

Bindloss Harold

The Mistress of Bonaventure



Harold Bindloss

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CHAPTER I

THE SWEETWATER FORD

After relaxing its iron grip a little so that we hoped for spring, winter had once more closed down on the broad Canadian prairie, and the lonely outpost was swept by icy draughts, when, one bitter night, Sergeant Mackay, laying down his pipe, thrust fresh billets into the crackling stove. It already glowed with a dull redness, and the light that beat out through its opened front glinted upon the carbines, belts, and stirrups hung about the rough log walls.

"'Tis for the rebuking of evildoers an' the keeping of the peace we're sent here to patrol the wilderness, an' if we're frozen stiff in the saddle 'tis no more than our duty," said the sergeant, while his eyes twinkled whimsically. "But a man with lands an' cattle shows a distressful want o' judgment by sleeping in a snow bank when he might be sitting snug in a club at Montreal. 'Tis a matter o' wonder to me that ye are whiles so deficient in common sense, Rancher Ormesby. Still, I'm no' denying ye showed a little when ye brought that whisky. 'Tis allowable to interpret the regulations with discretion in bitter weather – an' here's a safe ride to ye!"

A brighter beam that shot out called up the speaker's rugged face and gaunt figure from the shadows. Although his lean, hard fingers closed somewhat affectionately on a flask instead of on the bridle or carbine they were used to, his profession was stamped on him, for Allan Mackay was as fine a sample of non-commissioned cavalry officer as ever patrolled the desolate marches of Western Canada – which implies a good deal to those who know the Northwest troopers. He was also, as I knew, a man acquainted with sorrow, who united the shrewdness of Solomon with a childish simplicity and hid beneath his grim exterior a vein of eccentric chivalry which on occasion led him into trouble. The blaze further touched the face of a young English lad sitting in a corner of the room.

"Some of us were sent here for our sins, and some came for our health when the temperature of our birthplaces grew a trifle high," he said. "I don't know that anybody except Rancher Ormesby ever rode with us for pleasure. Yet I'm open to admit the life has its compensations; and Sergeant Mackay has given me many as good a run as I ever had with – that is, I mean any man who must earn his bread might well find work he would take less kindly to."

The lad's momentary embarrassment was not lost on his officer, who chuckled somewhat dryly as he glanced at him. "I'm asking no questions, an' ye are not called on to testify against yourself," he said. "Maybe ye rode fox-hunting on a hundred-guinea horse, an' maybe ye did not; but ye showed a bit knowledge o' a beast, an' that was enough for me. Meantime ye're Trooper Cotton, an' I'll see ye do your duty. To some, the old country – God bless her – is a hard stepmother, an' ye're no' the first she has turned the cold shoulder on and sent out to me."

The worthy sergeant was apt to grow tiresome when he launched out into his reminiscences, and, seeing that Trooper Cotton did not appreciate the turn the conversation was taking, I broke in: "But you're forgetting the outlaw, Mackay; and I'm not here for either health or pleasure. I want to recover the mare I gave five hundred dollars for, and that ought to excuse my company. What has the fellow who borrowed her done?"

"Fired on a mortgage money-lender down in Assiniboia," was the answer. "Maybe he was badly treated, for ye'll mind that the man who takes blood money, as yon Lane has done, is first cousin to Judas Iscariot; but that's no' my business. It is not allowable to shoot one's creditors in the Canadian Dominion. What I'm wondering is where he is now; an' that will be either striking north for the

barrens or west for British Columbia. It will be boot and saddle when Pete comes in, and meantime we'll consider what routes would best fit him!"

Mackay knew every bluff and ravine seaming a hundred miles of prairie; and another silent man, rising from his bunk, stood beside myself and Cotton as the sergeant traced lines across the table. Each represented an alternative route the fugitive might take, and the places where the hard forefinger paused marked a risky ford or lake on which the ice was yielding. Mackay spent some time over it, as much for his own edification as for ours, but I was interested, for I greatly desired to recover the blood mare stolen from me.

I was then five-and-twenty, fairly stalwart and tall of stature, and seldom regretted that after a good education in England I had gone out to Western Canada to assist a relative in raising cattle. The old man was slow and cautious, but he taught me my business well before he died suddenly and left me his possessions. Adding my small patrimony, I made larger profits by taking heavier risks, and, for fortune had favored me, and youth is no handicap in the Colonies, my homestead was one of the finest in that section of the country. Save for occasional risks of frost-bite and wild rides through blinding snow, the life had been toilsome rather than eventful; but the day which, while we talked in the outpost, was speeding westward across the pines of Quebec and the lakes of Ontario to gild the Rockies' peaks was to mark a turning-point in my history.

Suddenly a beat of hoofs rose out of the night, there was a jingle outside, and the cold set me shivering, when a man, who held a smoking horse's bridle, stood by the open door. "Your man tried to buy a horse from the reservation Crees, and, when they wouldn't trade, doubled on his tracks, heading west for the Bitter Lakes. I've nearly killed my beast to bring you word," he said.

Horses stood ready in the sod stable behind the dwelling, and in less than three minutes we were in the saddle and flitting in single file across the prairie. It was about five o'clock in the morning, and, though winter should have been over, it was very bitter. The steam from the horses hung about us, our breath froze on our furs, but a Chinook wind had swept the prairie clear of snow, and, though in the barer places the ground rang like iron beneath us, the carpet of matted grasses made moderately fast traveling possible. No word was spoken, and, when the silent figures about me faded as they spread out to left and right and only a faint jingle of steel or dull thud of hoofs betokened their presence, I seemed to have ridden out of all touch with warmth and life.

The frost bit keen, the heavens were black with the presage of coming storm, and the utter silence seemed the hush of death. Beast and bird had long fled south, and I started when once the ghostly howl of a coyote rose eerily and faintly from the rim of the prairie.

By daylight we had left long leagues behind us, and I was the better pleased that the fugitive's trail, of which we found signs, led back towards my own homestead. For a brief five minutes the Rockies, seen very far off across the levels, flushed crimson against the sky. Then the line of spectral peaks faded suddenly, and we were left, four tiny crawling specks, in the center of a limitless gray circle whose circumference receded steadily as the hours went by. But the trail grew plainer to the sergeant's practiced eyes, and, when we had crossed the Bitter Lakes on rotten and but partially refrozen ice, he predicted that we should come up with the fugitive by nightfall if our horses held out. Mine was the best in the party, and, though not equal to the stolen mare, the latter had already traveled fast and far. It was a depressing journey. No ray of sunlight touched the widespread levels, and there was neither smoke trail nor sign of human life in all that great desolation. Hands and feet lost sense of feeling, the cold numbed one's very brain; but the wardens of the prairie, used alike to sleep in a snow trench or swim an icy ford, care little for adverse weather, and Mackay held on with a slow tenacity that boded ill for the man he was pursuing.

The light showed signs of failing when Trooper Cotton shouted, and we caught sight of our quarry, a shadowy blur on the crest of a low rise that seamed the prairie. "Ye may save your breath, for ye'll need it," said Mackay. "It's a league from yon rise to the Sweetwater, an' there's neither ice-

bridge nor safe ford now. If he's across before we are we'll no' grip him the night, I'm thinking – and there's ill weather brewing."

Whip and heel were plied, and the worn-out beasts responded as best they might. The man who had taught me stock and horse breeding knew his business, and when my beast raced across the edge of the rise the troopers were at least two hundred yards behind. Then the exultation of the chase took hold of me, and my frozen blood commenced to stir as the staunch beast beneath me swept faster and faster down the long gray incline. At every stride I was coming up with the horse thief. A dusky ridge of birches loomed ahead, shutting off the steep dip to the river. Beyond this, there were thicker trees; and the light was failing; but while all this promised safety for the pursued, I was gaining fast and the troopers were dropping further behind. The fugitive had just reached the timber when a light wagon lurched out from it, and I yelled to the man who drove it to hold clear of my path. There was a hoarse shout away to the left, and, when no answer came back, the crack of a carbine. A repeating rifle banged against my back, and, feeling that its sling lay within easy reach, I drove my heels home as I raced past the wagon.

There was scarcely time for a side glance, but the one I risked set my heart beating. Two feminine figures wrapped in furs sat within it, and one smiled at me as I passed. The face that looked out from beneath the fur cap was worth remembering, though it was several years since I had last seen it in England. Haldane had brought his daughters with him when he came out from Montreal to visit his Western possessions, it seemed; but my horse was over the brink of the declivity before I could return the greeting, and, bending low to clear the branches, I drove him reeling and blundering down and down through willow undergrowth and scattered birches on the track of the fugitive. I was but a plain rancher, and it seemed presumptuous folly to neglect my lawful business for a smile from Beatrice Haldane.

It was growing dark among the birches, and flakes of feathery snow sliding down between the branches filled my eyes, but I could see that the distance between us was shortening more rapidly and that the man in front of me reeled in his saddle when a branch smote him. The mare also stumbled, and I gained several lengths. The drumming of hoofs and the moan of an icy wind which had sprung up seemed to fill all the hollow. White mist that slid athwart the birches hung over the Sweetwater in the rift beneath, and – for the river had lately burst its chains of ice – I felt sure that the man I followed would never make the crossing. Yet it appeared certain that he meant to attempt it, for he rode straight at the screen of willows that fringed the water's edge, vanished among them, and I heard a crackling as his weary beast smashed through the shoreward fringe of honeycombed ice. Then I saw nothing, for rattling branches closed about me as the horse feebly launched himself at the leap, while a denser whiteness thickened the mist. So far fortune had favored me throughout the reckless ride; but it is not wise to tempt fate too hardly, and the beast pitched forward when his hoofs descended upon bare frozen ground.

Had I worn boots my neck might have paid the penalty, but the soft moccasins slipped free of the stirrups in time, and when I came down the horse rolled over several yards clear of me. He was up next moment, but moved stiffly, and stood still, trembling, when I grasped the bridle. The saddle had slipped sideways, as though a girth buckle had yielded, and I felt faint and dizzy, for the fall had shaken me. Nevertheless, I unslung the rifle mechanically, when a hail reached me, and, turning, I saw the man we had followed sitting still in his saddle, some twoscore yards away, with the steam frothing white to his horse's knees. The daylight had almost gone, the snow was commencing in earnest, but I could make out that he was bareheaded and his face smeared with crimson, perhaps from a wound the branch had made. It looked drawn and ghastly as he sat stiffly erect against a background of hurrying water and falling snow, with one hand on his hip and the other raised as though to command attention.

"You are Rancher Ormesby, whose horse I borrowed, I presume?" he said. "Well, if you are wise you will give up the chase before worse befalls you. I am armed, and I give you fair warning that I do not mean to be taken. Go home to your stove and comforts. You have no quarrel with me."

The clean English accent surprised me, and the rifle lay still in the hollow of my left arm as I answered him: "Do you forget you are sitting on the best mare I possess? The loss of several hundred dollars is more than I can put up with; and your warning sounds rather empty when I could hardly fail to pick you off with this rifle."

I listened for the troopers' coming, but could hear only the fret of the river and the moaning of the blast, for the wind was rising rapidly. It was evident that the beast whose bridle I held was in no fit state to attempt the crossing, and yet, though the stranger's cool assurance was exasperating, I began to be conscious of a certain admiration and pity for him. The man was fearless. He had been hunted like a wolf; and now, left, worn out, wounded, and doubtless faint from want of food, to face the wild night in the open, he had, it seemed, risked his last chance of escape to warn me when he might have taken me at a disadvantage.

He laughed recklessly. "Still, I hardly think you will. The mare is done, and I pledge my word I'll turn her loose as soon as I'm clear of the troopers. I have no grudge against you, but if you are wise you will take no further chances with a desperate man. Go home, and be thankful you have a place to shelter you."

There would have been no great difficulty in bringing the man down at that range, even in a bad light, and it is probable that nobody would have blamed me; but, though I should willingly have ridden him down in fair chase, I could not fire on him as he sat there at my mercy, for if he was armed it must have been with a pistol – a very poor weapon against a rifle. I might also have shot the horse; but one hesitates to sacrifice a costly beast, even in the service of the State, and, strange to say, I felt inclined to trust his promise. Accordingly, I did neither; and when a great ice cake came driving down, and, raising his hand again as though in recognition of my forbearance, he wheeled the mare and vanished into a thicker rush of snow, I stood motionless and let him go. Then, feeling more shaken and dizzy than before, I seized the bridle and led the horse into the whirling whiteness that drove down the slope. Darkness came suddenly. I could scarcely see the trees, and it was by accident I stumbled upon the troopers dismounted and picking their way.

"Have ye seen him?" asked an object which looked like a polar bear and proved to be the sergeant.

"Yes," I answered shortly, deciding that it would not be well to fully explain how I had let our quarry slip through my fingers. "If he has not drowned himself in the river he has got away. I was close upon him when my horse fell and threw me badly. Are you going to try the crossing, too?"

There are few bolder riders than the Northwest troopers, but Mackay shook his head. "I'm thinking it would be a useless waste of Government property an' maybe of a trooper's life," he said. "No man could find him in this snow, and if he lives through the night, which is doubtful, we'll find his trail plain in the morning. We'll just seek shelter with Haldane at Bonaventure."

I do not know how we managed to find the Bonaventure ranch. The wind had suddenly freshened almost to a gale, and, once clear of the river hollow, we met the full force of it. The snow that whirled across the desolate waste filled our eyes and nostrils, rendering breathing difficult and sight almost impossible; but it may be that the instinct of the horses helped us, for, making no effort at guidance, I trudged on, clinging to the bridle of my limping beast, while half-seen spectral objects floundered through the white haze on each side. Nevertheless, the pain which followed the impact of the flakes on one side of my half-frozen face showed that we were at least progressing in a constant direction, and at last Trooper Cotton raised a hoarse halloo as a faint ray of light pierced the obscurity. Then shadowy buildings loomed ahead, and, blundering up against a wire fence, we staggered, whitened all over, to the door of Bonaventure.

It was flung wide open at our knock, banged to again, and while a trooper went off with the horses to the stable the rest of us, partly stupefied by the change of temperature, stood in the lamp-lit hall shaking the white flakes from us. A man of middle age, attired in a fashion more common in the cities than in the West, stretched out his hand to me.

"I am glad to see you, Ormesby; and, of course, you and your companions will spend the night here," he said cordially. "My girls told me they had met you, and we were partly expecting your company. Apparently the malefactor got away, Sergeant Mackay?"

"We did not bring him with us, but he'll not win far this weather," was the somewhat rueful answer. The master of Bonaventure smiled a little.

"He deserves to escape if he can live through such a night; and I'm inclined to be sorry for the poor devil," he said. "However, you have barely time to get into dry things before supper will be ready. We expect you all to join us, prairie fashion."

The welcome was characteristic of Carson Haldane, who could win the goodwill of most men, either on the prairie or in the exclusive circles of Ottawa and Montreal. It was also characteristic that he called the evening meal, as we did, supper; though when he was present a state of luxury, wholly unusual on the prairie, reigned at Bonaventure.

CHAPTER II

BONAVENTURE RANCH

"We are waiting for you," said Haldane, smiling, as he stood in the doorway of the room where, with some misgivings, and by the aid of borrowed sundries, we had made the best toilets we could. "You are not a stranger, Ormesby, and must help to see your comrades made comfortable. Sergeant, my younger daughter is enthusiastic about the prairie, and you will have a busy time if you answer all her questions, though I fear she will be disappointed to discover that nobody has ever scalped you."

