. The work she got out o' them slatter-heels of girls is a God's wonder."

Ross looked round for Virginia, but could not find her. She had seen him come in, and was out in the kitchen doing what she could to have his food brought in and properly served.

Redfield reassured the perturbed proprietor of "the joint." "No fear of going broke, madam – quite the contrary. A few little touches like this, and you'll be obliged to tear down and build bigger. I don't believe I'd like to see your daughter run this eating-house as a permanent job, but if she starts in I'm sure she'll make a success of it."

Lee Virginia came in flushed and self-conscious, but far lighter of spirit than at breakfast; and stood beside the table while the waitress *laid* the dishes before her guests with elaborate assumption of grace and design. Hitherto she had bumped them down with a slash of slangy comment. The change was quite as wonderful as the absence of the flies.

"Do we owe these happy reforms to you?" asked Cavanagh, admiring Virginia's neat dress and glowing cheeks.

"Partly," she answered. "I was desperate. I had to do

something, so I took to ordering people around."

"I understand," he said. "Won't you sit at our table again?"

"Please do," said Redfield. "I want to talk with you."

She took a seat – a little hesitantly. "You see, I studied Domestic Science at school, and I've never had a chance to apply it before."

"Here's your opportunity," Redfield assured her. "My respect for the science of domestics is growing – I marvel to think what another week will bring forth. I think I'll have to come down again just to observe the improvement in the place."

"It can't last," Lize interjected. "She'll catch the Western habits – she'll sag, same as we all do."

"No she won't," declared Ross, with intent to encourage her. "If you give her a free hand, I predict she'll make your place the wonder and boast of the county-side."

"When do you go back to the mountains?" Lee Virginia asked, a little later.

"Immediately after my luncheon," he replied.

She experienced a pang of regret, and could not help showing it a little. "Your talk helped me," she said; "I've decided to stay, and be of use to my mother."

Redfield overheard this, and turned toward her.

"This is a rough school for you, Lee Virginia, and I should dislike seeing you settle down to it for life: but it can't hurt you if you are what I think you are. Nothing can soil or mar the mind that wills for good. I want Mrs. Redfield to know you; I'm sure

her advice will be helpful. I hope you'll come up and see us if you decide to settle in Sulphur – or if you don't."

"I should like to do so," she said, touched by the tone as well as by the words of his invitation.

"Redfield's house is one of the few completely civilized homes in the State," put in Cavanagh. "When I get so weary of cuss-words and poaching and graft that I can't live without killing some one, I go down to Elk Lodge and smoke and read the Supervisor's London and Paris weeklies and recover my tone."

Redfield smiled. "When I get weak-kneed or careless in the service and feel my self-respect slipping away, I go up to Ross's cabin and talk with a man who represents the impersonal, even-handed justice of the Federal law."

Cavanagh laughed. "There! Having handed each other reciprocal bouquets, we can now tell Miss Wetherford the truth. Each of us thinks very well of himself, and we're both believers in the New West."

"What do you mean by the New West?" asked the girl.

"Well, the work you've been doing here this morning is a part of it," answered Redfield. "It's a kind of housecleaning. The Old West was picturesque and, in a way, manly and fine – certain phases of it were heroic – and I hate to see it all pass, but some of us began to realize that it was not all poetry. The plain truth is my companions for over twenty years were lawless ruffians, and the cattle business as we practiced it in those days was founded on selfishness and defended at the mouth of the pistol. We were all

pensioners on Uncle Sam, and fighting to keep the other fellow off from having a share of his bounty. It was all wasteful, half-savage. We didn't want settlement, we didn't want law, we didn't want a State. We wanted free range. We were a line of pirates from beginning to end, and we're not wholly, reformed yet."

He was talking to the whole table now, for all were listening. No other man on the range could say these things with the same authority, for Hugh Redfield was known all over the State as a man who had been one of the best riders and ropers in his outfit – one who had started in as a common hand at herding, and who had been entirely through "the war."

Lee Virginia listened with a stirring of the blood. Her recollections of the range were all of the heroic. She recalled the few times when she was permitted to go on the round-up, and to witness the breaking of new horses, and the swiftness, grace, and reckless bravery of the riders, the moan and surge of herds, the sweep of horsemen, came back and filled her mind with large and free and splendid pictures. And now it was passing – or past!

