THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

"Adventures of a Real Man and a Real Girl in a Real Country"

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Sheila Langford leaves the railroad station and begins the long horseback ride to her father's newly bought ranch, the "Double R." On the way, overtaken by storm, she takes refuge for the night in the cabin of a strange and gloomy man who calls himself Dakota and who shows emotion at mention of her father's name. An itinerant clergyman chances to stop that night at Dakota's cabin. Dakota forces Sheila to marry him, on threat of killing the clergyman. Next day she rides on to the Langford ranch and tells no one about the ceremony. Duncan, the ranch manager, who has quarrelled with Dakota, falls in love with Sheila. He insults Dakota and is thrashed for him. Meanwhile Langford becomes involved in a feud with a "nester," named Doubler, and offers Dakota $1,000 to kill the nester. Dakota refuses to accept. He and Sheila meet near Dakota's cabin and discuss a rifle shot they have just heard.

CHAPTER IX.

(Continued.)

A Meeting.

"WHY?" she questioned, defiantly.

"Well, for one thing, there's a certain fascination about a place where one has been close to cashing in—expect that when we've been in such a place we like to come back and look at it just to see how near we came to going over the divide. And there's another reason why I expected to see you on the river trail again. You forgot to thank me for pulling you out."

He deserved thanks for that, she knew. But there were in his voice and eyes the same subtle mockery which had marked his manner that other time, and as before she experienced a feeling of deep resentment. Why could he not have shown some evidence of remorse for his crime against her? She believed that had he done so now she might have found it in her heart to go a little distance toward forgiving him. But there was only mockery in his voice and words and her resentment against him grew. Mingling with it, moreover, was the bitterness which had settled over her within the last few days. It found expression in her voice when she answered him:

"This country is full of—of savages!"

"Indians, you mean, I reckon? Well, no, there are none around here except over near Fort Union, on the reservation." He drawled satefully and regarded her with a mild smile.

"I mean white savages!" she declared spitefully.

His smile grew broader, and then slowly faded and he sat quiet, studying her face.

The silence grew painful; she moved uneasily under his direct gaze and a flush of color swept into her cheeks. Then he spoke quietly.

"You been seeing white savages?"

"Yes!" venomously.

"Not around here?" The hateful mockery of that drawl!

"I am talking to one," she said, her eyes blazing with impotent anger.

"I thought you was meaning me," he said, without resentment. "I reckon I've got it coming to me. But at the same time that isn't exactly the way to talk to your"—— He hesitated and smiled oddly, apparently aware that he had made a mistake in referring to his crime against her. He hastened to repair it. "Your rescuer," he corrected.

However, she saw through the artifice, and the bitterness in her voice grew more pronounced. "It is needless for you to remind me of our relationship," she said; "I am not likely to forget."

"Have you told your father yet?"

In his voice was the quiet scorn and the peculiar, repressed venom which she had detected when he had referred to her father during that other occasion at the crossing. It mystified her, and yet within the past few days she had felt this scorn herself and knew that it was not remarkable. Undoubtedly he, having had much experience with men, had been able to see through Langford's mask and knew him for what he was. For the first time in her life she experienced a sensation of embarrassed guilt over hearing her name linked with Langford's, and she looked defiantly at Dakota.

"I have not told him," she said. "I won't tell him. I told you that before—I do not care to undergo the humiliation of hearing my name mentioned in the same breath with yours. And if you do not already know it, I want to tell you that David Langford is not my father; my real father died a long time ago, and Langford is only my stepfather."

A sudden moisture was in her eyes and she did not see Dakota start, did not observe the queer pallor that spread over his face, failed to detect the odd light in his eyes. However, she heard his voice—sharp in tone and filled with genuine astonishment.

"Your stepfather?" He had spurred his pony beside hers and looking up she saw that his face had suddenly grown stern and grim. "Do you mean that?" he demanded half angrily. "Why didn't you tell me that before? Why didn't you tell me when—the night I married you?"