Mackay drew himself up stiffly, as if for his inspection parade, and a white streak on his forehead showed the graze a bullet had made. Young Cotton smiled wryly as he glanced at his uniform, for it was probably under very different auspices he had last appeared in the society of ladies; and I was uneasily conscious of the fact that the black leather tunic which a German teamster had given me was much more comfortable than becoming. I might have felt even more dissatisfied had I known that my fall had badly split the tunic up the back. That, however, did not account for the curious mingling of hesitation and expectancy with which I followed our host.

During a brief visit to England some years ago I had met Miss Haldane at the house of a relative, and the memory had haunted me during long winter evenings spent in dreamy meditation beside the twinkling stove and in many a lonely camp when the stars shone down on the waste of whitened grass through the blue transparency of the summer night. The interval had been a time of strenuous effort with me, but through all the stress and struggle, in stinging snowdrift and blinding dust of alkali, I had never lost the remembrance of the maiden who whiled away the sunny afternoons with me under the English elms. Indeed, the recollection of the serene, delicately cut face and the wealth of dusky hair grew sharper as the months went by, until it became an abstract type of all that was desirable in womanhood, rather than a prosaic reality. Now I was to meet its owner once more in the concrete flesh. It may have been merely a young man's fancy, born of a life bare of romance, but I think that idealization was good for me.

Haldane held a door open, saying something that I did not catch; but young Cotton, whose bronzed color deepened for a moment, made a courtly bow, and the big grizzled sergeant smiled at me across the table as he took his place beside a laughing girl, while I presently found myself drawing a chair back for Beatrice Haldane, who showed genuine pleasure as she greeted me. Her beauty had increased during the long interval. The clustering dark hair and the dark eyes were those I remembered well, and if her face was a trifle colorless and cold I did not notice it. She had grown a little more full in outline and more stately in bearing, but the quiet graciousness which had so impressed me still remained.

"It is a long time since we met, and you have changed since then," she said pleasantly. "When you raced past our wagon I hardly recognized you. That, however, was perhaps only to be expected; but one might wonder whether you have changed otherwise, too. I recollect you were refreshingly sanguine when I last saw you."

This was gratifying. That I should have treasured the remembrance of Beatrice Haldane was only natural; but it was very pleasant to hear from her own lips that she had not forgotten me. Her intention was doubtless kindly, and it was inherited courtesy, for Haldane did most things graciously.

"The light was dim, and this life sets its stamp on most of us," I said. "May one compliment you on your powers of memory? Needless to say, I recognized you the moment I saw you."

Miss Haldane smiled a little. "A good memory is useful; but do you wish me to return the compliment?"

"No," and I looked at her steadily. "But there is a difference. In your world men and events follow each other in kaleidoscopic succession, and each change of the combinations must dim the

memory of the rest. With us it is different. You will see how we live – but, no; I hardly think you will – for Bonaventure is not a typical homestead, and the control of it can be only a pastime with your father."

"And yet it is said that whatever Carson Haldane touches yields him dividends; but proceed," interposed Miss Haldane.

"With us each day is spent in hurried labor; and it is probably well that it is, for otherwise the loneliness and monotony might overpower any man with leisure to brood and think. Heat, frost, and fatigue are our lot; and an interlude resembling the one in which I met you means, as a glimpse of a wholly different life, so much to us. We dream of it long afterwards, and wonder if ever the enchanted gates will open to us again. Now, please don't smile. This is really not exaggeration!"

"Which gates? You are not precise," said my companion, and laughed pleasantly when, smiling, too, I answered, "One might almost say – of Paradise!"

"It must be the Moslem's paradise, then," she said. "Still, I hardly fancy a stalwart prairie rancher would pose well as the Peri, and, by way of consolation, you can remember that there are disappointments within those gates, and those who have acquired knowledge beyond them sometimes envy the illusions of those without. No, you have not changed much in some respects, Mr. Ormesby. You must talk to my sister Lucille – she will agree with you."

Her manner was very gracious, in spite of the badinage; but there was a faint trace of weariness and sardonic humor in her merriment which chilled me. The dark-haired girl I remembered had displayed a power of sympathy and quick enthusiasm which had apparently vanished from my present companion.

"I am curious to hear if you have verified the optimistic views you once professed," she added languidly.

I laughed a little dryly. Being younger then, and led on by a very winsome maiden's interest, I had talked with perhaps a little less than becoming modesty of the possibilities open to a resolute man in the new lands of the West, and laid it down as an axiom that determination was a sure password to success.

"You should be merciful. That was in my callow days," I said. "Nevertheless, with a few more reservations, I believe it is possible for those who can hope and hold on to realize their ambition in this country, whether it be the evolution of a prosperous homestead from a strip of Government land and a sod hovel – or more desirable things. The belief is excusable, because one may see the proof of it almost every day. I even fancied, when in England, that you agreed with me."

There was a faint mischievous sparkle in Miss Haldane's eyes, but she answered with becoming gravity: "Wisdom, as you seem to intimate, comes with age, and it is allowable to change one's opinions. Now it seems to me that all things happen, more often against our will than as the result of it, when the invisible powers behind us decree. For instance, who could have anticipated yesterday that we two should meet to-night at table, or who could say whether this assembly, brought about by a blizzard, may not be the first scene of either a tragedy or a comedy?"

I was more at home when Haldane turned the conversation upon practical matters, such as wheat and cattle, than when discussing abstract possibilities; but I afterwards remembered that my fair companion's speech was prophetic, and, as I glanced about, it struck me that there were dramatic possibilities in the situation. We were a strangely assorted company, and to one who had spent eight years in the wilderness the surroundings were striking. Tall wax candles in silver standards, flickering a little when the impact of the snow-laden gale shook the lonely dwelling, lighted the table. The rest of the long room was wrapped in shadow, save when the blaze from the great open hearth flung forth its uncertain radiance. The light flashed upon cut glass and polished silver, and forced up against the dusky background the faces of those who sat together.

Carson Haldane, owner of Bonaventure, which he occasionally visited, sat at the head of the table, a clean-shaven, dark-haired man of little more than middle age, whose slightly ascetic

appearance concealed a very genial disposition. He was a man of mark, a daring speculator in mills and lands and mines, and supposed to be singularly successful. Why he bought Bonaventure ranch, or what he meant to do with it, nobody seemed to know; but he acted in accordance with the customs of the place in which he found himself, and because the distinctions of caste and wealth are not greatly recognized on the prairie there was nothing incongruous in his present company. Sergeant Mackay – lean, bronzed, and saturnine when the humor seized him – now bent his grizzled head with keen gray eyes that twinkled as he chatted to the fresh-faced girl in the simple dress beside him. I knew this was Lucille Haldane, but had hardly glanced at her. Cotton had evidently forgotten that he was a police trooper, and, when he could, broke in with some boyish jest or English story told in a different idiom from that which he generally adopted. He seemed unconscious that he was recklessly betraying himself.

"You must not turn my daughter's head with your reminiscences, Sergeant. She is inclined to be over-romantic already," Haldane said, with a kindly glance at the girl. "Possibly, however, one may excuse her to-night, for you gentlemen live the stories she delights in. By the way, I do not quite understand how you allowed the evildoer to escape, Ormesby."

Being forced to an explanation, I described the scene by the river as best I could, looking at the sergeant a trifle defiantly until, at the conclusion, he said: "I cannot compliment ye, Rancher Ormesby."

I was about to retort, when a clear young voice, with a trace of mischief in its tone, asked: "What would you have done had you been there, and why were you so far behind, Sergeant?"

"We do not ride pedigree horses," said Mackay, a trifle grimly. "I should have shot his beast, an' so made sure of him in the first place."

Then there was a sudden silence, when the girl, who turned upon him with a gesture of indignation, said: "It would have been cruel, and I am glad he got away. I saw his face when he passed us, and it was so drawn and haggard that I can hardly forget it; but it was not that of a bad man. What crime had he committed that he should be hunted so pitilessly?"

Young Cotton colored almost guiltily under his tan as the girl's indignant gaze fell upon him, and for the first time I glanced at her with interest. She was by no means to be compared with her sister, but she had a brave young face, slightly flushed with carmine and relieved by bright eyes that now shone with pity. In contrast to Beatrice's dark tresses the light of the candles called up bronze-gold gleams in her hair, and her eyes were hazel, while the voice had a vibration in it that seemed to awaken an answering thrill. Lucille Haldane reminded me of what her sister had been, but there was a difference. Slighter in physique, she was characterized by a suggestion of nervous energy instead of Beatrice's queenly serenity. The latter moved her shoulders almost imperceptibly, but I fancied the movement expressed subdued impatience, and her face a slightly contemptuous apology, while her father laughed a little.

"You must be careful, Sergeant. My younger daughter is mistress of Bonaventure, and rules us all somewhat autocratically; but, as far as I can gather, your perceptions were tolerably correct in this instance, Lucille," he said. "The man fell into the grip of the usurer, who, as usual, drained his blood; but, while what he did may have been ethical justice, he broke the laws of this country, and perhaps hardly deserves your sympathy."

"No?" said Lucille Haldane, and her eyes glistened. "I wish you had not told us what took place at the river, Mr. Ormesby. Here we sit, warm and sheltered, while that man, who has, perhaps, suffered so much already, wanders, hungry, faint, and bleeding, through this awful cold and snow. Just listen a moment!"

In the brief silence that followed I could hear the windows rattle under the impact of the driving snow and the eerie scream of the blast. I shivered a little, having more than once barely escaped with my life when caught far from shelter under such conditions, and it was borne in upon me that the outlaw might well be summoned before a higher tribunal than an earthly court by morning.

It was Beatrice Haldane, who, with, I noticed, a warning glance at her sister, turned the conversation into a more cheerful channel, and I was well content when some time later she took her place near me beside the hearth, while Lucille opened the piano at her father's request. Possibly neither her voice nor her execution might have pleased a critic; but as a break in our monotonous daily drudgery the music enchanted us, and the grizzled sergeant straightened himself very erect, while a steely glint came into his eyes as, perhaps to atone for her speech at dinner, the girl sang, with fire and pathos, a Jacobite ballad of his own country. Its effect may have been enhanced by the novelty; but there was a power in Lucille Haldane which is held only by the innocent in spirit whose generous enthusiasms are still unblunted, and it seemed to me that the words and chords rang alternately with a deathless devotion and the clank of the clansmen's steel.

"I cannot thank ye. It was just grand," said Mackay, shaken into unusual eloquence, when the girl turned and half-shyly asked if he liked the song, though, as the soft candle light touched it, her face was slightly flushed. "Ye made one see them – the poor lads with the claymores, who came out of the mist with a faith that was not bought with silver to die for their king. Loyal? Oh, ay! starving, ill-led, unpaid, they were loyal to the death! There's a pattern for ye, Trooper Cotton, who, if ye'll mind what he tells ye, will hold Her Majesty's commission some day when Sergeant Mackay's gone. Ye'll excuse me, Miss Haldane, but the music made me speak."

I noticed that Trooper Cotton seemed to flinch a moment at the mention of a commission, as though it recalled unpleasant memories, and that the worthy sergeant appeared slightly ashamed of his outbreak, while Beatrice Haldane showed a quiet amusement at his Caledonian weakness for improving the occasion. Lucille, however, smiled at him again. "I think that is the prettiest compliment I have ever had paid my poor singing," she said naïvely. "But I have done my duty. I wonder if you would sing if we asked you, Mr. Cotton?"

"Lucille is at an impressionable age," Beatrice Haldane said to me. "Later she may find much that she now delights in obsolete and old-fashioned. We have grown very materialistic in these modern days."

"God forbid!" I answered. "And I think the sergeant could tell you true stories of modern loyalty."

"For instance?" and I answered doggedly. "You can find instances for yourself if you try to see beneath the surface. There are some very plain men on this prairie who could furnish them, I think. Did you ever hear of Rancher Dane, who stripped himself of all his possessions to advance the career of a now popular singer? She married another man when fame came to her, and it is said he knew she would never be more than a friend to him from the beginning."

"I have," and the speaker's eyes rested on me with a faint and yet kindly twinkle in them. "He was a very foolish person, although it is refreshing to hear of such men. Even if disappointment follow consummation, aspiration is good for one. It is more blessed to give than to receive, you know."

Here, to the astonishment of his superior officer, Cotton, who played his own accompaniment, broke into song, and he not only sang passably well, but made a special effort to do his best, I think; while I remember reflecting, as I glanced at the lad in uniform and the rich man's daughter, who sat close by, watching him, how strange all this would have seemed to anyone unused to the customs of the prairie. Ours, however, is a new land, wide enough to take in not only the upright and the strong of hand, but the broken in spirit and the outcast whom the older country thrusts outside her gates; and, much more often than one might expect, convert them into sturdy citizens. The past history of any man is no concern of ours. He begins afresh on his merits, and by right of bold enterprise or industry meets as an equal whatever substitute for the older world's dignitaries may be found among us. How it is one cannot tell, but the brand of servitude, with the coarseness or cringing it engenders, fades from sight on the broad prairie.

Beatrice Haldane presently bade me go talk to her sister, and though I did so somewhat reluctantly, the girl interested me. I do not remember all we said, and probably it would not justify the

effort to recall it; but she was pleasantly vivacious of speech, and genuinely interested in the answers to her numerous questions. At length, however, she asked, with a half-nervous laugh: "Did you ever feel, Mr. Ormesby, that somebody you could not see was watching you?"

"No," I answered lightly. "In my case it would not be worth while for anybody to do so, you see." And Lucille Haldane first blushed prettily and then shivered, for no apparent reason.

"It must be a fancy, but I – felt – that somebody was crouching outside there in the snow. Perhaps it is because the thought of that hunted man troubles me still," said she.

"He would never venture near the house, but rather try to find shelter in the depths of the ravine – however, to reassure you. I wonder whether it is snowing as hard as ever, Sergeant," I said, turning towards Mackay as I concluded.

The casements were double and sunk in a recess of the thick log walls, over which red curtains were not wholly drawn. I flung one behind my shoulder, and when the heavy folds shut out the light inside I could see for some little distance the ghostly glimmer of the snow. Then, returning to my companion, I said quietly: "There is nobody outside, and I should have seen footprints if there had been."

Presently the two girls withdrew to attend to some household duties, and Haldane, who handed a cigar box around, said to me: "Did you do well last season, Ormesby, and what are your ideas concerning the prospects down here?"

"I was partly fortunate and partly the reverse," I answered. "As perhaps you heard, I put less into stock and sowed grain largely. It is my opinion that, as has happened elsewhere, the plow furrows will presently displace many of the unfenced cattle-runs. It is hardly wise to put all one's eggs into the same basket; but my plowing was not wholly successful, sir."

"It is a long way to Laurentian tide-water, and, assisted by Winnipeg mills, the Manitoba men would beat you," said Haldane, with a shrewd glance at me.

"For the East they certainly would, sir," I answered. "But I see no reason why, if we get the promised railroad, we should not have our own mills; and we lie near the gates of a good market in British Columbia."

Haldane nodded approval, and I was gratified. He was not a practical farmer, but it was said that he rarely made a mistake concerning the financial aspect of any industrial enterprise.

"You may be right. I wish I had taken in the next ranch when I bought Bonaventure. But, from what I gather, you have extended your operations somewhat rapidly. Is it permissible to ask how you managed in respect to capital?"

The speaker's tone was friendly, and I did not resent the question. "I borrowed on interest, sir; after three good seasons I paid off one loan, and, seeing an opportunity, borrowed again. As it happened, I lost a number of my stock; but this year should leave me with much more plowland broken and liabilities considerably reduced."