Some one at the table accused Redfield of being more of a town-site boomer than a cattle-man.

He was quite unmoved by this charge. "The town-site boomer at least believes in progress. He does not go so far as to shut out settlement. If a neat and tidy village or a well-ordered farmstead is not considered superior to a cattle-ranch littered with bones and tin cans, or better than even a cow-town whose main industry is whiskey-selling, then all civilized progress is a delusion. When

I was a youngster these considerations didn't trouble me. I liked the cowboy life and the careless method of the plains, but I've some girls growing up now, and I begin to see the whole business in a new light. I don't care to have my children live the life I've lived. Besides, what right have we to stand in the way of a community's growth? Suppose the new life *is* less picturesque than the old? We don't like to leave behind us the pleasures and sports of boyhood; but we grow up, nevertheless. I'm far more loyal to the State as Forest Supervisor than I was when I was riding with the cattle-men to scare up the nester."

He uttered all this quite calmly, but his ease of manner, his absolute disregard of consequences, joined with his wealth and culture, gave his words great weight and power. No one was ready with an answer but Lize, who called out, with mocking accent: "Reddy, you're too good for the Forest Service, you'd ought 'o be our next Governor."

This was a centre shot. Redfield flushed, and Cavanagh laughed. "Mr. Supervisor, you are discovered!"

Redfield recovered himself. "I should like to be Governor of this State for about four years, but I'm likelier to be lynched for being in command of twenty 'Cossacks.'"

At this moment Sam Gregg entered the room, followed by a young man in an English riding-suit. Seeing that "the star-boarder table" offered a couple of seats, they pointed that way. Sam was plainly in war-like frame of mind, and slammed his sombrero on its nail with the action of a man beating an

adversary.

"That is Sam Gregg and his son Joe – used to be ranch cattle-man, now one of our biggest sheepmen," Cavanagh explained. "He's bucking the cattle-men now."

Lee Virginia studied young Gregg with interest, for his dress was that of a man to whom money came easy, and his face was handsome, though rather fat and sullen. In truth, he had been brought into the room by his father to see "Lize Wetherford's girl," and his eyes at once sought and found her. A look of surprise and pleasure at once lit his face.

Gregg was sullen because of his interview with Cavanagh, which had been in the nature of a grapple; and in the light of what Redfield had said, Lee Virginia was able to perceive in these two men a struggle for supremacy. Gregg was the greedy West checked and restrained by the law.

Every man in the room knew that Gregg was a bitter opponent of the Forest Service, and that he "had it in" for the ranger; and some of them knew that he was throwing more sheep into the forest than his permits allowed, and that a clash with Redfield was sure to come. It was just like the burly old Irishman to go straight to the table where his adversary sat.

Virginia's eyes fell before the gaze of these two men, for they had none of the shyness or nothing of the indirection of the ruder men she had met. They expressed something which angered her, though she could not have told precisely why.

Redfield did not soften his words on Gregg's account; on the

contrary he made them still more cutting and to the line.

"The mere fact that I live near the open range or a national forest does not give me any *rights* in the range or forest," he was saying, as Gregg took his seat. "I enjoy the *privilege* of these Government grazing grounds, and I ought to be perfectly willing to pay the fee. These forests are the property of the whole nation; they are public lands, and should yield a revenue to the whole nation. It is silly to expect the Government to go on enriching a few of us stockmen at the expense of others. I see this, and I accept the change."

"After you've got rich at it," said Gregg.

"Well, haven't you?" retorted Redfield. "Are you so greedy that nothing will stop you?"

Lize threw in a wise word. "The sporting-houses of Kansas City and Chicago keep old Sam poor."

A roar of laughter followed this remark, and Gregg was stumped for a moment; but the son grinned appreciatively. "Now be good!"

Cavanagh turned to Virginia in haste to shield her from all that lay behind and beneath this sally of the older and deeply experienced woman. "The Supervisor is willing to yield a point – he knows what the New West will bring."

Gregg growled out: "I'm not letting any of my rights slip."