"Would it have made any difference to you?" she said bitterly. "Does it make any difference now? You have treated me like a savage; you are treating me like one now. I—I—haven't any friends at all," she continued, her voice breaking slightly, as she suddenly realized her entire helplessness before the combined evilness of Duncan, her father, and the man who sat on his pony beside her. A sob shook her, and her hands went to her face, covering her eyes.

She sat there for a time shuddering, and watching her closely, Dakota's face grew slowly pale, and grim, hard lines came into his lips.

"I know what Duncan's friendship amounts to," he said harshly. "But isn't your stepfather your friend?"

"My friend?" She echoed his words with hopeless intonation that closed Dakota's teeth like a vise. "I don't know what has come over him," she continued, looking up at Dakota, her eyes filled with wonder for the sympathy which she saw in his face and voice; "he has changed since he came out here; he is so selfish and heartless."

"What's he been doing? Hurting you?" She did not detect the anger in his voice, for he had kept it so low that she scarcely heard the words.

"Hurting me? No; he has not done anything to me. Don't you know?" she said scornfully, certain that he was mocking her again—for how could his interest be genuine when he was a party to the plot to murder Doubler? Yet perhaps not—maybe Duncan had been lying. Determined to get to the bottom of the affair as quickly as possible, Sheila continued rapidly, her scorn giving way to eagerness. "Don't you know?" And this time her voice was almost a plea. "What did father visit you for. Wasn't it about Doubler? Didn't he hire you to—to kill him?"

She saw his lips tighten strangely, his face grow pale, his eyes flash with some mysterious emotion, and she knew in an instant that he was guilty—guilty as her father!

"Oh!" she said, and the scorn came into her voice again. "Then it is true. You and my father have conspired to murder an inoffensive old man! You—you cowards!"

He winced, as though he had received an unexpected blow in the face, but almost immediately he smiled—a hard, cold, sneering smile which chilled her.

"Who has been telling you this?" The question came slowly, without the slighest trace of excitement.

"Duncan told me."

"Duncan?" There was much contempt in his voice. "Not your father?"

She shook her head negatively, wondering at his cold composure. No wonder her father had selected him!

He laughed mirthlessly. "So that's the reason Doubler was so friendly to his rifle this morning?" he said, as though her words had explained a mystery which had been puzzling him. "Doubler and me have been friends for a long time. But this morning while I was talking to him he kept his rifle beside him all the time. He must have heard from some one that I was gunning for him."

"Then you haven't been hired to kill him?"

He smiled at her eagerness, but spoke gravely and with an earnestness which she could not help but feel. "Miss Sheila," he said, "there isn't money enough in ten counties like this to make me kill Doubler." His lips curled with a quiet sarcasm. "You are like a lot of other people in this country," he added. "Because I put Blanca away they think I am a professional gunman. But I want you"——he placed a significant emphasis on the word—"to understand that there wasn't any other way to deal with Blanca. By coming back here after selling me that stolen Star stock and refusing to admit the deed in the presence of other people—even denying it and accusing me—he forced me to take the step I did with him. Even then, I gave him his chance. That he didn't take it isn't my fault.

"I suppose I look pretty black to you, because I treated you like I did. But it was partly your fault, too. Maybe that's mysterious to you, but it will have to stay a mystery. I had an idea in my head that night—and something else. I've found something out since that makes me feel a lot sorry. If I had known what I knew now, that wouldn't have happened to you—I've got my eyes open now."

Their ponies were very close together, and leaning over suddenly he placed both hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes, his own flashing with a strange light. She did not try to escape his hands, for she felt that his sincerity warranted the action.

"I've treated you mean, Sheila," he said; "about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you'll understand and forgive me."

"This business?" Sheila drew back and looked at him wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

There was no mirth in his laugh as he dropped his hands to his sides. Her question had brought about a return of that mocking reserve which she could not penetrate. Apparently he would let her no farther into the mystery whose existence his words had betrayed. He had allowed her to get a glimpse of his inner self; had shown her that he was not the despicable creature she had thought him; had apparently been about to take her into his confidence. And she had felt a growing sympathy for him and had been prepared to meet him half way in an effort to settle their differences, but she saw that the opportunity was gone—was hidden under the cloak of mystery which had been about him from the beginning of their acquaintance.