"You borrowed from a bank?" asked Haldane, and looked a little graver when I answered, "No."

It was, as transpired later, a great pity he spoke again before I told him where I had obtained the money; but fate would have it so.

"I have grown gray at the game you are commencing; but, unless you have a gift for it, it is a dangerous one, and the facilities for obtaining credit are the bane of this country," he said. "I don't wish to check any man's enterprise, but I knew the man who started you, and promised him in his last sickness to keep an eye on you. Take it as an axiom that if you can't get an honest partner you should deal only with the banks. Otherwise the mortgage speculator comes uppermost in the end. He'll carry you over, almost against your wishes, when times are good, but when a few adverse seasons run in succession, he will take you by the throat when you least expect it. Your neighbors are panic-stricken; nobody with money will look at your property, and the blood-sucker seizes his opportunity."

"But if he sold one up under such circumstances he could not recover his loan, much less charges and interest," I interposed; and Haldane laughed.

"A man of the class I'm describing would not wish to recover in that way. He is not short of money, and knows bad seasons don't last forever, so he sells off your property for, say, half its value, recovers most of what he lent, and still – remember the oppressive interest – holds you fast for the balance. He also puts up a dummy to buy the place – at depression value – pays a foreman to run it, and when times improve sells the property on which you spent the borrowed money for twice as much."

Haldane nodded to emphasize his remarks as he leaned forward towards me. "The man you were hunting was handled in a similar fashion, and it naturally made him savage. We are neighbors, Ormesby, and if ever you don't quite see your way out of a difficulty you might do worse than consult me."

He moved towards the others when I thanked him, and left me slightly troubled. I knew his offer was genuine, but being obstinately proud, there were reasons why he would be the last man I should care to ask for assistance in a difficulty. That I should ever have anything worth offering Beatrice Haldane appeared at one time a chimerical fancy; but though her father's words left their impression, I had made some progress along the road to prosperity. Ever since the brief days I spent in her company in England a vague purpose had been growing into definite shape; but that night I had discovered, with a shock, that if the difference in wealth between us had been lessened, she was far removed by experience, as well as culture, from a plain stock-raiser.

CHAPTER III

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

The snow had thinned a little, though it still blew hard, when, before retiring, I borrowed a lantern and made a dash for the stable. The horse which had fallen was a valuable one, and, remembering how stiffly he had moved, I was anxious about him. Winter should have been over, and this was its last effort, but the cold struck through me, and I knew by the depth of the snow that a horse would be a useless incumbrance to the fugitive, who could not have made a league in any direction. He was probably hiding in the ravine, and it appeared certain that he would be captured on the morrow. I was therefore the less surprised when the stolen mare shuffled towards me. The man had at least kept his promise to release her when useless; but I was still slightly puzzled as to how the beast had found her own way to Bonaventure. This meant work for me, and I spent some time in the long, sod-protected building, which was redolent of peppermint in the prairie hay, before returning to the dwelling. My moccasins made no sound as I came softly through the hall, but it was not my fault that, when I halted to turn out and hang up the lantern, voices reached me through an open door.

"You are in charge here, and will see that the lamps and stoves are safe, Lucille," one of them said. "What did you think about our guests?"

"I liked them immensely; the sergeant was simply splendid," answered another voice. "The young trooper was very nice, too. I did not see much of Mr. Ormesby. He talked a good deal to you."

There was no mistaking Beatrice Haldane's rippling laugh. "Rancher Ormesby is amusing for a change. One grows to long for something original after the stereotyped products of the cities. Contact with primitive men and fashions acts, for a time, as a tonic, although too much of it might serve as, say, an emetic."

It was a pity it had not occurred to me to rattle the lantern earlier, for though women do not always mean what they say, this last observation was not particularly gratifying. Neither was it quite what I had expected from Beatrice Haldane. Whether the fair speaker guessed that she had been overheard or not, I never knew; but because a ripple of subdued laughter reached me as a door swung to, I surmised that her sister had found cause for merriment. Tired as I was, I did not feel immediately disposed for sleep, and, as Haldane had bidden us do just what best pleased us, I looked into the troopers' quarters and found Mackay and one of his subordinates, who had preferred to spend the evening with the hired hands, asleep, and Cotton cleaning his carbine.

"We'll be off before daybreak, and I had not a chance earlier. I would not have missed a minute of this evening for promotion to-morrow. Of course, I'll pay for it later; but that's the usual rule, and partly why I'm serving the nation as Trooper Cotton now," he said, with a mirthless smile.

"You are getting as bad as the sergeant," I answered impatiently. "Come along when you have finished, if you're not overtired, and we'll smoke one of our host's cigars together. He left the box for us beside the big hearth in the hall."

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Mackay's so confoundedly particular about the arms," said Cotton.

The fire was burning redly in the hall, though the lamps were out, when I ensconced myself in a deep chair behind a deerhide screen quaintly embroidered by Indian women. The cigar was a good one, and I had much to think about; so it was not until a shaft of light streamed athwart the screen that, looking round it, I noticed that Lucille Haldane, carrying a candle, had entered the long room. She set it down on a table, and stood still, glancing about her, while I effaced myself behind the screen. The girl had cast her hair loose, and it rippled in glossy masses from her shoulders to the delicate inward curve of her waist, setting forth the lithe shapeliness of her figure. Concluding that she would withdraw as soon as she was satisfied that all was safe, I decided it would be better if she remained unaware of my presence, and hoped that Cotton would delay his coming. To judge by the

soft footsteps, she was returning, when a sudden coldness chilled the room. The light grew uncertain, as though the candle flickered in a draught, and a door I had not previously noticed opened noiselessly.

Wondering what this might mean, I sat very still, and then stared blankly, as a snow-whitened object came softly into the room. For a few seconds I could almost have fancied it was a supernatural visitant rather than a creature of flesh and blood, for the man's face was ghastly, and he brought the chill of the grave with him. He was bareheaded, his cheeks ashy gray, and clotted brown patches streaked the rag bound round his forehead, while the snow was in his hair; but as he moved forward I had no difficulty in recognizing him. I heard Lucille Haldane draw in her breath with a gasp, and it was that which roused me to action, but the intruder broke the silence first.

"Please don't cry out. You are perfectly safe – and my life is in your hands," he said.

"Not exactly!" I broke in, and, flinging the screen sideways, stepped between him and the girl. The stranger's hand dropped instinctively to the holster at his waist, then he let it fall to his side.

"You here, Rancher Ormesby! I freed your horse, and you have no further cause for hunting me down," he said, with a composure which astonished me. "I am sorry to alarm you, Miss Haldane, but it was the truth I told you. I will not be taken, and it rests with you either to call the troopers or to turn me out to freeze in the snow."

In spite of his terrifying appearance, it was clear that the man was not a ruffian. He spoke with deference, and his voice betrayed consideration for the girl; and again a sense of compassion came upon me. Still, there was my host's daughter to consider, and I turned towards her.

"Will you go away and leave him to me?" I said.

Lucille Haldane, glancing from one of us to the other, shook her head; and I think we must have formed a striking tableau as we stood where the candle-light flickered athwart one small portion of the long shadowy room. The girl's face was pale, but a sudden wave of color swept across it when, with a sinuous movement of her neck, she flung back the lustrous masses of her hair. She was dressed as I had last seen her, except that the lace collar was missing, and her full white throat gleamed like ivory. Yet, though her voice trembled a little, she showed small sign of fear.

"Will you tell me how you came here?" she asked, and as the question applied to either, we both answered it.

"I have been here some little time, and feared to surprise you; but am very glad it happened so," I said, and the stranger followed me.

"Rancher Ormesby is unjustified in his inference. I came in by the ante-room window. Earlier in the evening I lay outside in the lee of the building watching you, and I felt that I might risk trusting you, so I waited for an opportunity. I knew the troopers were here; but I was freezing in the snow, and I wondered whether, out of charity, you would give me a little food and let me hide in an outbuilding until the blizzard blows over?"

Lucille Haldane's fear, if it ever lasted more than a moment, had vanished, and her eyes glistened with womanly pity, for the man's strength was clearly spent; but she drew herself up a little. "What have you done to come to this?" said she.

"I am afraid I should tire you, and somebody might surprise us, before I told you half," he answered logically. "You must take my word that all I did was to resist by force the last effort of an extortioner to complete my ruin. He lent me money, and after I had paid it back nearly twice over he tried to seize the little that remained between me and destitution. There was a fracas and he was shot – though the wound was only trifling."

I believed the terse story, and saw that Lucille Haldane did also. Then I grew anxious lest Cotton should come in before she had made her decision. "There is not a minute to lose. Your father at least should know. Had you not better tell him while I stay here?" I said.

"I don't think so. He has told me that I am mistress at Bonaventure, and I might rouse the troopers in calling him," the girl answered steadily, turning from me to the intruder. "I think I can

believe you, and you will find sleigh-ropes in the harness-room at the end of the long stable. Slip up the ladder and crawl in among the hay. The sergeant would never suspect your presence there."

"And Rancher Ormesby?" asked the other, with a glance at me.

"Will accept the mistress of Bonaventure's decision," I answered dryly. "But I am expecting one of the troopers, and you are risking your liberty every second you stay."

"He is starving," said Lucille Haldane. "There is brandy in that sideboard, Mr. Ormesby, and I can find cold food in the kitchen. Ah! –"

I had forgotten, while I strained my ears, that Cotton's moccasins would give no warning as he came down the passage, and I hurried forward, at the girl's exclamation, a second too late to bolt the door. He came in before I reached it, and halted at sight of the outlaw, gripping the edge of the table as suddenly as though struck by a bullet. He was a lad of spirit, and I saw there was some special cause for his consternation, and that he was also apparently oblivious of the presence of two of the party.

"Good Lord! Is it you, Boone, we have been chasing all day?" he said.

I seized a chair-back and measured the distance between myself and the fugitive as I noticed the venomous pistol glint in his hand. But he lowered the muzzle when he saw Cotton clearly, and, with a glance in Miss Haldane's direction, let the weapon fall out of sight behind his thigh.

"It is," he answered steadily. "What in heaven's name brought – you – to Canada, Charlie Cotton, and thrust you in my way? It was in a very different character from your present one that I last saw you."

Both apparently forgot the spectators in their mutual surprise, though Lucille Haldane stared at them wide-eyed, which was small wonder, considering that she was a romantic girl forced for the first time to play a part in what threatened to prove an unpleasantly realistic tragedy. It was hardly possible for her not to guess that these two had been friends in very different circumstances.

Cotton leaned heavily on the table, and, I fancied, groaned; then straightened himself and answered in a strained voice that sounded very bitter: "It would be useless to return the compliment, though the contrast is more marked in your case. I didn't see your face, and the name on our warrant suggested nothing. This is Her Majesty's uniform, at least – though I would give ten years' pay if it weren't. Can't you see that I'm Trooper Cotton, and must skulk away a deserter unless I arrest you?"

"There does not seem to be much choice," Boone said grimly. "Heaven knows how little there is to attract any man in the life I have been leading; but there is one good cause why I should not be Quixotic enough to give myself up to oblige you. No! Stand back, Charlie Cotton – I don't want to hurt you."

The pistol barrel glinted as it rose into sight again, and, though no one had spoken in more than a hoarse whisper before, a heavy silence settled upon the room, through which I thought I could hear the girl catch at her breath. I stood between her and the two men, but I was at my wits' end as to what should be done. By this time my sympathies were enlisted on the side of the unfortunate rancher; but the girl's presence complicated the affair. It seemed imperative that she should be safely out of the way before either an alarm was given or a struggle ensued. Yet she had refused to vacate the position, and I realized that she meant it. Meantime, Cotton's face was a study of indecision and disgust. The lad was brave enough, but it seemed as though the mental struggle had partly crippled his physical faculties. With a gesture of dismay he turned suddenly to me.

"It's a horrible combination, Ormesby. Of course, I can't tell anybody all, but I knew this man well, and was indebted to him in the old country. Now he has somehow broken the laws of the Dominion, and I'm bound by my oath of service to arrest him. There is no other course possible. Boone, I can't help it. Will you surrender quietly?"

"No!" was the answer. "My liberty is precious because I have work to do. Move or call out at your peril, Charlie!"

The climax was evidently approaching, and still I could do nothing for fear of jeopardizing Lucille Haldane's safety if I precipitated it. The young lad, unarmed as he was, stiffened himself as

for a spring, and I wondered whether I could reach his opponent's pistol arm with the chair-leg in time when the trooper moved or shouted. Then, because feminine wits are often quicker than our own, I saw the girl's eyes were fixed on me, as, unnoticed by the others, she pointed towards the candle. Another second passed before I understood her; then, for the light stood on the corner of the table nearest me, I swept one arm out, and there was sudden darkness as I hurled it sideways across the room. The door into the main passage swung to, and Cotton fell over something as he groped his way towards it, while, though strung up in a state of tension, I smiled, hearing – what he did not – somebody brush through the other door, which it was evident had escaped his notice.

Next, feeling that the girl was mistress of the position, I stirred the sinking fire until a faint brightness shone out from the hearth. It just sufficed to reveal Lucille Haldane standing with her back to the door the fugitive had not passed through. This quick-witted maneuver sufficed to deceive the bewildered representative of the law. "You cannot pass, Trooper Cotton," she said.

The lad positively groaned. "Do you know that you are disgracing me forever, Miss Haldane?" he said, in a hoarse appeal. "You must let me pass!"

The girl resolutely shook her head, and the dying light showed me her slender fingers tightly clenched on the handle of the door. "I will see that you do not suffer; but I am mistress of this house, and I think you are an English gentleman, Trooper Cotton," she said.

Then, with an air of desperation, the lad turned to me. "Won't you try to persuade her, Ormesby?"

"No," I said dryly. "I am Miss Haldane's guest, and not a police officer. I am sorry for you, Cotton, but you have done your best, and even if you forget your own traditions I'll certainly see you show her due respect. It is not your fault that I have twice your strength, but it will be if, while Miss Haldane remains here, you summon your comrades by a shout."

"Confound you! You never thought – " he broke out; but, ceasing abruptly, he left the sentence incomplete; and, feeling that there were two sides to the question, I stood aside while he commenced a circuit of the room, which he might have done earlier. Still, Lucille Haldane did not move, for each moment gained might be valuable, until, with an ejaculation, he discovered and sprang through the other door. Then, hurrying to her side, I laid my hand reassuringly on the girl's arm and found she was trembling like a leaf as I drew the door open.

"You must not lose a moment, and I think you should tell your father; but you can trust me to manage Cotton and keep what has passed a secret," I said.

There was a faint "Thank you"; while hardly had she flitted down the passage than a shout rang out, and hurrying as for my life, I found Cotton pounding on the inner door of the ante-room. Noticing that the window was shut, I seized his shoulder and gripped it hard. "Pull yourself together, and remember, that whatever tale you tell, Miss Haldane does not figure in it," I said. "A horse would be no use to him; but I'll make sure by a run to the stable while you acquaint the sergeant."

It was still snowing, and the drifts were deep, but I managed to plunge my feet into the hollows left by somebody who had preceded me, and there was a bottle of brandy in my pocket. I returned, floundering as heavily as possible along my outward tracks – for one learns a good deal when trailing wandering steers or stalking antelope – and met Cotton, who now carried his carbine. It was evident that he was bent on discharging his duty thoroughly, for when I announced that no horses were missing, he answered shortly: "Thanks; but I'm going myself to see. Mackay and Mr. Haldane are waiting for you."