The girl was troubled by the war-light which she saw in the faces of the men about her, and vague memories of the words and stories she had overchanced to hear in her childhood came back

to her mind – hints of the drunken orgies of the cowboys who went to the city with cattle, and the terrifying suggestion of their attitude toward all womankind. She set Cavanagh and his chief quite apart from all the others in the room, and at first felt that in young Gregg was another man of education and right living – but in this she was misled.

Lize had confidence enough in the ranger to throw in another malicious word. "Ross, old Bullfrog came down here to chase you up a tree – so he said. Did he do it?"

Gregg looked ugly. "I'm not done with this business."

She turned to Ross. "Don't let him scare you – his beller is a whole lot worse than his bite."

This provoked another laugh, and Gregg was furious – all the more so that his son joined in. "I'll have your head, Mr. Supervisor; I'll carry my fight to the Secretary."

"Very well," returned Redfield, "carry it to the President if you wish. I simply repeat that your sheep must correspond to your permit, and if you don't send up and remove the extra number I will do it myself. I don't make the rules of the department. My job is to carry them out."

By this time every person in the room was tense with interest. They all knew Gregg and his imperious methods. He was famous for saying once (when in his cup): "I always thought sheepmen were blankety blank sons of guns, and now I'm one of 'em I *know* they are." Some of the cattle-men in the room had suffered from his greed, and while they were not partisans of the Supervisor

they were glad to see him face his opponent fearlessly.

Lize delivered a parting blow. "Bullfrog, you and me are old-timers. We're on the losing side. We belong to the 'good old days' when the Fork was 'a man's town,' and to be 'shot up' once a week kept us in news. But them times are past. You can't run the range that way any more. Why, man, you'll have to buy and fence your own pasture in a few years more, or else pay rent same as I do. You stockmen kick like steers over paying a few old cents a head for five months' range; you'll be mighty glad to pay a dollar one o' these days. Take your medicine – that's my advice." And she went back to her cash-drawer.

Redfield's voice was cuttingly contemptuous as he said quite calmly: "You're all kinds of asses, you sheepmen. You ought to pay the fee for your cattle with secret joy. So long as you can get your stock pastured (and in effect guarded) by the Government from June to November for twenty cents, or even fifty cents, per head you're in luck. Mrs. Wetherford is right: we've all been educated in a bad school. Uncle Sam has been too bloomin' lazy to keep any supervision over his public lands. He's permitted us grass pirates to fight and lynch and burn one another on the high range (to which neither of us had any right), holding back the real user of the land – the farmer. We've played the part of selfish and greedy gluttons so long that we fancy our privileges have turned into rights. Having grown rich on free range, you're now fighting the Forest Service because it is disposed to make you pay for what has been a gratuity. I'm a hog, Gregg, but I'm not a fool. I

see the course of empire, and I'm getting into line."

Gregg was silenced, but not convinced. "It's a long lane that has no turn," he growled.

Redfield resumed, in impersonal heat. "The cow-man was conceived in anarchy and educated in murder. Whatever romantic notions I may have had of the plains twenty-five years ago, they are lost to me now. The free-range stock-owner has no country and no God; nothing but a range that isn't his, and damned bad manners – begging pardon, Miss Wetherford. The sooner he dies the better for the State. He's a dirty, wasteful sloven, content to eat canned beans and drink canned milk in his rotten bad coffee; and nobody but an old crank like myself has the grace to stand up and tell the truth about him."

Cavanagh smiled. "And you wouldn't, if you weren't a man of independent means, and known to be one of the most experienced cow-punchers in the county. I've no fight with men like Gregg; all is they've got to conform to the rules of the service."

Gregg burst out: "You think you're the whole United States army! Who gives you all the authority?"

"Congress and the President."

"There's nothing in that bill to warrant these petty tyrannies of yours."

"What you call tyrannies I call defending the public domain," replied Redfield. "If I had my way, I'd give my rangers the power of the Canadian mounted police. Is there any other State in

this nation where the roping of sheep-herders and the wholesale butchery of sheep would be permitted? From the very first the public lands of this State have been a refuge for the criminal – a lawless no-man's land; but now, thanks to Roosevelt and the Chief Forester, we at least have a force of men on the spot to see that some semblance of law and order is maintained. You fellows may protest and run to Washington, and you may send your paid representatives there, but you're sure to lose. As free-range monopolists you are cumberers of the earth, and all you represent must pass, before this State can be anything but the byword it now is. I didn't feel this so keenly ten years ago, but with a bunch of children growing up my vision has grown clearer. The picturesque West must give way to the civilized West, and the war of sheepmen and cattle-men must stop."