"This Doubler business," he answered, and she nibbled impatiently at her lips, knowing that he had meant something else.

"That's evasion," she said, looking straight at him, hoping that he would relent and speak.

"Is it?" In his unwavering eyes she saw a glint of grim humor. "Well, that's the answer. I am not going to kill Doubler—if it will do you any good to know. I don't kill my friends."

"Then," she said eagerly, catching at the hope which he held out to her, "father didn't hire you to kill him? You didn't talk to father about that?"

His lips curled. "Why don't you ask your father about that?"

The hope died within her. Dakota's words and manner implied that her father had tried to employ him to make way with the nester, but that he had refused. She had not been wrong—Duncan had not been wrong in his suspicion that her father was planning the death of the nester. Duncan's only mistake was in including Dakota in the scheme.

She had hoped against hope that she might discover that Duncan had been wrong altogether; that she had done her father an injury in believing him capable of deliberately planning a murder. She looked again at Dakota. There was no mistaking his earnestness, she thought, for there was no evidence of deceit or knavery in his face, nor in the eyes that were steadily watching her.

She put her hands to her face and shivered, now thoroughly convinced of her father's guilt; feeling a sudden repugnance for him, for everybody and everything in the country, excepting Doubler.

She had done all she could, however, to prevent them killing Doubler—all she could do except to warn Doubler of his danger, and she would go to him immediately. Without looking again at Dakota she turned, dry-eyed and pale, urging her pony up the trail toward the nester's cabin, leaving Dakota sitting silent in his saddle, watching her.

She lingered on the trail, riding slowly, halting when she came to a spot which offered a particularly good view of the country surrounding her, for in spite of her lonesomeness she could not help appreciating the beauty of the land, with its towering mountains, its blue sky, its vast, yawning distances, and the peacefulness which seemed to be everywhere except in her heart.

She presently reached the Two Forks and urged her pony through the shallow water of its crossing, riding up the slight intervening slope and upon a stretch of plain beside a timber grove. A little later she came to the corral gates, where she dismounted and hitched her pony to a rail, smiling to herself as she thought of how surprised Doubler would be to see her.

Then she left the corral gate and stole softly around a corner of the cabin, determined to steal upon Doubler unawares. Once at the corner she halted and peered around. She saw Doubler lying in the open doorway, his body twisted into a peculiarly odd position, face down, his arms outstretched, his legs doubled under him.

CHAPTER X.

The Shot in the Back.

FOR an instant after discovering Doubler lying in the doorway, Sheila stood motionless at the corner of the cabin, looking down wonderingly at him. She thought at first that he was merely resting, but his body was doubled up so oddly that a grave doubt rose in her mind. A vague fear clutched at her heart, and she stood rigid, her eyes wide as she looked for some sign that would confirm her fears. And then she saw a moist red patch on his shirt on the right side just below the shoulder blade, and it seemed that a band of steel had been suddenly pressed down over her forehead. Something had happened to Doubler!

The world reeled, objects around her danced fantastically, the trees in the grove near her seemed to dip toward her in derision, her knees sagged and she held tightly to the corner of the cabin for support in her weakness.

She saw it all in a flash. Dakota had been to visit Doubler and had shot him. She had heard the shot. Duncan had been right, and Dakota—how she despised him now!—was probably even now picturing in his imagination the scene of her discovering the nester lying on his own threshold, murdered. An anger against him, which arose at the thought, did much to help her regain control of herself.

She must be brave now, for there might still be life in Doubler's body, and she went slowly toward him, cringing and shrinking along the wall of the cabin.

She touched him first, lightly, with the tips of her fingers, calling softly to him in a quavering voice. Becoming more bold, she took hold of him by the left shoulder and shook him slightly, and her heart seemed to leap within her when a faint moan escaped his lips. Her fear fled instantly as she realized that he was alive, that she had not to deal with a dead man.