I smiled to myself. Trooper Cotton had acquired small proficiency in the art of tracking, and I knew that my footprints would not only deceive him, but that, following them, he would obliterate evidence that might have been conclusive to the sergeant's practiced eyes. All the male inmates of Bonaventure had gathered, half-dressed, in the hall, and Sergeant Mackay, who was asking questions, turned to me. "Ye were here when he came in, Rancher Ormesby?"

"I was," I answered. "I didn't hear him until he was in the room; but he seemed starving, and presumably ran the risk in the hope of obtaining food."

"Why did ye not seize him or raise the alarm?" asked the sergeant; and I shrugged my shoulders.

"I was wholly unarmed, and he is a desperate man with a pistol. You may remember mentioning that his capture was not my business."

"I mind that I have seen ye take as heavy risks when, for a five-dollar wager, ye drove a loaded sledge over the rotten ice," said the sergeant, with a searching glance at me. "While ye did nothing Trooper Cotton came in to help ye?"

"Just so! He had no weapon either, but appeared quite willing to face the outlaw's pistol, when the candle went out, and the man must have slipped out by the second door in the dark. I made for the stables at once, but all the horses were safe. My own, I discovered earlier, had come back by itself."

"Ye showed little sense," said Mackay; while Haldane glanced curiously at me. "What would he do with a horse in two foot of snow? There are points I'm no' clear about; but there'll be time for questions later. Ah! Found ye anything, Trooper Cotton?"

"No," said the lad. "Nothing but the footprints made by Ormesby; and I can only presume that, there being no lee on that side, the wind would fill the horse-thief's track with snow. He would never risk trying the outbuildings when he knew that we were here."

"No," was the sergeant's answer. "He'll be for the ravine. We'll take our leave, Mr. Haldane, with thanks for your hospitality, leaving the horses in the meantime. It is a regret to me we have brought this disturbance upon ye."

Two minutes later the police had vanished into the snow, and in another ten Bonaventure was almost silent again. I went back to my couch and slept soundly, being too wearied to wonder whether I had done well or ill. Next morning Haldane called me into a room of his own.

"My daughter has told me what took place last night, and while, in one sense, I'm indebted to you, Ormesby, I really can't decide whether you showed a lamentable lack of judgment in abetting her," he said. "She is a brave little soul, but does not always spare time to think. Frankly, I wish this thing had not come about as it did."

He spoke seriously, but there was a kindness in his eyes, and it was easy to see that Carson Haldane's younger daughter was his idol, which slightly puzzled me. There were those who heaped abuse upon his head, and it is possible his financial operations did not benefit everybody, for when men grow rich by speculation somebody must lose. There are, however, many sides to every nature, and I always found him an upright, kindly gentleman, while only those who knew him best could guess that he was faithful to a memory, and that the gracious influence of one he had lost still swayed him.

"I am sorry if I acted indiscreetly, sir; but I could think of no other course at the time," I said. "Do you know where the man is now?"

"It is sometimes unwise to ask questions, and I have not inquired too closely," and Haldane laid his hand on my shoulder. "It must be our secret, Ormesby, and I should prefer that Miss Haldane did not share it; this – I suppose one must call it an escapade – might trouble her. I presume you could rely on that lad's discretion. He was evidently not brought up for a police trooper."

"I think you could depend on him, sir; and, as you know, a good many others in this country follow vocations they were never intended for."

"Well, we will say no more on that subject," he answered. "The doctors tell me I have been working under too great a strain, and as they recommend quiet and relaxation, I decided to try six months' practical ranching. My partner will no doubt arrange that other folks pay the bill; but this is hardly a peaceful beginning."

Haldane laughed before he added, significantly: "In one respect I'm duly grateful, Ormesby, and – in confidence – here is a proof of it. You are staking high on the future of this region. Well, the railroad will be built, which will naturally make a great difference in the value of adjacent land. You will, however, remember that, in accordance with medical advice, I am now ranching for my health."

I remembered it was said that Carson Haldane could anticipate long before anybody else what the powers at Ottawa would sanction or veto, and that a hint from him was valuable. "It is good news, and I presume that Bonaventure will have extended its boundaries by the time you recover, sir," I said.

That evening Sergeant Mackay returned to requisition provisions, and departed again. He was alone, and very much disgusted, having no news of the fugitive. He did not revisit Bonaventure during the next day I remained there, and presumably the man he sought slipped away when the coast was clear. Perhaps the fact that the whirling drifts would obliterate his tracks had deceived the sergeant, and we supposed the contrabandists who dealt in prohibited liquor had smuggled him across the American frontier. The night before I took my leave Beatrice Haldane looked across at her sister, who sat sewing near the stove, and then at me.

"Since you recovered your horse I am not altogether sorry the hunted man got away," she said. "There are, however, two things about the affair which puzzle me – how the candlestick my sister carried when she made the rounds reached the table in the hall where it is never left; and why I should find the candle it contained under the sideboard in the room the intruder entered! Can you suggest any solution, Mr. Ormesby?"

I felt uncomfortable, knowing that Beatrice Haldane was not only clever herself, but the daughter of a very shrewd man, while her eyes were fixed steadily on me. Lucille's head bent lower over her sewing, and, though I would have given much to answer frankly, I felt that she trusted me. So I said, as indifferently as I could: "There might be several, and the correct one very simple. Somebody must have knocked the candlestick over in his hurry and forgotten about it. Have you been studying detective literature latterly?"

Beatrice Haldane said nothing further; but I realized that I had incurred her displeasure, and was not greatly comforted by the grateful glance her sister flashed at me.

CHAPTER IV

THE TIGHTENING OF THE NET

It was a hot morning of early summer when I rode up the low rise to my house at Gaspard's Trail. A few willows straggled behind one side of it, but otherwise it rose unsheltered from the wind-swept plain, which, after a transitory flush of greenness, had grown dusty white again. I had been in the saddle since sunrise, when the dewy freshness had infused cheerfulness and vigor into my blood, but now it was with a feeling of dejection I reined in my horse and sat still, looking about me.

The air was as clear as crystal, so that the birches far off on the western horizon cut sharply against the blue. All around the rest of the circle ran an almost unbroken sweep of white and gray, streaked in one place by the dust of alkali rolling up from a strip of bitter water, which flashed like polished steel. Long plow-furrows stretched across the foreground, but even these had been baked by pitiless sunshine to the same monotony of color, and it was well I had not sown the whole of them, for sparse, sickly blades rose in the wake of the harrows where tall wheat should have been. Behind these stood the square log dwelling and straggling outbuildings of logs and sod, all of a depressing ugliness, while two shapeless yellow mounds, blazing under the sunshine, represented the strawpile granaries. There was no touch of verdure in all the picture, for it had been a dry season, which boded ill for me.

Presently a horse and a rider, whose uniform was whitened by the fibrous dust, swung out of a shallow ravine – or *coulée*, as we called them – and Trooper Cotton cantered towards me. "Hotter than ever, and I suppose that accounts for your downcast appearance," he said. "I've never seen weather like it. Even the gophers are dead."

"It grows sickening; but you are wrong in one respect," I answered ruefully. "All the gophers in the country have collected around my grain and wells. As they fall in after every hearty meal of wheat, we have been drinking them. You are just in time for breakfast, and I'll be glad of your company. One overlooks a good deal when things are going well, but the sordid monotony of these surroundings palls on one now and then."

"You are not the only man who feels it," said the trooper, while a temporary shadow crossed his face. "You have been to Bonaventure too often, Ormesby. Of course, it's delightful to get into touch with things one has almost forgotten, but I don't know that it's wise for a poor man, which is, perhaps, why I allowed Haldane to take me in last night. You, however, hardly come into the same category."

"I shall soon, unless there's a change in the weather," I answered with a frown. "But come in, and tell me what Haldane – or his daughters – said to you."

"I didn't see much of Miss Haldane," said Cotton, as we rode on together. "Of course, she's the embodiment of all a woman of that kind should be; but I can't help feeling it's a hospitable duty when she talks to me. You see I've forgotten most of the little I used to know, and she is, with all respect, uncomfortably superior to an average individual."

I was not pleased with Trooper Cotton, but did not tell him so. "Presumably you find Miss Lucille understands you better?" I answered, with a trace of ill-humor.

The lad looked straight at me. "I'm not responsible for the weather, Ormesby," he said, a trifle stiffly. "Still, since you have put it so, it's my opinion that Miss Lucille Haldane would understand anybody. She has the gift of making you feel it also. To change the subject, however, I was over warning Bryan about his fireguard furrows, and yours hardly seem in accordance with the order."

I laughed, and said nothing further until a man in a big straw hat appeared in the doorway. "Who's that?" asked Cotton, drawing his bridle.

"Foster Lane," I answered. "He came over yesterday."

"Ah!" said the trooper, pulling out his watch. "On reflection, perhaps I had better not come in. I am due at the Cree reserve by ten, and, as my horse is a little lame, I don't want to press him. This time you will excuse me."

His excuse was certainly lame, as I could see little the matter with the horse; and, being short of temper that morning, I answered sharply: "I won't press you; but is it a coincidence that you remember this only when you recognize Lane?"

Trooper Cotton, who was frank by nature and a poor diplomatist, looked uneasy. "I don't want to offend you, Ormesby, but one must draw the line somewhere, and I will not sit down with that man," he said. "I know he's your guest, but you would not let me back out gracefully, and, if it's not impertinent, I'll add that I'm sorry he is."

"I congratulate you on being able to draw lines, but just now I myself cannot afford to be particular," I answered dryly; and when, with a feeble apology, Cotton rode away, it cost me an effort to greet the other man civilly.

As breakfast was ready, he took his place at the table, and glanced at me whimsically. Foster Lane was neither very prepossessing nor distinctly the reverse in appearance. He was stout, and somewhat flabby in face, with straw-colored hair and a thick-lipped mouth; but while his little eyes had a humorous twinkle, there was a suggestion of force as well as cunning about him. He was of middle age, and besides representing a so-styled "development company" was, by profession, land agent, farmers' financier, and mortgage jobber, and, as naturally follows, a usurer.

"Say, I'm not deaf yet, Ormesby," he commenced, with coarse good-humor. "Particular kind of trooper that one, isn't he? Is he another broken-up British baronet's youngest son, or – because they only raise his kind in the old country – what has the fellow done?"

"He's a friend of mine," I answered. "I never inquired of him. Still, I'm sorry you overheard him."

"That's all right," was the answer. "My hide is a pretty thick one; and one needs such a protection in my business. Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him, Rancher Ormesby, although I flatter myself I'm a necessity in a new country. How many struggling ranchers would go under in a dry season but for my assistance; and how many fertile acres now growing the finest wheat would lie waste but for me? Yet, when I ask enough to live on, in return, every loafer without energy or foresight abuses me. It's a very ungrateful world, Ormesby."

Lane chuckled as he wiped his greasy forehead, and paused before he continued: "I've been thinking all night about carrying over the loan you mentioned, and though money's scarce just now, this is my suggestion. I'll let you have three-fourths of its present appraised value on Crane Valley, and you can then clear Gaspard's Trail, and handle a working balance. I'd sooner do that than carry over – see?"

I set down my coffee cup because I did not see. I had expected he would have exacted increased interest on the loan due for repayment, and interest in Western Canada is always very high; but it seemed curious that he should wish to change one mortgage for another. It also struck me that if, in case I failed to make repayment, Crane Valley would be valuable to him, it should be worth at least as much to me.

"That would not suit me," I said.

"No?" and Lane spoke slowly, rather as one asking a question than with a hint of menace. "Feel more like letting me foreclose on you?"

"You could not do that, because I should pay you off," I said. "I could do it, though there's no use denying that it would cripple me just now. As of course you know, whatever I could realize on at present, when everybody is short of money and trade at a standstill, should bring twice as much next season. That is why I wish the loan to run on."

"Well!" And Lane helped himself before he answered. "In that case, I'll have to tax you an extra ten per cent. It seems high, but no bank would look at encumbered property or a half-developed

place like Crane Valley. Take it, or leave it, at six months' date. That would give you time to sell your fat stock and realize on your harvest."

I fancied there was a covert sneer in the last words, because I had faint hope of any harvest, and answered accordingly. "It seems extortionate, but even so, should pay me better than sacrificing now."

"Money's scarce," said Lane suavely. "I'm going on to Lawrence's, and will send you in the papers. Lend me as good a horse as you have for a day or two."

I did not like the man's tone, and the request was too much like an order; but I made no further comment; though a load seemed lifted from me when he rode away, and I started with my foreman to haul home prairie hay. It was fiercely hot, and thick dust rolled about our light wagon, while each low rise, cut off as it were from the bare levels, floated against the horizon. The glare tired one's vision, and, half-closing my aching eyes, I sank into a reverie. For eight long years I had toiled late and early, taxing the strength of mind and body to the utmost. I had also prospered, and lured on by a dream, first dreamed in England, I grew more ambitious, breaking new land and extending my herds with borrowed capital. That had also paid me until a bad season came, and when both grain and cattle failed, Lane became a menace to my prosperity. It was a bare life I and my foreman lived, for every dollar hardly won was entrusted in some shape to the kindly earth again, and no cent wasted on comforts, much less luxuries; but I had seldom time to miss either of them, and it was not until Haldane brought his daughters to Bonaventure that I saw what a man with means and leisure might make of his life. Then came the reaction, and there were days when I grew sick of the drudgery and heavy physical strain; but still, spurred on alternately by hope and fear, I relaxed no effort.

Now, artificial grasses are seldom sown on the prairie where usually the natural product grows only a few inches high, and as building logs are scarce, implements are often kept just where they last were used. It was therefore necessary to seek hay worth cutting in a dried-out slough, or swamp, and next to find the mower, which might lie anywhere within a radius of four miles or so. We came upon them both together, the mower lying on its side, red with rust, amid a stretch of waist-high grass. The latter was harsh and wiry, heavy-scented with wild peppermint, and made ready for us by the sun.

There were, however, preliminary difficulties, and I had worked myself into a state of exasperation before the rusty machine could be induced to run. After a vigorous hammering and the reckless use of oil the pair of horses were at last just able to haul it, groaning vehemently, through the dried-up swamp. I was stripped almost to the skin by this time, the dust that rose in clouds turned to mire upon my dripping cheeks and about my eyes, while bloodthirsty winged creatures hovered round my head.

"This," said Foreman Thorn, as he wiped the red specks from his face and hands, "is going to be a great country. We can raise the finest insects on the wide earth already. The last time I was down to Traverse a man came along from somewhere with a gospel tent, and from what he said there wasn't much chance for anyone to raise cattle. He'd socked it to us tolerable for half-an-hour at least, when Tompson's Charlie gets up and asks him: 'Did you ever break half-thawn sod with oxen?' 'No, my man; but this interruption is unseemly,' says he. 'It's not a conundrum,' says Charlie. 'Did you ever sleep in a mosquito muskeg or cut hay in a dried-out slough?' and the preacher seeing we all wanted an answer, shakes his head. 'Then you start in and try, and find out that there are times when a man must talk or bust, before you worry us,' says Charlie. But who's coming along now?"

I had been too busy to pay much attention to the narrative or to notice a rattle of wheels, and I looked up only when a wagon was drawn up beside the slough. A smooth-shaven man, with something familiar about his face, sat on the driving-seat smiling down at me.