The whole dining-room was still as he finished, and Lee Virginia, with a girl's vague comprehension of the man's world, apprehended in Redfield's speech a large and daring purpose.

Gregg sneered. "Perhaps you intend to run for Congress on that line of talk."

Redfield's voice was placid. "At any rate, I intend to represent the policy that will change this State from the sparsely settled battle-ground of a lot of mounted hobos to a State with an honorable place among the other commonwealths. If this be treason, make the most of it."

Cavanagh was disturbed; for while he felt the truth of his chief's words, he was in doubt as to the policy of uttering them.

It was evident to Virginia that the cow-men, as well as Gregg, were nearly all against the prophet of the future, and she was filled with a sense of having arrived on the scene just as the curtain to a stern and purposeful drama was being raised. With her recollections of the savage days of old, it seemed as if Redfield, by his bold words, had placed his life in danger.

Cavanagh rose. "I must be going," he said, with a smile.

Again the pang of loss touched her heart. "When will you come again?" she asked, in a low voice.

"It is hard to say. A ranger's place is in the forest. I am very seldom in town. Just now the danger of fires is great, and I am very uneasy. I may not be down again for a month."

The table was empty now, and they were standing in comparative isolation looking into each other's eyes in silence. At last she murmured: "You've helped me. I'm going to stay – a little while, anyway, and do what I can – "

"I'm sorry I can't be of actual service, but I am a soldier with a work to do. Even if I were here, I could not help you as regards the townspeople – they all hate me quite cordially; but Redfield, and especially Mrs. Redfield, can be of greater aid and comfort. He's quite often here, and when you are lonely and discouraged let him take you up to Elk Lodge."

"I've been working all the morning to make this room decent. It was rather fun. Don't you think it helped?"

"I saw the mark of your hand the moment I entered the door," he earnestly replied. "I'm not one that laughs at the small field of

woman's work. If you make this little hotel clean and homelike, you'll be doing a very considerable work in bringing about the New West which the Supervisor is spouting about." He extended his hand, and as she took it he thrilled to the soft strength of it. "Till next time," he said, "good luck!"

She watched him go with a feeling of pain – as if in his going she were losing her best friend and most valiant protector.

IV
VIRGINIA TAKES ANOTHER MOTOR RIDE

Lee Virginia's efforts to refine the little hotel produced an amazing change in Eliza Wetherford's affairs. The dining-room swarmed with those seeking food, and as the news of the girl's beauty went out upon the range, the cowboys sought excuse to ride in and get a square meal and a glimpse of the "Queen" whose hand had witched "the old shack" into a marvel of cleanliness.

Say what you will, beauty is a sovereign appeal. These men, unspeakably profane, cruel, and obscene in their saddle-talk, were awed by the fresh linen, the burnished glass, and the well-ordered tables which they found in place of the flies, the dirt, and the disorder of aforetime. "It's worth a day's ride just to see that girl for a minute," declared one enthusiast.

They did not all use the napkins, but they enjoyed having them there beside their plates, and the subdued light, the freedom from insects impressed them almost to decorum. They entered with awe, avid for a word with "Lize Wetherford's girl." Generally they failed of so much as a glance at her, for she kept away from the dining-room at meal-time.

Lee Virginia was fully aware of this male curiosity, and vaguely conscious of the merciless light which shone in the

eyes of some of them (men like Gregg), who went about their game with the shameless directness of the brute. She had begun to understand, too, that her mother's reputation was a barrier between the better class of folk and herself; but as they came now and again to take a meal, they permitted themselves a word in her praise, which she resented. "I don't want their friendship *now*," she declared, bitterly.