Stifling a quivering sob she took hold of him again, tugging and pulling at him, trying to turn him over so that she might see his face. She observed that the red patch on his shoulder grew larger with the effort, and her face grew paler with apprehension, but convinced that she must persist she shut her eyes and tugged desperately at him, finally succeeding in pulling him over on his back.

He moaned again, though his face was ashen and lifeless, and with hope filling her heart she redoubled her efforts and finally succeeded in dragging him inside the cabin, out of the sun, where he lay inert, with wide stretched arms, a gruesome figure to the girl.

Panting and exhausted, some stray wisps of hair sweeping her temples, the rest of it threatening to come tumbling down around her shoulders, she leaned against one of the door jambs, thinking rapidly. She ought to have help, of course, and her thoughts went to Dakota, riding unconcernedly away on the river trail. She could not go to him for assistance, such a course was not to be considered—she would rather let Doubler die than to go to his murderer; she could never have endured the irony of such an action. Besides, she was certain that, even were she to go to him, he would find some excuse to refuse her, for, having shot the nester, he certainly would do nothing toward bringing the help which might possibly restore him to life.

She put aside the thought with a shudder of horror, yet conscious that something must be done for Doubler at once if he was to live. Perhaps it was already too late to go for assistance; there seemed to be but very little life in his body, and trembling with anxiety she decided that she must render him whatever aid she could. There was not much that she could do, to be sure, but if she could do something she might keep him alive until other help would come.

She stood beside the door jamb and watched him for some time, for she dreaded the idea of touching him again, but after a while her courage returned, and she again went to him, kneeling down beside him, laying her head on his breast and listening.

His heart was beating, faintly, but still it was beating, and she rose from him, determined.

She found a sheath knife in one of his pockets, and with this she cut the shirt away from the wound, discovering, when she drew the pieces of cloth away, that there was a large, round hole in his breast. She came near to swooning when she thought of the red patch on his back, for that seemed to prove that the bullet had gone clear through him. It had missed a vital spot, though, she thought, for it seemed to be rather high on the shoulder.

She got some water from a pail that stood just inside the door, and with this and some white cloth which she tore from one of her skirts she bathed and bandaged the wound and laid a wet cloth on his forehead. She tried to force some of the water down his throat, but he could not swallow, lying there with closed eyes and drawing his breath in short, painful gasps.

After she had worked with him for a quarter of an hour or more she stood up, convinced that she had done all she could for him and that the next move would be to get a doctor.

She had heard Duncan say that it was fifty miles to Dry Bottom, and she knew that it was at least forty to Lazette. She had never heard any one mention that there was a doctor nearer, and so of course she would have to go to Lazette—ten miles would make a great difference.

She might ride to the Double R ranch house, and she thought of going there, but it was at least ten miles off the Lazette trail, and even though at the Double R she might get a cowboy to make the ride to Lazette, she would be losing much valuable time. She drew a deep breath over the contemplation of the long ride—at best it would take her four hours—but she did not hesitate long and with a last glance at Doubler she was out of the door and walking to the corral, where she unhitched her pony, mounted, and sent the animal over the level toward the crossing at a sharp gallop.

Once over the crossing and on the river trail where the riding was better, she held the pony to an even, steady pace. One mile, two miles, five or six she rode with her hair flying in the breeze, her cheeks pale, except for a bright red spot in the centre of each—which betrayed the excitement under which she was labering. There was a resolute gleam in her eyes, though, and she rode lightly, helping her pony as much as possible. However, the animal was fresh and did not seem to mind the pace, cavorting and lunging up the rises and pulling hard on the reins on the levels, showing a desire to run. She held it in, though, realizing that during the forty mile ride the animal would have plenty of opportunity to prove its mettle.

She reached and passed the quicksand crossing from which she had been pulled by Dakota, the pony running with the sure regularity of a machine, and was on a level which led into some hills directly ahead, when the pony stumbled.

She tried to jerk it erect with the reins, but in spite of the effort she felt it sink under her, and with a sensation of dismay clutching at her heart she slid out of the saddle.