"Good-morning, Rancher Ormesby. Wanting any little pictures of yourself to send home to friends in the old country?" he said, pointing to what looked like the lens of a camera projecting through the canvas behind him. "I'll take you for half-a-dollar, as you are, if you'll give me the right to sell enlargements as a prairie study."

The accent was hardly what one might have expected from one of the traveling adventurers who at intervals wandered across the country, and I looked at the speaker with a puzzled air. "I have no time to spare for fooling, and don't generally parade half-naked before either the public or my civilized friends," I said.

"Some people look best that way," answered the other, regarding me critically; whereupon Thorn turned round and grinned. "The team and tall grass would make an effective background. Stand by inside there, Edmond. It's really not a bad model of a bare throat and torso, and as I don't know that your face is the best of you, the profile with a shadow on it would do – just so! Say, I wonder did you know those old canvas overalls drawn in by the leggings are picturesque and become you? There – I'm much obliged to you."

A faint click roused me from the state of motionless astonishment his sheer impudence produced, and when I strode forward Thorn's grin of amusement changed to one of expectancy. "You don't want any hair-restorer, apparently, though I've some of the best in the Dominion at a dollar the bottle; but I could give you a salve for the complexion," continued the traveler, and I stopped suddenly when about to demand the destruction of the negative or demolish his camera.

"Good heavens, Boone! Is it you; and what is the meaning of this mummery?" I asked, staring at him more amazed than ever.

"Just now I'm called Adams, if you please," said the other, holding out his hand. "I hadn't an opportunity for thanking you for your forbearance when we met at Bonaventure, but I shall not readily forget it. This is not exactly mummery. It provides me with a living, and suits my purpose. I could not resist the temptation of trying to discover whether you recognized me, or whether I was playing my part artistically."

"Are you not taking a big risk, and why don't you exploit a safer district?" I asked; and the man smiled as he answered: "I don't think there's a settler around here who would betray me even if he guessed my identity, and the troopers never got a good look at me. I live two or three hundred miles east, you see, and the loss of a beard and mustache alters any man's appearance considerably. I also have a little business down this way. Have you seen anything of Foster Lane during the last week or two?"

"Yes," I said. "He has just ridden over from my place to Lawrence's, in Crane Valley."

"You have land there, too," said Boone, as though aware of it already; and when I nodded, added: "Then if you are wise you will see that devil does not get his claws on it. I presume you are not above taking a hint from me?"

I looked straight at him. "I know very little of you except that there is a warrant out for your arrest, and I am not addicted to taking advice from strangers."

Boone returned my gaze steadily without resentment, and I had time to take note of him. He was a tall, spare, sinewy man, deeply bronzed like most of us; but now that he had, as it were, cast off all pertaining to the traveling pedlar, there was an indefinite something in his speech and manner which could hardly have been acquired on the prairie. He did not look much over thirty, but his forehead was seamed, and from other signs one might have fancied he was a man with a painful history. Then he flicked the dust off his jean garments with the whip, and laughed a little.

"I am an Englishman, Rancher Ormesby, and, needless to say, so are you. We are not a superfluously civil people, and certain national characteristics betray you. I fancy we shall be better acquainted, and, that being so, feel prompted to tell you a story which, after what passed at Bonaventure, you perhaps have a right to know. You will stop a while for lunch, anyway, and if you have no objections I will take mine along with you."

I could see no reasonable objection to this, and presently we sat together under the wagon for the sake of coolness, while, when the mower ceased its rattle, the dust once more settled down upon the slough. It was almost too hot to eat; there was no breath of wind, and the glare of the sun-scorched prairie grew blinding.

"I should not wonder if you took most kindly to indirect advice, and there is a moral to this story," said Boone, when I lit my pipe. "Some years ago a disappointed man, who knew a little about land and horses, came out from the old country to farm on the prairie, bringing with him a woman used hitherto to the smoother side of life. He saw it was a good land and took hold with energy, believing the luck had turned at last, while the woman helped him gallantly. For a time all went well with them, but the loneliness and hardship proved too much for the woman, whose strength was of the spirit and not of the body, and she commenced to droop and pine. She made no complaint, but her eyes lost their brightness, and she grew worn and thin, while the man grew troubled. She had already given up very much for him. He saw his neighbors prospering on borrowed capital, and, for the times were good, determined to risk sowing a double acreage. That meant comfort instead of privation if all went well, and, toiling late and early, he sowed hope for a brighter future along with the grain. So far it is not an uncommon story."

I nodded, when the speaker, pausing, stared somberly towards the horizon, for since that English visit I also had staked all I hoped for in the future on the chances of the seasons.

"The luck went against him," the narrator continued. "Harvest frost, drought, and summer hail followed in succession, and when the borrowed money melted the man who held the mortgage foreclosed. He was within his rights in this, but he went further, for while there were men in that district who would, out of kindness or as a speculation, have bought up the settler's possessions at fair prices, the usurer had his grasp also on them, and when a hint was sent them they did nothing. Therefore the auction was a fraud and robbery, and all was bought up by a confederate for much less than its value. There was enough to pay the loan off – although the interest had almost done so already – but not enough to meet the iniquitous additions; and the farmer went out ruined on to Government land with a few head of stock a richer man he had once done a service to gave him; but the woman sickened in the sod hovel he built. There was no doctor within a hundred miles, and the farmer had scarcely a dollar to buy her necessaries. Even then the usurer had not done with him. He entered proceedings to claim the few head of cattle for balance of the twice-paid debt. The farmer could not defend himself; somebody took money for willful perjury to evade a clause of the homestead exemptions, and the usurer got his order. The woman lay very ill when he came with a band of desperadoes to seize the cattle. They threatened violence; a fracas followed, and the farmer's hands were, for once, unsteady on the rifle he did not mean to use, for when a drunken cowboy would have ransacked his dwelling the trigger yielded prematurely, and the usurer was carried off with a bullet through his leg. The woman died, and was buried on a lonely rise of the prairie; and the man rode out with hatred in his heart and a price upon his head. You should know the rest of the story – but the sequel is to follow. It was not without an effort or a motive I told it you."

I stretched out my hand impulsively towards the speaker. "It is appreciated. I need not ask one name, but the other – "

"Is Foster Lane; and in due time he shall pay in full for all."

Boone's voice, which had grown a trifle husky, sank with the last words to a deeper tone, and the sinewy right hand he raised for a moment fell heavily, tight-clenched, upon his knee. He said nothing further for a while, but I felt that if ever the day of reckoning came one might be sorry for Foster Lane.

Presently he shrugged his shoulders and rose abruptly. "I have a case of pomade to sell the Swedes over yonder, and if my luck is good, some photographs to take," he said, resuming his former manner. "I presume you wouldn't care to decorate your house with tin-framed oleographs of German manufacture. I have a selection, all of the usual ugliness. Whatever happens, one must eat, you know. Well, Lane's gone into Crane Valley, and it happens I'm going that way, too. This, I hope, is the beginning of an acquaintance, Ormesby."

He sold Thorn a bottle of some infallible elixir before he climbed into his tented wagon, and left me troubled as he jolted away across the prairie. One thing, however, I was resolved upon, and

that was to pay off Foster Lane at the earliest opportunity. By parting with my best stock at a heavy sacrifice it seemed just possible to accomplish it.

CHAPTER V

A SURPRISE PARTY

Except when the snow lies deep one has scanty leisure on the prairie, and when Adams departed Thorn and I hurriedly recommenced our task. We had lost time to make up, and vied with each other; for I had discovered that, even in a country where all work hard, much more is done for the master who can work himself. Pitching heavy trusses into a wagon is not child's play at that temperature, but just then the exertion brought relief, and I was almost sorry when Thorn went off with the lurching vehicle, leaving me to the mower and my thoughts. The latter were not overpleasant just then. Still, the machine needed attention, and the horses needed both restraint and encouragement, for at times they seemed disposed to lie down, and at others, maddened by the insects, inclined to kick the rusty implement into fragments, and I grew hoarse with shouting, while the perspiration dripped from me.

It was towards six o'clock, and the slanting sunrays beat pitilessly into my face, which was thick with fibrous grime, when, with Thorn lagging behind, I tramped stiffly beside the wagon towards my house. My blue shirt was rent in places; the frayed jean jacket, being minus its buttons, refused to meet across it; and nobody new to the prairie would have taken me for the owner of such a homestead as Gaspard's Trail. Thick dust, through which mounted figures flitted, rolled about the dwelling, and a confused bellowing mingled with the human shouts that rose from behind the long outbuildings.

"It's Henderson's boys bringing shipping stock along. Somebody's been squeezing him for money or he wouldn't sell at present," said Thorn, who rejoined me. "They'll camp here to-night and clean up the larder. I guess most everybody knows how Henderson feeds them."

There are disadvantages attached to the prairie custom of free hospitality, and I surmised that Henderson's stock riders might have pushed on to the next homestead if they had not known that we kept a good table at Gaspard's Trail. Nevertheless, I was thankful that no stranger need ever leave my homestead hungry, and only wondered whether my cook's comments would be unduly sulphurous. When I reached the wire-fenced corral, which was filled with circling cattle and an intolerable dust, a horseman flung his hand up in salute.

"We're bound for the Indian Spring Bottom with an H triangle draft," he said. "The grass is just frizzled on the Blackfeet run, and we figured we'd camp right here with you to-night."

"That's all right; but couldn't you have fetched Carson's by dusk without breaking anybody's neck; and yonder beasts aren't branded triangle H," I said.

The horseman laughed silently in prairie fashion. "Well, we might and we mightn't; but Carson's a close man, and I've no great use for stale flapjacks and glucose drips. No, sir, I'm not greedy, and we'll just let Carson keep them for himself. Those beasts marked dash circle are the best of the lot. Lane's put the screw on Redmond, and forced him to part. Redmond's down on his luck. He's crawling round here somewhere, cussing Lane tremendous."

"Lane seems to own all this country," I answered irritably. "Has he got a hold on your master, too? I told him and Redmond I was saving that strip of sweet prairie for myself."

"He will own all the country, if you bosses don't kick in time," was the dry answer. "I don't know how ours is fixed, but he's mighty short in temper, and you've no monopoly of unrecorded prairie. Say, it might save your boys a journey if we took your stock along with us and gave them a chance before this draft cleans all the sweet grass up. Redmond told me to mention it."

The offer was opportune, and I accepted it; then hurried towards the galvanized iron shed which served as summer quarters for the general utility man who acted as cook. He was a genius at his business, though he had learned it on board a sailing ship. He was using fiery language as he banged his pans about. "It's a nice state of things when a cattle-whacking loafer can walk right in and tell me what he wants for his supper," he commenced. "General Jackson! it's bad enough when a blame

cowboy outfit comes down on one like the locusts and cleans everything up, but it's worse just when I'm trying to fix a special high-grade meal."

"I'm not particular. What is good enough for a cowboy is good enough for a rancher any time," I said; and the cook, who was despotic master of his own domain, jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the house. "Guess it mightn't be to-night. Get out, and give me a fair show. You're blocking up the light."

I went on towards the house, wondering what he could mean, but halted on the threshold of our common room, a moment too late. We had worked night and day during spring and early summer, and the sparely-furnished room was inches deep in dust. Guns, harness I had no time to mend, and worn-out garments lay strewn about it, save where, in a futile attempt to restore order, I had hurled a pile of sundries into one corner. Neither was I in exactly a condition suitable for feminine society, and Beatrice Haldane, who had by some means preserved her dainty white dress immaculate, leaned back in an ox-hide chair regarding me with quiet amusement. Her father lounged smoking in the window seat, and it was his younger daughter who, when I was about to retreat, came forward and mischievously greeted me.

"I believe you were ready to run away, Mr. Ormesby, and you really don't seem as much pleased to see us as you ought to be," she said. "You know you often asked us to visit you, so you have brought this surprise party on your own head."

"I hope you will not suffer for your rashness, but you see those men out there. They generally leave famine behind them when they come," I said.

The girl nodded. "They are splendid. I have been talking to them, and made one sit still while I drew him. Please don't trouble about supper. I have seen cookie, and he's going to make the very things I like."

Miss Haldane's eyebrows came down just a trifle, and I grew uneasy, wondering whether it was the general state of chaos or my own appearance which had displeased her; but Haldane laughed heartily before he broke in: "Lucille is all Canadian. She has not been to Europe yet, and I am not sure that I shall send her. She has examined the whole place already, and decided that you must be a very – "

The girl's lips twitched with suppressed merriment, but she also reddened a little; and I interposed: "A very busy man, was it not? Now you must give me ten minutes in which to make myself presentable."

I was glad to escape, and, for reasons, withdrew sideways in crab fashion, while what suspiciously resembled smothered laughter followed me. By good luck, and after upsetting the contents of two bureaus upon the floor, I was able to find garments preserved for an occasional visit to the cities, and, flinging the window open, I hailed a man below to bring me a big pail of water. He returned in ten minutes with a very small one, and with the irate cook expostulating behind him, while I feared his comments would be audible all over the building.

"Cook says the well's playing out, and washing's foolishness this weather. The other pail's got dead gophers in it, and Jardine allows he caught cookie fishing more of them out of the water he used for the tea."

"Fling them out, and for heaven's sake let me have the thing. I'm getting used to gophers, and dead ones can't bite you," I said, fearing that if the indignant cook got to close quarters the precious fluid might be spilled. Then while I completed my toilet Cotton came in.

"Perhaps I was hardly civil this morning," he commenced. "I'm out for four days' fire-guard inspecting, and thought I'd come round and tell you – "

"That you saw the Bonaventure wagon heading in this direction," I interposed. "Well, you're always welcome at Gaspard's Trail, and I presume you won't feel tempted to draw the line at my present guests."

Cotton dropped into my one sound chair. "I suppose I deserve it, Ormesby. We shall not get such opportunities much longer, and one can't help making the most of them," he said.

We went down together; and there was no doubt that the cook had done his best, while Haldane laughed and his younger daughter looked very demure when, as we sat down at table, I stared about my room. It had lost its bare appearance, the thick dust had gone, and there was an air of comfort about it I had never noticed before.

"You see what a woman's hand can do. Lucille couldn't resist the temptation of straightening things for you," observed the owner of Bonaventure. "She said the place resembled a – "

The girl blushed a little, and shook her head warningly at her father, while, as she did so, her bright hair caught a shaft of light from the window and shimmered like burnished gold. For a moment it struck me that she equaled her sister in beauty; and she was wholly bewitching with the mischief shining in her eyes. There was, however, a depth of kindness beneath the mischief, and I had seen the winsome face grow proud with a high courage one night when the snows whirled about Bonaventure. Nevertheless, I straightway forgot it when Beatrice Haldane set to work among the teacups at the head of the table, for her presence transfigured the room. I had often, as I sat there through the bitter winter nights, pictured her taking a foremost place in some scene of brightness in London or Montreal, but never presiding at my poor table or handling my dilapidated crockery with her dainty fingers. She did it, as she did everything, very graciously; while, to heighten the contrast, the lowing of cattle and the hoarse shouts of those who drove them, mingled with whipcracks and the groaning of jolting wagons, came in through the open windows.

For a time the meal progressed satisfactorily. Haldane was excellent company, and I had almost forgotten my fears that some untoward accident might happen, when his younger daughter asked: "What is a gopher, Mr. Cotton? I have heard of them, but never saw one."

I projected a foot in his direction under the table, regretting I had discarded my working boots, and Haldane, dropping his fork, looked up sharply.