As she gained courage to look about her, she began to be interested in some of her coatless, collarless boarders on account of their extraordinary history. There was Brady, the old government scout, retired on a pension, who was accustomed to sit for hours on the porch, gazing away over the northern plains – never toward the mountains – as if he watched for bear or bison, or for the files of hostile red hunters – though in reality there was nothing to see but the stage, coming and going, or a bunch of cowboys galloping into town. Nevertheless, every cloud of dust was to him diversion, and he appeared to dream, like a captive eagle, bedraggled, spiritless, but with an inner spark of memory burning deep in his dim blue eyes.

Then there was an old miner, distressingly filthy, who hobbled to his meals on feet that had been frozen into clubs. He had a little gold loaned at interest, and on this he lived in tragic parsimony. He and the old scout sat much together, usually without speech (each knew to the last word the other's stories), as if they recognized each other's utter loneliness.

Sifton, the old remittance man, had been born to a higher

culture, therefore was his degradation the deeper. His poverty was due to his weakness. Virginia was especially drawn toward him by reason of his inalienable politeness and his well-chosen words. He was always the gentleman – no matter how frayed his clothing.

So far as the younger men were concerned, she saw little to admire and much to hate. They were crude and uninteresting rowdies for the most part. She was put upon her defence by their glances, and she came to dread walking along the street, so open and coarse were their words of praise. She felt dishonored by the glances which her feet drew after her, and she always walked swiftly to and from the store or the post-office.

Few of these loafers had the courage to stand on their feet and court her favor, but there was one who speedily became her chief persecutor. This was Neill Ballard, celebrated (and made impudent) by two years' travel with a Wild West show. He was tall, lean, angular, and freckled, but his horsemanship was marvellous and his skill with the rope magical. His special glory consisted in a complicated whirling of the lariat. In his hand the limp, inert cord took on life, grace, charm. It hung in the air or ran in rhythmic waves about him, rising, falling, expanding, diminishing, as if controlled by some agency other than a man's hand, and its gyrations had won much applause in the Eastern cities, where such skill is expected of the cowboys.

He had lost his engagement by reason of a drunken brawl, and he was now living with his sister, the wife of a small rancher

near by. He was vain, lazy, and unspeakably corrupt, full of open boasting of his exploits in the drinking-dens of the East. No sooner did he fix eyes upon Virginia than he marked her for his special prey. He had the depraved heart of the herder and the insolent confidence of the hoodlum, and something of this the girl perceived. She despised the other men, but she feared this one, and quite justly, for he was capable of assaulting and binding her with his rope, as he had once done with a Shoshone squaw.

The Greggs, father and son, were in open rivalry for Lee also, but in different ways. The older man, who had already been married several times, was disposed to buy her hand in what he called "honorable wedlock," but the son, at heart a libertine, approached her as one who despised the West, and who, being kept in the beastly country by duty to a parent, was ready to amuse himself at any one's expense. He had no purpose in life but to feed his body and escape toil.

There are women to whom all this warfare would have been diverting, but it was not so to Lee. Her sense of responsibility was too keen. It was both a torture and a shame. The chivalry of the plains, of which she had read so much – and which she supposed she remembered – was gone. She doubted if it had ever existed among these centaurs. Why should it inhere in ignorant, brutal plainsmen any more than in ignorant, brutal factory hands?

There came to her, now and again, gentle old ranchers – "grangers," they would be called – and shy boys from the farms, but for the most part the men she saw embittered her, and she

kept out of their sight as much as possible. Her keenest pleasures, almost her only pleasures, lay in the occasional brief visits of the ranger, as he rode in for his mail.

Lize perceived all these attacks on her daughter, and was infuriated by them. She snapped and snarled like a tigress leading her half-grown kitten through a throng of leopards. Her brows were knotted with care as well as with pain, and she incessantly urged Virginia to go back to Sulphur. "I'll send you money to pay your board till you strike a job." But to this the girl would not agree; and the business, by reason of her presence, went on increasing from day to day.

To Redfield Lize one day confessed her pain. "I ought to send for that doctor up there, but the plain truth is I'm afraid of him. I don't want to know what's the matter of me. It's his job to tell me I'm sick and I'm scared of his verdict."

"Nonsense," he replied; "you can't afford to put off getting him much longer. I'm going back to-night, but I'll be over again to-morrow. Why don't you let me bring him down? It will save you twelve dollars. And, by the way, suppose you let me take Lee Virginia home with me? She looks a bit depressed; an outing will do her good. She's taken hold here wonderfully."