A swift examination showed her that the pony's right fore-leg was deep in the sand of the trail, and she surmised instantly that it had stepped into a prairie dog hole. When she went to it and raised its head it looked appealingly at her, and she stifled a groan of sympathy and began looking about for some means to extricate it.

She found this no easy task, for the pony's leg was deep in the sand, and when she finally dug a space around it with a branch of tree which she procured from a nearby grove, the animal struggled out, only to limp badly. The leg, Sheila decided after a quick examination, was not broken, but badly sprained, and she knew enough about horses to be certain that the injured pony would never be able to carry her to Lazette.

She would be forced to go to the Double R now, there was nothing else that she could do. Standing beside the pony, debating whether she had not better walk than try to ride him, even to the Double R, she heard a clatter of hoofs and turned to see Dakota riding the trail toward her. He was travelling in the direction she had been travelling when the accident had happened, and apparently had left the trail somewhere back in the distance, or she would have seen him. Perhaps, she speculated, with a flash of dull anger, he had followed her near to Doubler's cabin, perhaps had been near when she had dragged the wounded nester into it.

His first word showed her that there was ground for this suspicion. He drew up beside her and looked at her with a queer smile, and she, aware of his guilt, wondered at his composure.

"You didn't stay long at Doubler's shack," he said. "I was on a ridge, back on the trail a ways, and I saw you hitting the breeze away from there some rapid. I was thinking to intercept you, but you went tearing by so fast that I didn't get a chance. You're in an awful hurry. What's wrong?"

"You ought to know that," she said, bitterly angry because of his pretended serenity. "You—you murderer!"

His face paled instantly, but his voice was clear and sharp.

"Murderer?" he said sternly. "Who has been murdered?"

"You don't know, of course," she said scornfully, her face flaming, her eyes alight with loathing and contempt. "You shot him and then let me ride on alone—to find him shot—shot in the back! Oh!"

She shuddered at the recollection, held her hands over her eyes for an instant to keep from looking at the expression of amazement in his eyes, and while she stood thus she heard a movement, and withdrew her hands from her eyes to see him standing beside her, so close that his body touched hers, his eyes ablaze with curiosity and interest and repressed anxiety. She cringed and cried with pain as he seized her arm and twisted her forcibly around so that she faced him.

"Stop this fooling and tell me what has happened!" he said, with short, incisive accents. "Who did you find shot? Who has been murdered?"

Oh, it was admirable acting, she told herself as she tore herself away from him and stood back a little, her eyes flashing with scorn and horror. "You don't know, of course," she flared. "You shot him—shot him in the back and sent me on to find him. You gloried in the thought of me finding him dead. But he isn't dead, thank God, and will live, if I can get a doctor, to accuse you!" She pointed a finger at him, but he ignored it and took a step toward her, his eyes cold and boring into hers.

"Who?" he demanded. "Who?"

"Ben Doubler. Oh!" she cried, in an excess of rage and horror, "to think that I should have to tell you!"

But if he heard her last words he paid no attention to them, for he was suddenly at his pony's side, buckling the cinches tighter. She watched him, fascinated at the repressed energy of his movements, and became so interested that she started when he suddenly looked up at her.

"He isn't dead, then," he said rapidly, sharply, the words coming with short, metallic snaps. "You were going to Lazette for a doctor. I'm glad I happened along—glad I saw you."

"I'll be able to make better time than you.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, scarcely having heard his words, though aware that he was preparing to leave. She took a step forward and seized his pony's bridle rein, her eyes blazing with wrath over the thought that he should attempt to deceive her with so bald a ruse.

"For the doctor," he said shortly. "This is no time for melodramatics, ma'am, if Doubler is badly hurt. Will you please let go of that bridle?"

"Do you think," she demanded, her cheeks aflame, her hair, loosened from the long ride, straggling over her temples and giving her a singularly dishevelled appearance, "that I am going to let you go for the doctor? You!"

"This isn't a case where your feelings should be considered, ma'am," he said. "If Ben Doubler has been hurt like you think he has I'm going to get the doctor mighty sudden, whether you think I ought to or not!"