"A little beast between a rat and a squirrel, which lives in a hole in the ground. There are supposed to be more of them round Gaspard's Trail than anywhere in Canada," answered the trooper, incautiously. "That's quite correct, Ormesby. You cannot contradict me."

I did not answer, but grew uneasy, seeing that he could not take a hint; and the girl continued: "Are they fond of swimming?"

"I don't think so," answered Cotton, with a slightly puzzled air; and then added, with an infantile attempt at humor, for which I longed to choke him: "I'm not a natural historian, but Ormesby ought to know. I found him not long ago in a very bad temper fishing dozens of dead ones out of his well. Perhaps they swam too long, and were too tired to climb out, you know."

Lucille Haldane, who had been thirsty, gave a little gasp and laid her hand on the cup Cotton would have passed on for replenishing. Her sister glanced at her with some surprise, and then quietly set down her own, while I grew hot all over and felt savagely satisfied by the way he winced that this time I had got my heel well down on Cotton's toe. Then there was an awkward silence until Haldane, leaning back in his chair, laughed boisterously when the lad, attempting to retrieve one blunder, committed another.

"I am afraid there are a good many at Bonaventure, and it is not Ormesby's fault, you see. It is almost impossible for anybody to keep them out of the wells in dry weather; but nobody minds a few gophers in this country."

Haldane had saved the situation; but his elder daughter filled no more teacups, and both my fair guests seemed to lose their appetite, while I was almost glad when the meal I had longed might last all night was over and Lucille and her father went out to inspect the cattle. I, however, detained Cotton, who was following them with alacrity.

"Your jokes will lead you into trouble some day, and it's a pity you couldn't have displayed your genius in any other direction," I said.

"You need not get so savage over a trifle," he answered apologetically. "I really didn't mean to upset things – it was an inspiration. No man with any taste could be held responsible for his answers when a girl with eyes like hers cross-questions him. You really ought to cultivate a better temper, Ormesby."

I let him go, and joined Beatrice Haldane, who had remained behind the rest. She did not seem to care about horses and cattle, and appeared grateful when I found her a snug resting-place beneath the strawpile granary.

"You are to be complimented, since you have realized at least part of your aspirations," she said, as she swept a glance round my possessions. "Is it fair to ask, are you satisfied with – this?"

I followed her eyes with a certain thrill of pride. Wheat land, many of the dusty cattle, broad stretch of prairie, barns, and buildings were mine, and the sinewy statuesque horsemen, who came up across the levels behind further bunches of dappled hide and tossing horns, moved at my bidding. By physical strain and mental anxiety I had steadily extended the boundaries of Gaspard's Trail, and, had I been free from Lane, would in one respect have been almost satisfied. Then I looked up at my companion, whose pale-tinted draperies and queenly head with its clustering dark locks were outlined against the golden straw, and a boldness, as well as a great longing, came upon me.

"It is a hard life, but a good one," I said. "There is no slackening of anxiety and little time for rest, but the result is encouraging. When I took hold, with a few hundred pounds capital, Gaspard's Trail was sod-built and its acreage less than half what it is at present; but this is only the beginning, and I am not content. Bad seasons do not last forever, and in spite of obstacles I hope the extension will continue until it is the largest holding on all this prairie; but even that consummation will be valuable only as the means to an end."

Beatrice Haldane looked at me with perfect composure. "Is it all worth while, and how long have you been so ambitious?" she asked, with a smile, the meaning of which I could not fathom.

"Since a summer spent in England showed me possibilities undreamed of before," I said; and while it is possible that the vibration in my voice betrayed me, the listener's face remained a mask. Beatrice Haldane was already a woman of experience.

"One might envy your singleness of purpose, but there are things which neither success nor money can buy," she said. "Probably you have no time to carefully analyze your motives, but it is not always wise to take too much for granted. Even if you secured all you believe prosperity could give you you might be disappointed. Wiser men have found themselves mistaken, Rancher Ormesby."

"You are right in the first case," I answered. "But in regard to the other, would not the effort be proof enough? Would any man spend the best years of his life striving for what he did not want?"

"Some have spent the whole of it, which was perhaps better than having the longer time for disappointment," answered the girl, with a curious smile. "But are we not drifting, as we have done before, into a profitless discussion of subjects neither of us knows much about? Besides, the sun is swinging farther west and the glare hurts my eyes, while father and Lucille appear interested yonder."

Beatrice Haldane always expressed herself quietly, but few men would have ventured to disregard her implied wishes, and I took the hint, fearing I had already said too much. Gaspard's Trail was not yet the finest homestead on the prairie, and the time to speak had not arrived. When we joined Haldane it was a somewhat stirring sight we looked upon. A draft of my own cattle came up towards the corral at a run, mounted men shouting as they cantered on each flank, while one, swinging a whip twice, raced at a gallop around the mass of tossing horns when the herd would have wheeled and broken away from the fence in a stampede. The earth vibrated to the beat of hoofs; human yells and a tumultuous bellowing came out of the dust; and I sighed with satisfaction when, cleverly turned by a rider, who would have lost his life had his horse's speed or his own nerve failed him, the beasts surged pell-mell into the enclosure. Much as I regretted to part with them, their sale should set me free of debt.

Then the flutter of a white dress caught my eye, and I saw Lucille Haldane, who, it seemed, had already pressed the foreman into her service, applauding when Thorn, cleverly roping a beast, reined in his horse, and, jerking it to a standstill, held it for her inspection. It no doubt pleased him to display his skill, but I saw it was with Thorn, as it had been with the sergeant, a privilege to interest the girl. She walked close up to the untamed creature, which, with heaving sides and spume dripping from its nostrils, seemed to glare less angrily at her, while Thorn appeared puzzled as he answered her rapid questions, and Haldane leaned on the rails with his face curiously tender as he watched her. Trooper Cotton, coming up, appropriated Miss Haldane with boyish assurance, and her father turned to me.

"My girl has almost run me off my feet, and now that she has taken possession of your foreman, I should be content to sit down to a quiet smoke," he said. "Will you walk back to the house with me?"

I could only agree, but I stopped on the way to speak to one of the men who had brought in the cattle. He was a struggling rancher, without enterprise or ability, and generally spoken of with semi-contemptuous pity. "I'm obliged to you, Redmond, for suggesting that you would take my draft along; but why didn't you come in and take supper with the rest? This sort of banquet strikes me as the reverse of neighborly," I said.

The man fidgeted as he glanced at the dirty handkerchief containing eatables beside him. "I figured you had quite enough without me, and I don't feel in much humor for company just now," he said. "This season has hit me mighty hard."

"Something more than the season has hit him," commented Haldane, as we proceeded. "If ever I saw a weak man badly ashamed of himself, that was one. You can't think of any underhand trick he might have played you lately?"

"No," I answered lightly. "He is a harmless creature, and has no possible reason for injuring me."

"Quite sure?" asked Haldane, with a glance over his shoulder as we entered the door. "I've seen men of his kind grow venomous when driven into a corner. However, it's cool and free from dust in here. Sit down and try this tobacco."

Haldane was said to be a shrewd judge of his fellowmen, but I could see no cause why Redmond should cherish a grudge against me, and knew he had spoken the truth when he said the seasons had hit him hardly. It was currently reported that he was heavily in debt, and the stock-rider had suggested that Lane was pressing him. When Haldane had lighted a cigar he took a roll of paper off the table and tossed it across to me, saying, "Is that your work, Ormesby?"

"No. I never saw it before," I answered, when a glance showed me that the paper contained a cleverly drawn map of our vicinity, and Haldane nodded.

"To tell the truth, I hardly expected it was. Some of your recent visitors must have dropped it, and as my daughter found it among the litter during the course of her improvements, and asked whether it should be preserved, I could not well help seeing what it was. Look at the thing again, and tell me what you conclude from it."

"That whoever made it had a good eye for the most valuable locations in this district," I answered, thoughtfully. "He has also shaded with the same tint part of my possessions in Crane Valley."

"Exactly!" and Haldane gazed intently into the blue cigar smoke. "Does it strike you that the man who made the map intended to acquire those locations, and that, considering the possible route of the railway, he showed a commendable judgment?"

"It certainly does so now," I answered; and Haldane favored me with a searching glance. "Then when you discover who it is, keep your eyes on him, and especially beware of giving him any hold on you."

I suspected that Lane had made the map, and it is a pity I did not take Haldane into my full confidence; but misguided pride forbade it, and we smoked in silence until the opportunity was lost,

for he rose, saying: "No peace for the wicked; the girls are returning. Great heavens! I thought the child had broken her neck!"

While Thorn went round by the slip-rails, a slender, white-robed figure on a big gray horse sailed over the tall fence and came up towards the house at a gallop, followed by the startled foreman. Haldane, whose unshakable calm was famous in Eastern markets, quivered nervously, and I felt relieved that there had been no accident, for it was a daring leap. Then, while Cotton and Beatrice Haldane followed, Lucille came in flushed and exultant.

"We have had a delightful time, father, and you must leave me in charge of Bonaventure when you go East," she said. "But where did you get the lady's saddle, Mr. Ormesby?"

"It is not mine," I answered, smiling. "It belongs to my neighbor's sister, Sally Steel. She rode a horse over here for Thorn to doctor."

I regretted the explanation too late. Steel was a good neighbor, but common report stigmatized his sister as a reckless coquette, and by the momentary contraction of Beatrice Haldane's forehead I feared that she had heard the gossip. If this were so, however, she showed no other sign of it.

When a delicious coolness preceded the dusk it was suggested that Cotton should sing to us, and he did so, fingering an old banjo of mine with no mean skill. I managed to find a place by Beatrice Haldane's side, and when the pale moon came out and the air had the quality of snow-cooled wine, her sister sang in turn to the trooper's accompaniment. I remember only that it was a song free from weak sentimentality, with an heroic undertone; but it stirred me, and a murmur of voices rose from the shadows outside. Then Foreman Thorn stood broad hat in hand, in the doorway.

"If it wouldn't be a liberty, miss, the boys would take it as an honor if you would sing that, or something else, over again. They've never heard nothing like it, even down to Winnipeg," he said.

The girl blushed a little, and looked at me. "They were kind to me. Do you really think it would please them?" she asked.

"If it doesn't they will be abominably ungrateful; but although we are not conventional, the request strikes me as a liberty," I said, noticing that her sister did not seem wholly pleased.

"Tell them I will do my best," was the answer, and, after a conference with Cotton, Lucille Haldane walked towards the open door. There was no trace of vanity or self-consciousness in her bearing. It was pure kindness which prompted her, and when she stood outside the building, with the star-strewn vault above her, and the prairie silver-gray at her feet, bareheaded, slight, and willowy in her thin white dress, it seemed small wonder that the dusty men who clustered about the wire fence swung down their broad hats to do her homage.

Perfect stillness succeeded, save for sounds made by the restless cattle; then the banjo tinkled, and a clear voice rang out through the soft transparency of the summer night: "All day long the reapers!"

There was a deep murmur when the last tinkle of the banjo sank into silence, a confused hum of thanks, and teamster and stock-rider melted away, and Lucille Haldane, returning, glanced almost apologetically at me.

"I just felt I had to please them," she said. "Even if you older people smile, I am proud of this great country, and it seems to me that these are the men who are making it what it will some day be. Don't you think that we who live idly in the cities owe a good deal to them?"

Haldane laid his hand caressingly on his daughter's arm. "Impulsive as ever – but perhaps you are right," he said. "In any case, it will be after midnight before we get home, and you might ask for our team, Ormesby."

Every man about Gaspard's Trail helped to haul up the wagon and harness the spirited team, while, in spite of Cotton's efforts, Thorn insisted on handing my youngest guest into the vehicle; and it was with some difficulty I exchanged parting civilities with the rest as the vehicle rolled away amid the stockmen's cheers.

CHAPTER VI

A HOLOCAUST

It was late one sultry night when I sat moodily beside an open window in my house at Gaspard's Trail. I had risen before the sun that morning, but, though tired with a long day's ride, I felt restless and ill-disposed to sleep. Thomas Steel, whose homestead stood some leagues away, lounged close by with his unlighted pipe on his knee and his coarse sun-faded shirt flung open showing his bronzed neck and the paler color of his ample chest. He was about my own age and possessed the frame of a gladiator, but there was limp dejection in his attitude.

"It's just awful weather, but there's a change at hand," he said. "It will be too late for some of us when it comes."

I merely nodded, and glanced out through the window. Thick darkness brooded over the prairie, though at intervals a flicker of sheet lightning blazed along the horizon and called up clumps of straggling birches out of the obscurity. A fitful breeze which eddied about the building set the grasses sighing, but it was without coolness, and laden with the smell of burning. Far-off streaks of crimson shone against the sky in token that grass-fires were moving down-wind across the prairie. They would, however, so far as we could see, hurt nobody. Steel fidgeted nervously until I began to wonder what was the matter with him, and when he thrust his chair backwards I said irritably: "For heaven's sake sit still. You look as ill at ease as if you had been told off to murder somebody."

The stalwart farmer's face darkened. "I feel 'most as bad, and have been waiting all evening to get the trouble out," he said. "Fact is, I'm borrowing money, and if you could let me have a few hundred dollars it would mean salvation."

I laughed harshly to hide my dismay. The prairie settlers stand by one another in time of adversity, and in earlier days Steel had been a good friend to me; but the request was singularly inopportune. Two bad seasons had followed each other, when the whole Dominion labored under a commercial depression; and though my estate was worth at ordinary values a considerable sum, it was only by sacrificing my best stock I could raise money enough to carry it on.

"If I get anything worth mentioning for the beasts I'll do my utmost, and by emptying the treasury perhaps I can scrape up two or three hundred now. What do you want with it?" I said.

"I thought you would help me," answered Steel, with a gasp of relief. "I've been played for the fool I am. I got a nice little book from the – Company, and it showed how any man with enterprise could get ahead by the aid of borrowed capital. Then its representative – very affable man – came along and talked considerable. I was a bit hard pressed, and the end was that he lent me money. There were a blame lot of charges, and the money seemed to melt away, while now, if I don't pay up, he'll foreclose on me."

I clenched my right hand viciously, for the man who had trapped poor Steel had also a hold on me, and I began to cherish a growing fear of the genial Lane.

"It's getting a common story around here," I said. "That man seems bent on absorbing all this country, but if only for that very reason we're bound to help each other to beat him. It will be a hard pull, but, though it all depends on what the stock fetch, I'll do the best I can."

Steel was profuse in his thanks, and I lapsed into a by no means overpleasant reverie. So some time passed until a glare of red and yellow showed up against the sky where none had been before.

"Looks like a mighty big fire. There's long grass feeding it, and it has just rolled over a ridge," said Steel. "Seems to me somewhere near the Indian Spring Bottom, but Redmond and the other fellow would drive the stock well clear."

Flinging my chair back I snatched a small compass from a shelf, laid it on the window-ledge, and, kneeling behind it, with a knife blade held across the card I took the bearings of the flame. "It's

coming right down on the bottom, and though by this time the stock is probably well clear, I'm a little uneasy about it. We'll ride over and make quite sure," I said.

"Of course!" Steel answered, and seemed about to add something, but thought better of it and followed me towards the stable. Thorn, who was prompt of action, had also seen the fire, for he was already busy with the horses; and inside of five minutes we were sweeping at a gallop across the prairie. Save for the intermittent play of lightning the darkness was Egyptian; and the grass was seamed by hollows and deadly badger-holes; but the broad blaze streamed higher for a beacon, and, risking a broken neck, I urged on the mettled beast beneath me. Grass fires are common, and generally are harmless enough in our country; but that one seemed unusually fierce, and an indefinite dread gained on me as the miles rolled behind us.