"Hasn't she! But I should have sent her away the very first night. I'm getting to depend on her. I'm plumb foolish about her now – can't let her out of my sight; and yet I'm off my feed worryin' over her. Gregg is getting dangerous – you can't fool me when it comes to men. Curse 'em, they're all alike – beasts,

every cussed one of them. I won't have my girl mistreated, I tell you that! I'm not fit to be her mother, now that's the God's truth, Reddy, and this rotten little back-country cow-town is no place for her. But what can I do? She won't leave me so long as I'm sick, and every day ties her closer to me. I don't know what I'd do without her. If I'm goin' to die I want her by me when I take my drop. So you see just how I'm placed."

She looked yellow and drawn as she ended, and Redfield was moved by her unwonted tenderness.

"Now let me advise," he began, after a moment's pause. "We musn't let the girl get homesick. I'll take her home with me this afternoon, and bring her back along with a doctor to-morrow."

"All right, but before you go I want to have a private talk – I want to tell you something."

He warned her away from what promised to be a confession. "Now, now, Eliza, don't tell me anything that requires that tone of voice; I'm a bad person to keep a secret, and you might be sorry for it. I don't want to know anything more about your business than I can guess."

"I don't mean the whiskey trade," she explained. "I've cut that all out anyway. It's something more important – it's about Ed and me."

"I don't want to hear *that* either," he declared. "Let bygones be bygones. What you did then is outlawed, anyway. Those were fierce times, and I want to forget them." He looked about. "Let me see this Miss Virginia and convey to her Mrs. Redfield's

invitation."

"She's in the kitchen, I reckon. Go right out."

He was rather glad of a chance to see the young reformer in action, and smiled as he came upon her surrounded by waiters and cooks, busily superintending the preparations for the noon meal, which amounted to a tumult each day.

She saw Redfield, nodded, and a few moments later came toward him, flushed and beaming with welcome. "I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Supervisor."

He bowed profoundly. "I'm delighted to find you well, Miss Virginia, and doubly pleased to see you in your regimentals, which you mightily adorn."

She looked down at her apron. "I made this myself. Do you know our business is increasing wonderfully? I'm busy every moment of the day till bedtime."

"Indeed I do know it. I hear of the Wetherford House all up and down the line. I was just telling your mother she'll be forced to build bigger, like the chap in the Bible."

"She works too hard. Poor mother! I try to get her to turn the cash-drawer over to me, but she won't do it. Doesn't she seem paler and weaker to you?"

"She does, indeed, and this is what I came in to propose. Mrs. Redfield sends by me a formal invitation to you to visit Elk Lodge. She is not quite able to take the long ride, else she'd come to you." Here he handed her a note. "I suggest that you go up with me this afternoon, and to-morrow we'll fetch the doctor down to

see your mother. What do you say to that?"

Her eyes were dewy with grateful appreciation of his kindness as she answered: "That would be a great pleasure, Mr. Redfield, if mother feels able to spare me."

"I've talked with her; she is anxious to have you go."

Virginia was indeed greatly pleased and pleasantly excited by this message, for she had heard much of Mrs. Redfield's exclusiveness, and also of the splendor of her establishment. She hurried away to dress with such flutter of joyous anticipation that Redfield felt quite repaid for the pressure he had put upon his wife to induce her to write that note. "You may leave Lize Wetherford out of the count, my dear," he had said. "There is nothing of her discernible in the girl. Virginia is a lady. I don't know where she got it, but she's a gentlewoman by nature."

Lize said: "Don't you figure on me in any way, Reddy. I'm nothing but the old hen that raised up this lark, and all I'm a-livin' for now is to make her happy. Just you cut me out when it comes to any question about your wife and Virginia. I'm not in their class."

It was hot and still in the town, but no sooner was the car in motion than both heat and dust were forgotten. Redfield's machine was not large, and as he was content to go at moderate speed, conversation was possible.

He was of that sunny, optimistic, ever-youthful nature which finds delight in human companionship under any conditions whatsoever. He accepted this girl for what she seemed – a fresh,

unspoiled child. He saw nothing cheap or commonplace in her, and was not disposed to impose any of her father's wild doings upon her calendar. He had his misgivings as to her future – that was the main reason why he had said to Mrs. Redfield, "The girl must be helped." Afterward he had said "sustained."