"It's the worst I've seen for several seasons. Whole ridge is blazing," panted Steel, as, with a great crackling, we swept neck and neck together through the tall grass of a slough in the midst of which Thorn's horse blundered horribly. Then we dipped into a ravine, reeling down the slope and splashing through caked mire where a little water had been. Every moment might be precious, and turning aside for nothing, we rode straight across the prairie, while at last I pressed the horse fiercely as a long rise shut out the blaze. Once we gained its crest the actual conflagration would be visible. The horse was white with lather, and I was almost blinded with sweat and dust when we gained the summit. Drawing bridle, I caught at my breath. The Sweetwater ran blood red beneath us, and the whole mile-wide hollow through which it flowed was filled with fire, while some distance down stream on the farther side a dusky mass was discernible through the rolling smoke which blew in long wisps in that direction. It seemed as though a cold hand had suddenly been laid on my heart, for the mass moved, and was evidently composed of close-packed and panic-stricken beasts.

"It's the Gaspard draft held up by the wing fence!" a voice behind me rose in a breathless yell.

I smote the horse, and we shot down the declivity. How the beast kept its footing I do not know, for there were thickets of wild berries and here and there thin willows to be smashed through; but we went down at a mad gallop, the clods whirling behind us and the wind screaming past, until we plunged into the Sweetwater through a cloud of spray. In places soft mire clogged the sinking hoofs, in others slippery shingle rolled beneath them, while the stream seethed whitely to the girth; but steaming, panting, dripping, we came through, and I dashed, half-blinded, into the smoke. A confused bellowing came out of the drifting wreaths ahead, and there was a mad beat of hoofs behind, but I could see little save the odd shafts of brightness which leaped out of the vapor as I raced towards the fire. Then somebody cried in warning, and the horse reared almost upright as – while I wrenched upon the bridle – a running man staggered out of the smoke. A red blaze tossed suddenly aloft behind him, and as he turned the brightness smote upon his blackened face. It was set and savage, and the hair was singed upon his forehead.

"It's blue ruin. The green birches are burning, and all your beasts are corraled in the fence wings," he gasped. "Fire came over the rise without warning, in Redmond's watch. Somehow he got the rest clear, but your lot stampeded and the wire brought them up. I'm off to the shanty for an ax – but no living man could get them out."

Thorn pulled up his plunging horse as the other spoke, and for a few seconds I struggled with the limpness of dismay. Then I said hoarsely: "If the flame hasn't lapped the wings yet, we'll try."

By this time the horses were almost in a state of panic, and Thorn's nearly unseated him, but we urged them into the vapor towards the fence. Fences were scarce in our district then, but after a dispute as to the grazing I had shared the cost of that one with another man, partly because it would be useful when sheep washing was forward and would serve as a corral when we cut out shipping stock. It consisted of only two wings at right angles – a long one towards the summit of the rise, and another parallel to the river, which flowed deep beneath that rotten bank; but the beasts on each side would seldom leave the rich grass in the hollow to wander round the unclosed end, and if driven into

the angle two riders could hold the open mouth. Now I could see that the simple contrivance might prove a veritable death-trap to every beast within it.

It was with difficulty we reached the crest of the rise, but we passed the wing before the fire, which now broke through the driving vapor, a wavy wall of crimson, apparently two fathoms high, closing in across the full breadth of the hollow at no great pace, but with a relentless regularity. Then I rode fiercely towards the angle or junction of the wires where the beasts were bunched together as in the pocket of a net. Thorn and Steel came up a few seconds later.

The outside cattle were circling round and jostling each other, thrusting upon those before them; the inside of the mass was as compact as if rammed together by hydraulic pressure, and, to judge by the bellowing, those against the fence were being rent by the barbs or slowly crushed to death. Our cattle wander at large across the prairie and exhibit few characteristics of domestic beasts. Indeed, they are at times almost dangerous to handle, and when stampeded in a panic a squadron of cavalry would hardly turn them. Yet the loss of this draft boded ruin to me, and it was just possible that if we could separate one or two animals from the rest and drive them towards the end of the fence the others might follow. The mouth of the net might remain open for a few minutes yet.

"I guess it's hopeless, but we've just got to try," said Thorn, who understood what was in my mind. "Start in with that big one. There's not a second to lose."

Steel, leaning down from the saddle, drove his knife-point into the rump of one beast, and when it wheeled I thrust my horse between it and the herd and smote it upon the nostrils with my clenched fist, uselessly. The terrified creature headed round again, jamming me against its companions, and when my horse backed clear, one of my legs felt as though it were broken. This, however, was no time to trouble about minor injuries or be particular on the score of humanity; and while Thorn endeavored to effect a diversion by twisting one beast's tail I pricked another savagely. It wheeled when it felt the pain, and when it turned again with gleaming horns and lowered head Steel pushed recklessly into the opening. Then a thick wisp of smoke filled my eyes, and I did not see how it happened, but man and horse had gone down together when the vapor thinned, and the victorious animal was once more adding its weight to the pressure on the rear of the surging mass.

Steel was up next moment, struggling with his horse, which, with bared teeth, was backing away from him at full length of its bridle; but, answering my shout, he said breathlessly: "I don't know whether half my bones are cracked or not, but they feel very much like it. It's no good, Ormesby. We'll have to cut the fence from the other side, and if we fool here any longer we'll lose the horses, too."

I saw there was truth in this, and almost doubted if we could clear the fence wing now. It was at least certain that nothing we could do there would extricate the terrified beasts; and when Steel got himself into the saddle we started again at a gallop. There was less smoke, and what there was towered vertically in a lull of the breeze; but the crackling flame tossed higher and higher. For a moment I fancied it had cut us off within the fence, which would have made a dangerous leap; but though the terrified horses were almost beyond guidance, fear lent them speed, and with very little room to spare Steel and I shot round the end of the wire.

"Look out for the setting-up post nearest the corner, and slack the turn-screws until the wire goes down, while I try to cut the strand close in to the herd!" I roared "Is Thorn behind you?"

"No," the answer came back. "Good Lord! we've left him inside the fence!"

I managed to pull my horse up, when a glance showed me the foreman's stalwart figure silhouetted against the crimson flame as he strove to master his plunging horse. It was evident that the horse had refused to face the fire, which now rolled right up the wings of the fence.

"Come down and let him go! You can either climb the wires or crawl under them!" I shouted, wondering whether the crackling of the flame drowned my husky voice.

"This horse is worth three hundred dollars, and he's either going through or over," the answer came back; and I shouted in warning, for it appeared impossible to clear that fence, though the beast, which was not of common bronco stock, had good imported blood in him. Then there was a yell from

the foreman as he recklessly shot forward straight at the fence. The horse was ready to face anything so long as he could keep the fire behind him, and I held my breath as he rose at the wire. Our horses are not good jumpers, and the result seemed certain. His knees struck the topmost wire; there was a heavy crash; and the man, shooting forward as from a catapult, alighted with a sickening thud, while the poor brute rolled over and lay still on the wrong side of the fence. Thorn rose, but very shakily, and I was thankful I had lost only some three hundred dollars, which I could very badly spare.

"Nothing given out this trip," he spluttered. "I've dropped my knife, though. Go on and try the cutting. I'll follow when I can."

In another few moments I dismounted abreast of the angle, and hitched the bridle round a strand of the wire, knowing that the possibility of getting away almost instantaneously when my work was done might make all the difference between life and death. The fence was tall, built of stout barbed wire strained to a few screw standards and stapled to thick birch posts. I had neither ax nor nippers, only a long-bladed knife, and densely packed beasts were wedging themselves tighter and tighter against the other side of the barrier. Already some had fallen and been trampled out of existence, while others seemed horribly mangled and torn. The man who had gone for an ax had not reappeared, and I regretted I had not bidden him take one of our horses, for the shanty was some distance away.

Slashing through the laces I dragged off one boot. Its heel was heavy and might serve for a mallet, and holding the blade of my knife on the top strand close against a post, I smote it furiously. The wire was not nicked half through when it burst beneath the pressure, and a barb on its flying end scored my face so that the blood trickled into my mouth and eyes; but the next wire was of treble twist, and as I struck and choked I regretted the thoroughness with which we had built the fence. The knife chipped under the blows I rained upon it, and when I shortened the blade its end snapped off. In a fit of desperation I seized the lacerating wires with my naked fingers and tore at them frenziedly, but what the pressure on the other side failed to accomplish the strength of twenty men might not do, so when in a few seconds reason returned to me I picked up what remained of the knife and set to work again. There was still no sign of Thorn, and as the wires did not slacken it was plain that Steel had failed to loose the straining screws without convenient tools. Three slender cords of steel alone pent in the stock that were to set me free of debt, but I had no implements with which to break them, so they also held me fast to be dragged down helpless to beggary.

At last the wire I struck at bent outward further, and when I next brought the boot heel down there was a metallic ringing as one strand parted, and I shouted in breathless triumph, knowing the other must follow. The fire was close behind the pent-up herd now, and I guessed that very shortly my life would depend on my horse's speed. Just then Steel dashed up, mounted, shouting: "Into the saddle with you. The fence is going!"

I saw him unhitch my horse's bridle and struggle to hold the beast ready between himself and me, but I meant to make quite certain of my part, so I brought the boot heel down thrice again. Then I leaped backward, clutched at the bridle, and scrambled to the saddle as a black mass rolled out of the gap where the wire flew back. I remember desperately endeavoring to head the horse clear of it along the fence, and wondering how many of the cattle would fall over the remaining wires and be crushed before their carcasses formed a causeway for the rest; but the horse was past all guidance; and now that the fence had lost its continuity more fathoms of it went down and the dusky mass poured over it. Then something struck me with a heavy shock, the horse stumbled as I slipped my feet out of the stirrups, and we went down together. I saw nothing further, though I could feel the earth tremble beneath me; then this sensation faded, and I was conscious of only a numbing pain beneath my neck and my left arm causing me agony. After this there followed a space of empty blackness.

When I partly recovered my faculties the pain was less intense, though my left arm, which was tied to my side, felt hot and heavy, and the jolting motion convinced me that I lay in the bottom of a wagon.

"Did you get the stock clear?" I gasped, striving to raise my head from the hay truss in which it was almost buried; and somebody who stooped down held a bottle to my lips.

"Don't you tell him," a subdued voice said, and the man, who I think was Steel, came near choking me as he poured more spirit than I could swallow down my throat and also down my neck.

"That's all right. Don't worry. We're mighty thankful we got you," he said.

Then the empty blackness closed in on me again, and I lay still, wondering whether I were dead and buried, and if so, why the pricking between shoulder and breast should continue so pitilessly; until that ceased in turn, and I had a hazy idea that someone was carrying me through an interminable cavern; after which there succeeded complete oblivion.

CHAPTER VII

A BITTER AWAKENING

The first day on which my attendants would treat me as a rational being was a memorable one to me. It must have been late in the morning when I opened my eyes, for the sun had risen above the level of the open window, and I lay still blinking out across the prairie with, at first, a curious satisfaction. I had cheated death and been called back out of the darkness to sunlight and life, it seemed. Then I began to remember, and the pain in the arm bound fast to my side helped to remind me that life implied a struggle. Raising my head, I noticed that there had been changes made in my room, and a young woman standing by the window frowned at me.

"I guess all men are worrying, but you're about the worst I ever struck, Rancher Ormesby. Just you lie back till I fix you, or I'll call the boys in to tie you fast with a girth."

She was a tall, fair, well-favored damsel, with a ruddy countenance and somewhat bold eyes; but I was disappointed when I saw her clearly, even though her laugh was heartsome when I answered humbly: "I will try not to trouble you if you don't mean to starve me."

Miss Sally Steel, for it was my neighbor's sister, shouted to somebody through the window, and then turned to the man who rose from a corner. "You just stay right where you are. When I call cookie I'll see he comes. I've been running this place as it ought to be run, and you won't know Gaspard's when you get about, Rancher Ormesby."

The man laughed, and I saw it was Thorn, though I did not know then that after doing my work and his own during the day he had watched the greater part of every night beside me.

"Feeling pretty fit this morning?" he asked.

"Comparatively so," I answered. "I should feel better if I knew just what happened to me and to the stock. You might tell me, beginning from the time the fence went down."

"If he does there'll be trouble," broke in Miss Steel, who, I soon discovered, had constituted herself autocratic mistress of Gaspard's Trail. "He must wait until you have had breakfast, anyway." And I saw the cook stroll very leisurely towards the window carrying a tray.

"Was anybody calling?" he commenced, with the exasperating slowness he could at times assume; and then, catching sight of me, would have clambered in over the low window-sill but that Miss Steel stopped him.

"Anybody calling! I should think there was – and when I want people they'll come right along," she said. "No; you can stop out there – isn't all the prairie big enough for you? There'll be some tone about this place before I'm through," and the cook grinned broadly as he caught my eye.

Miss Steel's voice was not unpleasant, though it had a strident ring, and her face was gentle as she raised me on a heap of folded blankets with no great effort, though I was never a very light weight, after which, between my desire to please her and a returning appetite, I made a creditable meal.

"That's a long way better," she said approvingly. "Tom brought a fool doctor over from Calgary, who said you'd got your brain mixed and a concussion of the head. 'Fix up his bones and don't worry about anything else,' I said. 'It would take a steam hammer to make any concussion worth talking of on Rancher Ormesby's head.'"

"Thorn has not answered my question," I interrupted; and Miss Steel flashed a glance at the foreman, who seemed to hesitate before he answered. "It happened this way: You were a trifle late lighting out when you'd cut the fence. Steel said one of the beasts charged you, and after that more of them stampeded right over you. The horse must have kept some of them off, for he was stamped out pretty flat, and it was a relief to hear you growling at something when we got you out."

"How did you get me out?" I asked, and Thorn fidgeted before he answered: "It wasn't worth mentioning, but between us Steel and I managed to split the rush, and the beasts went by on each side of us."

"At the risk of being stamped flat, too! I might have expected it of you and Steel," I said; and the girl's eyes sparkled as she turned to the foreman.

"Then Steel went back for the wagon after we found you had an arm and a collarbone broken. I rode in to the railroad and wired for a doctor. Sally came over to nurse you, and a pretty tough time she has had of it. You had fever mighty bad."

"There's no use in saying I'm obliged to both of you, because you know it well," I made shift to answer; and Sally Steel stroked the hair back from my forehead in sisterly fashion as she smiled at Thorn. "But what about the stock? Did they all get through?"

Thorn's honest face clouded, and Sally Steel laid her plump hand on my mouth. "You're not going to worry about that. A herd of cattle stampeded over you and you're still alive. Isn't that good enough for you?"

I moved my head aside. "I shall worry until I know the truth. All the beasts could not have got out. How many did?" I asked.

Thorn looked at Sally, then sideways at me, and I held my breath until the girl said softly: "You had better tell him."

"Very few," said the foreman; and I hoped that my face was as expressionless as I tried to make it when I heard the count. "Some of those near the fence got clear, and some didn't. Steel had grubbed up a post, and when the wires slacked part of the rest got tangled up and went down, choking the gap. It was worse than a Chicago slaughter-house when the fire rolled up."

"The horses, too? How long have I been ill, and has any rain fallen?" I asked, with the strange steadiness that sometimes follows a crushing blow, and Thorn moodily shook his head.