It was inevitable that the girl should soon refer to the ranger, and Redfield was as complimentary of him as she could wish. "Ross hasn't a fault but one, and that's a negative one: he doesn't care a hang about getting on, as they say over in England. He's content just to do the duty of the moment. He made a good cow-puncher and a good soldier; but as for promotion, he laughs when I mention it."

"He told me that he hoped to be Chief Forester," protested Virginia.

"Oh yes, he says that; but do you know, he'd rather be where he is, riding over the hills, than live in London. You should see his cabin some time. It's most wonderful, really. His walls are covered with bookshelves of his own manufacture, and chairs of his own design. Where the boy got the skill, I don't see. Heaven knows, his sisters are conventional enough! He's capable of being Supervisor, but he won't live in town and work in an office. He's like an Indian in his love of the open."

All this was quite too absorbingly interesting to permit of any study of the landscape, which went by as if dismissed by the chariot wheels of some contemptuous magician. Redfield's eyes were mostly on the road (in the manner of the careful driver),

but when he did look up it was to admire the color and poise of his seat-mate, who made the landscape of small account.

She kept the conversation to the desired point. "Mr. Cavanagh's work interests me very much. It seems very important; and it must be new, for I never heard of a forest ranger when I was a child."

"The forester is new – at least, in America," he answered. "My dear young lady, you are returned just in the most momentous period in the history of the West. The old dominion – the cattle-range – is passing. The supremacy of the cowboy is ended. The cow-boss is raising oats, the cowboy is pitching alfalfa, and swearing horribly as he blisters his hands. Some of the rangers at the moment are men of Western training like Ross, but whose allegiance is now to Uncle Sam. With others that transfer of allegiance is not quite complete, hence the insolence of men like Gregg, who think they can bribe or intimidate these forest guards, and so obtain favors; the newer men are college-bred, real foresters. But you can't know what it all means till you see Ross, or some other ranger, on his own heath. We'll make up a little party some day and drop down upon him, and have him show us about. It's a lonely life, and so the ranger keeps open house. Would you like to go?"

"Oh, yes indeed! I'm eager to get into the mountains. Every night as I see the sun go down over them I wonder what the world is like up there."

Then he began very delicately to inquire about her Eastern

experience. There was not much to tell. In a lovely old town not far from Philadelphia, where her aunt lived, she had spent ten years of happy exile. “I was horribly lonely and homesick at first,” she said. “Mother wrote only short letters, and my father never wrote at all. I didn’t know he was dead then. He was always good to me. He wasn’t a bad man, was he?”

“No,” responded Redfield, without hesitation. “He was very like the rest of us – only a little more reckless and a little more partisan, that’s all. He was a dashing horseman and a dead-shot, and so, naturally, a leader of these daredevils. He was popular with both sides of the controversy up to the very moment when he went South to lead the invaders against the rustlers.”

“What was it all about? I never understood it. What were they fighting about?”

“In a sense, it was all very simple. You see, Uncle Sam, in his careless, do-nothing way, has always left his range to whomever got there first, and that was the cattle-man. At first there was grass enough for us all, but as we built sheds and corrals about watering-places we came to claim *rights* on the range. We usually secured by fraud homesteads in the sections containing water, and so, gun in hand, ‘stood off’ the man who came after. Gradually, after much shooting and lawing, we parcelled out the range and settled down covering practically the whole State. Our adjustments were not perfect, but our system was working smoothly for us who controlled the range. We had convinced ourselves, and pretty nearly everybody else, that the State was

only fit for cattle-grazing, and that we were the most competent grazers; furthermore, we were in possession, and no man could come in without our consent.

"However, a very curious law of our own making was our undoing. Of course the 'nester' or 'punkin roller,' as we contemptuously called the small farmer, began sifting in here and there in spite of our guns, but he was only a mosquito bite in comparison with the trouble which our cow-punchers stirred up. Perhaps you remember enough about the business to know that an unbranded yearling calf without its mother is called a maverick?"

"Yes, I remember that. It belongs to the man who finds him, and brands him."

"Precisely. Now that law worked very nicely so long as the poor cowboy was willing to catch and brand him for his employer, but it proved a 'joker' when he woke up and said to his fellows: 'Why brand these mavericks at five dollars per head for this or that outfit when the law says it belongs to the man who finds him?'"

Lee Virginia looked up brightly. "That seems right to me!"

"Ah yes; but wait. We cattle-men had large herds, and the *probabilities* were that the calf belonged to some one of us; whereas, the cowboy, having no herd at all, *knew* the maverick belonged to some one's herd. True, the law said it was his, but the law did not mean to reward the freebooter; yet that is exactly what it did. At first only a few outlaws took advantage of it; but hard

years came on, the cattle business became less and less profitable, we were forced to lay off our men, and so at last the range swarmed with idle cow-punchers; then came the breakdown in our scheme! The cowboys took to 'mavericking' on their own account. Some of them had the grace to go into partnership with some farmer, and so claim a small bunch of cows, but others suddenly and miraculously acquired herds of their own. From keeping within the law, they passed to violent methods. They slit the tongues of calves for the purpose of separating them from their mothers. Finding he could not suck, bossy would at last wander away from his dam, and so become a 'maverick.' In short, anarchy reigned on the range."

"But surely my father had nothing to do with this?"

"No; your father, up to this time, had been on good terms with everybody. He had a small herd of cattle down the river, which he owned in common with a man named Hart."

"I remember him."

"He was well thought of by all the big outfits; and when the situation became intolerable, and we got together to weed out 'the rustlers,' as these cattle-thieves were called, your father was approached and converted to a belief in drastic measures. He had suffered less than the rest of us because of his small herd and the fact that he was very popular among the cowboys. So far as I was concerned, the use of violent methods revolted me. My training in the East had made me a respecter of the law. 'Change the law,' I said. 'The law is all right,' they replied; 'the trouble is

with these rustlers. We'll hang a few of 'em, and that will break up the business.'"

Parts of this story came back to the girl's mind, producing momentary flashes of perfect recollection. She heard again the voices of excited men arguing over and over the question of "mavericking," and she saw her father as he rode up to the house that last day before he went South.

Redfield went on. "The whole plan as developed was silly, and I wonder still that Ed Wetherford, who knew 'the nester' and the cowboy so well, should have lent his aid to it. The cattle-men – some from Cheyenne, some from Denver, and a few from New York and Chicago – agreed to finance a sort of Vigilante Corps composed of men from the outside, on the understanding that this policing body should be commanded by one of their own number. Your father was chosen second in command, and was to guide the party; for he knew almost every one of the rustlers, and could ride directly to their doors."

"I wish he hadn't done that," murmured the girl.

"I must be frank with you, Virginia. I can't excuse that in him. It was a kind of treachery. He must have been warped by his associates. They convinced him by some means that it was his duty, and one fine day the Fork was startled by a messenger, who rode in to say that the cattle-barons were coming with a hundred Texas bad men 'to clean out the town,' and to put their own men into office. This last was silly rot to me, but the people believed it."

The girl was tingling now. “I remember! I remember the men who rode into the town to give the alarm. Their horses were white with foam; their heads hung down, and their sides went in and out. I pitied the poor things. Mother jumped on her pony, and rode out among the men. She wanted to go with them, but they wouldn’t let her. I was scared almost breathless.”

“I was in Sulphur City, and did not hear of it till it was nearly all over,” Redfield resumed, his speech showing a little of the excitement which thrilled through the girl’s voice. “Well, the first act of vengeance was so ill-considered that it practically ended the whole campaign. The invaders fell upon and killed two ranchers – one of whom was probably not a rustler at all, but a peaceable settler, and the other one they most barbarously hanged. More than this, they attacked and vainly tried to kill two settlers whom they met on the road – German farmers, with no connection, so far as known, with the thieves. These men escaped, and gave the alarm. In a few hours the whole range was aflame with vengeful fire. The Forks, as you may recall, was like a swarm of bumblebees. Every man and boy was armed and mounted. The storekeepers distributed guns and ammunition, leaders developed, and the embattled ‘punkin rollers,’ rustlers, and townsmen rode out to meet the invaders.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.