"Both horses done for. You've been ill 'bout two weeks, I think. No rain worth mentioning – and the crop is clean wiped out."

There was silence for some minutes, and Sally Steel patted my uninjured shoulder sympathetically. Then I pointed to a litter of papers on the table, and inquired if there were any letters in Lane's writing. Thorn handed me one reluctantly, and it was hard to refrain from fierce exclamation as I read the laconic missive. Lane regretted to hear of my accident, but the scarcity of money rendered it necessary to advise me that as I had not formally accepted his terms, repayment of the loan was overdue, and he would be obliged to realize unless I were willing to pledge Crane Valley or renew the arrangement at an extra five per cent. on the terms last mentioned.

"Bad news?" said Sally. "Then I guess Thorn sha'n't worry you any more; but it's just when things look worst the turn comes. That team will be bolting soon, Thorn. I'll sit right back in the corner, and until you want to talk to me you can forget I'm there."

The high-pitched voice sank to a gentler tone, and I felt grateful to Sally Steel. Her reckless vagaries often formed a theme for laughter when the inhabitants of the prairie foregathered at settlement or store; but there was a depth of good-nature, as well as an overdaring love of mischief in her, and not infrequently a blessing accompanied the jest. Thorn was moving towards the door when, recollecting another point, I beckoned him.

"How was it that when they had, or should have had, time enough, Henderson's man and Redmond did not stop the cattle bunching in the fence? It's very unlike our ways if they made no effort to save my beasts as well as their own masters' property," I said.

Foreman Thorn looked troubled, and I saw that Sally was watching him keenly. "I don't understand it rightly, and I guess no man ever will," he said. "Of course, we struck Henderson's Jo with just that question, and this is what he made of it. He and Redmond were camping in Torkill's deserted sod-house, and when they saw the fires were bad that night, Redmond said he'd ride round the cattle. Their own lot was pretty well out of harm's way, east of the fence, but Jo told him to take

a look at yours. Redmond started, and, as Jo knew that he'd be called if he were wanted, he went off to sleep."

"That does not explain much," I interjected, when Thorn halted, rubbing his head as though in search of inspiration.

"There isn't an explanation. Jo, waking later, saw the fire coming right down the hollow and started on foot for the fence. There was no sign of Redmond anywhere. Jo couldn't get the stock out, and he couldn't cut the fence, and he was going back for an ax when we met him. You know all the rest – 'cept this. Steel and I were standing over you, and the fire was roasting the beasts mixed up in the fence, when Redmond comes along. The way he stood, the flame shone right on his face. It seemed twisted, and the man looked like a ghost. He stood there blinking at the beasts – and it wasn't a pretty sight – then shook all over as he stooped down and looked at you. There was a good deal of blood about you from the horse.

"What the devil's wrong with you? Stiffen yourself up!" says Steel; and Redmond's voice cracked in the middle as he answered him: 'I'm feeling mighty sick. Is he dead?'

"Looks pretty near it. If you'd seen those beasts clear he mightn't have come to this. Here, take a drink. We'll want you presently,' says Steel, and went on strapping you together with a girth and bridle, while I watched Redmond with one eye. As you know, there was never much grit in the creature, and he had another shivering fit.

"Get out until you're feeling better. That kind of thing's catching, and we've lots to do,' I said; and he laughs with a cackle like an hysterical woman, and blinks straight past me. Steel and I figured he'd got hold of some smuggled whisky and been drinking bad, but afterwards Henderson's Jo said no.

"It's murder. My God! It's horrible – an' he never done anyone no harm,' he says, and falls to cussing somebody quietly. I can talk pretty straight when I'm hot myself, but that was ice-cold swearing with venom in it, and when he got on to Judas, with the devil in his eyes, I ripped up a big sod and plugged him on the head with it.

"If you don't let up or quit I'll pound the life out of you,' says Steel.

"Well, we got you fixed so you couldn't make the damage worse, and when Steel went for the wagon and I looked around for Redmond he was gone. Don't know what to think of it, anyway, 'cept his troubles or bad whisky had turned his head. You see he was never far from crazy."

"Why didn't one of you get hold of him and make him talk next day?" I asked; and Thorn looked at me curiously.

"Because he'd gone. Lit out to nobody knows where and stopped there. I don't know just what to think, myself."

Sally took Thorn by the shoulders and thrust him out, but he left me with sufficient, and unpleasant, food for reflection. The stock I had counted on were gone. Also, when it was above all things desirable that I should be up and doing, I must lie still for weeks, useless as a log. One thing at least I saw clearly, and that was the usurer's purpose to absorb my property; and as I lay with throbbing forehead and tight-clenched fingers, which had grown strangely white, I determined that he should have cause to remember the struggle before he accomplished it. That Redmond had been driven by him into shameful treachery appeared too probable, though there was no definite proof of it, and the thought stiffened my resolution. My scattered neighbors, patient as they were, were ill to coerce and would doubtless join me in an effort before the schemer's machinations left us homeless.

Then I could hardly check a groan as I remembered all that the brief glimpses of a brighter life at Bonaventure had suggested. A few months earlier it had appeared possible that with one or two more good seasons I might even have attained to it; but since then a gulf had opened between Beatrice Haldane and me, and the best I could hope for was a resumption of what now seemed hopeless drudgery. It was a bitter awakening, and I almost regretted that Steel and Foreman Thorn had not been a few seconds later when the fence went down. An hour passed, and Sally Steel, bringing a chair over to my side, offered to read to me what she said was a real smart shadowing story. I glanced at

the invincible detective standing amid a scene of bloodshed, depicted on the cover of the journal she held up, and declined with due civility.

"I am afraid my nerves are not good enough. I should sooner you talked to me, Sally," I said.

She laughed coquettishly, and there was no doubt that Steel's sister was handsome, as women on that part of the prairie go. Sun and wind had ripened the color in her face, her teeth were white as ivory, her lips full and red, and perhaps most men would have found pleasure watching the sparkle of mischief that danced in her eyes as she answered demurely: "That would be just too nice. What shall we talk about?"

"You might tell me who was the first to come ask about me," I said.

The girl stretched out one plump arm with a comprehensive gesture. "They all came, bringing things along, most of them. Even the little Icelander; he loaded up his wagon with a keg of herrings – said they were best raw – and lumps of grindstone bread. Oh, yes; they all came, and I was glad to see them, 'cept when some of their wives came with them."

"They are kind people in this country; but how could the women worry you? In any case, I think you would be equal to them," I commented; and, somewhat to my surprise, the girl first blushed, and then looked positively wicked.

"They – well, they would ask questions, and said things, when they found Tom was down to Brandon," she answered enigmatically. "Still, I guess I was equal to most of them. 'Rancher Ormesby's not sending the hat round yet, and that truck is not fit for any sick man to eat when it's just about half-cooked,' I said. 'You can either take it back or leave it for Thorn to worry with. Fresh rocks wouldn't hurt his digestion. Just now I'm way too busy to answer conundrums.'"

Sally seemed glad to abandon that topic, and did not look quite pleased when I hazarded another question, with suppressed interest, but as carelessly as I could: "Did anybody else drive over?"

The girl laughed a trifle maliciously, and yet with a certain enjoyment. "Oh, yes. One day, when I was too busy for anything, the people from Bonaventure drove over, and wanted to take you back. I don't know why, but the way Haldane's elder daughter looked about the place just got my back up. 'You can't have him. This is where he belongs,' I said.

"'But he is ill, and this place is hardly fit for him. There are no comforts, and we could take better care of him,' said the younger one, and I turned round to her.

"'That's just where you're wrong. Rancher Ormesby has lived here for eight years, and when he's sick he has plenty friends of his own kind to take care of him. I'm one of them, and we don't dump our sick people on to strangers,' I said.

"The elder one she straightens herself a little, as though she didn't like my talk. 'He could not be as comfortable as he would be at Bonaventure, which is the most important thing. We will ask the doctor; and have you any right to place obstacles in the way of Mr. Ormesby's recovery?' says she, and that was enough for me.

"'I've all the right I want,' I answered. 'I'm running Gaspard's Trail, and if you can find a man about the place who won't jump when I want him, you needn't believe me. That makes me a busy woman – see? – so I'll not keep you. Go back to Bonaventure, and don't come worrying the people he belongs to about Rancher Ormesby.'"

I groaned inwardly, and only by an effort concealed my blank consternation. "What did they say next?" I asked.

"Nothing much. The younger one – and I was half sorry I'd spoken straight to her – opened her eyes wide. The elder one she looks at me in a way that made me feel fit to choke her, while Haldane made a little bow. 'I have no doubt he is in capable hands, and we need not trouble you further. No, I don't think you need mention that we called,' says he."

Sally tossed her head with an air of triumph as she concluded, and I lay very still, for it was too late to pray for deliverance from my friends, though of all the rude succession this was about the most cruel blow. What mischievous fiend had prompted the quick-tempered girl to turn upon the

Haldanes I could never surmise, but jealousy might have had something to do with it, for Trooper Cotton had once been a favorite of hers. In any case, the result appeared disastrous, for, while I believed her no more than thoughtless, there was no disguising the fact that some of the settlers' less-favored daughters spoke evil of Sally Steel, and I feared their stories had reached Bonaventure.

When five minutes or so had passed she looked at me somewhat shyly. "You're not mad?" she said.

"I could hardly be vexed with you, whatever happened, after all you have done for me. I was only thinking," I made shift to answer. "Still, you might have been a little more civil, Sally."

For a moment or two the girl appeared almost penitent; then she bent her head towards my own, and again the mischief crept into her eyes.

"I'd have brought them in to a banquet, if I had only guessed," she said; and with a thrill of laughter she slipped out of the room. It was with sincere relief I saw her go, for I was in no mood for the somewhat pointed prairie banter, and felt that, in spite of her manifold kindnesses, I could almost have shaken Sally Steel. Then I turned my head from the light, remembering I was not only a ruined man without even power to move, but had left a discordant memory with the friends whose good opinion I most valued, and whom now I might never again meet on the old terms.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW REDMOND CAME HOME

The weather continued pitilessly hot and dry, when, one afternoon, Trooper Cotton, returning from a tour of fireguard inspection, sat near the window-seat in which I lay at Gaspard's Trail. I was glad of his company, because the sight of the parched prairie and bare strip of plowland was depressing. Barns and granary alike were empty, for the earth had failed to redeem her promise that season, and an unnatural silence brooded over Gaspard's Trail.

"I don't know what has come over this country," the trooper said. "One used to get a cheery word everywhere, but now farmer and stockman can hardly answer a question civilly, and the last fellow I spoke to about his fireguards seemed inclined to assault me. Presumably it's the bad times, and I'll be thankful when they improve. It might put some of you into a more pleasant humor."

"If you had said bad men you might have been nearer the mark," I answered dryly. "We are a peaceable people, but there's an oppression worse than any governmental tyranny, and from the rumors in the air it's not impossible some of us may try to find our own remedy if we are pushed too far."

"That's a little indefinite," said Cotton, with a laugh. "If you mean taking the law into your own hands, there would be very unpleasant work for me. Still, I'm sorry for all of you, especially those whom that flabby scoundrel Lane seems to be squeezing. He's been driving to and from the railroad a good deal of late, and it's curious that twice when I struck his trail two traveling photographers turned up soon after him. One was a most amusing rascal, but I did not see the other, who was busy inside the wagon tent, and who apparently managed the camera. I'll show you a really tolerable picture of me he insisted on taking."

It struck me that Boone, or Adams, had twice run a serious risk; but I said nothing, and Cotton, fumbling inside his tunic, tossed a litter of papers on the table. These were mostly official, but there were odd letters among them, for the trooper was not remarkable for preciseness, and I noticed a crest upon some of the envelopes, while, after shuffling them, he flung me a small card, back uppermost. I was surprised when, turning it over, the face of Lucille Haldane met my gaze.

"It is a charming picture; but that is only natural, considering the original. How did you get this, Cotton?" I said.

The trooper snatched it from me, and a darker color mantled his forehead. "Confound it! I never meant to show you that," he said.

"So I surmised," I answered dryly; and the lad frowned as he thrust the picture out of sight.

"You will understand, Ormesby, that Miss Haldane did not give me this. I – well – I discovered it."

"Wasn't it foolish of you?" I asked quietly; and the trooper, who, strange to say, did not seem to find my tone of paternal admonition ludicrous, answered impulsively: "I don't know why I should strip for your inspection, Ormesby, or why I should not favor you with a well-known reply; but it is perhaps best that you should not misunderstand the position. I know what you are thinking, but I haven't forgotten I'm Trooper Cotton – nor am I likely to. It's a strange life, Ormesby, and the men who live it go under occasionally. This – God bless her – is merely something to hold on by."

I made no answer, for there was nothing appropriate I could find to say; but it occurred to me that Lucille Haldane might never receive a higher compliment than this lad's unexpectant homage.

"Here is the right one, and you will obliterate the other from your memory," he said, passing me a second photograph. "The fellow who took it knows how to handle a camera."

It was evident he did; and, knowing who he was, the irony of the circumstances impressed me as I examined the picture. "He has an artistic taste and an eye for an effective pose. Are you going to send any copies to your people in England, Cotton?" I said.

"No," answered the lad quietly; "they might not be pleased with it. Well, I dare say, you have guessed long ago that I am one of the legion. Most of my people were soldiers, which was why, when I had two dollars left, I offered the nation my services at Regina; but I am the first of them to wear a police private's uniform."

I nodded sympathetically, and the trooper, who looked away from me out of the window, said: "Talk of the devil! All men, it is said, are equal in this country, but I fancy there's a grade between most of us and your acquaintance, Foster Lane. The fellow has passed the corral, and I can't get out without meeting him."

I nodded with a certain grim sense of anticipation, for I had determined to speak very plainly to Foster Lane, and knew that Cotton could, on occasion, display a refined insolence that was signally exasperating. The next moment Lane came in, red-faced and perspiring, and greeted me with his usual affability.

"I'm on the way to recovery, but unable to ride far, which explains my request for a visit," I said; and Lane waved his large hands deprecatingly.

"Business is business, and you need not apologize, because although I have come two hundred miles you will find first-class expenses charged for in the bill. I can't smoke on horseback. Will you and the trooper try one of these?"

"No, thanks," said Cotton, with an inflection in his voice and a look in his half-closed eyes that would have warned a more sensitive person; but Lane, still holding out the cigar-case, added with mild surprise: "By the price I paid for them they ought to be good."

"I don't doubt it," drawled Cotton, glancing languidly at the speaker. "But a few of what you would call British prejudices still cling to me, and I take cigars and things only from my friends – you see?"

The stout man laughed a little, though there was malice in his eye. "And we are not likely to be acquainted? You are, one might presume, a scion of the English aristocracy, come out to recruit your health or wait until it's a little less sultry in the old country."

"I would hardly go so far!" – and Cotton drawled out the words, as he turned upon his heel. "More unlikely things have happened. At present I have the honor of serving her Majesty as – a police trooper."

Lane handed me his cigar-case when the lad strolled out of the door, but I was in no mood to assume an unfelt cordiality. "I am not inclined for smoking. Hadn't we better come straight to business?" I said.

Lane struck a match, and stretched his legs along the window-seat, though he closed the case with a snap. "Why, certainly! You are ready to redeem the mortgage on Gaspard's Trail?"

He spoke pleasantly, though there was a sneer in his eyes, and he had both lighted his cigar, in spite of my hint, and laid his dusty boots on the cushions with a cool assurance that made me long to personally chastise him. "You probably know that I am not," I said.

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