"You won't!" she declared, stamping a foot furiously. "You shot him and now you want to disarm suspicion by going after the doctor for him. But you won't! I won't let you!"

"You'll have to," he said rapidly. "The doctor isn't at Lazette; he is over on Cariso Creek, taking care of Dave Moreland's wife, who is down bad. I saw Dave yesterday, and he was telling me about her; that the doctor is to stay there until she is out of danger. You don't know where Moreland's place is. Be sensible, now," he said gruffly. "I'll talk to you later about you suspecting me."

"You shan't go," she protested; "I am going myself. I will find Moreland's place. I can't let you go—it would be horrible!"

For answer he swung quickly down from the saddle, seized her by the waist, disengaged her hands from the bridle rein, and picking her up bodily carried her, struggling and fighting and striking blindly at his face, to the side of the trail. When he set her down he pinned her arms to her sides. He did not speak, and she was entirely helpless in his grasp, but when he released his grasp of her arms and tried to leave her she seized the collar of his vest. With a grim laugh he slipped out of the garment, leaving it dangling from her hand.

"Keep it for me, ma'am," he said with a cold chuckle. "But get back to Doubler's cabin and see what you can do for him. You'll be able to do a lot. I'll be back with the doctor before sundown."

In an instant he was at his pony's side, mounting with the animal at a run, and in a brief space had vanished around a turn in the trail, leaving a cloud of dust to mark the spot where Sheila had seen him disappear.

For a long time Sheila stood beside the trail, looking at the spot where he had disappeared, holding his vest with an unconscious grasp. Looking down she saw it and with an exclamation of rage threw it from her, watching it fall into the sand. But after an instant she went over and took it up, recovering, at the same time, a black leather pocket memoranda which had slipped out of it. She put the memoranda back into one of the pockets, handling both the book and the vest gingerly, for she felt an aversion to touching them. She conquered this feeling long enough to tuck the vest into the slicker behind the saddle, and then she mounted and sent her pony up the trail toward Doubler's cabin.

She found Doubler where she had left him, and he was still unconscious. The water pail was empty and she went down to the river and refilled it, returning to the cabin and again bathing and bandaging Doubler's wound, and placing a fresh cloth on his forehead.

For a time she sat watching the injured man, revolving the incident of her discovery of him in her mind, going over and over again her gruesome details. She did not dwell long on the latter, for she could not prevent her mind reviewing Dakota's words and actions—his satanic cleverness in pretending to be on the verge of taking her into his confidence, his prediction that she would understand when this "business" was over. She did not need to wait, she understood now!

Finding the silence in the cabin irksome, she rose, placed Doubler's head in a more comfortable position, and went outside into the bright sunshine of the afternoon. She took a turn around the corral, abstractedly watched the awkward antics of several yearlings which were penned in a corner, and then returned to the cabin door, where she sat on the edge of the step.

Near the side of the cabin door, leaning against the wall, she saw a rifle. She started, not remembering to have seen it there before, but presently she found courage to take it up gingerly, turning it over and over in her hands.

Some initials had been carved on the stock, and she examined them, making them out finally as "B. D."—Doubler's. Examining the weapon, she found an empty shell in the chamber, and she nearly dropped the rifle when the thought struck her that perhaps Doubler had been shot with it. She set it down quickly, shuddering, and for diversion walked to her pony, examining the injured leg and rubbing it, the pony nickering gratefully. Returning to the cabin, she sat for a long time on the step, but she did not again take up the rifle. Several times while she sat on the step she heard Doubler moan, and once she got up and went to him, again bathing his wound, but returning instantly to the door step, for she could not bear the silence of the interior.

Suddenly remembering Dakota's vest and the black leather memoranda which had dropped from one of the pockets, she got up again and went to the bench where she had laid the garment, taking out the book and regarding it with some curiosity.

There was nothing on the cover to suggest what might be the nature of its contents—time had worn away any printing that might have been on it. She hesitated, debating the propriety of an examination, but her curiosity got the better of her and with a sharp glance at Doubler she turned her back and opened the book.

Almost the first object that caught her gaze was a piece of paper, detached from the leaves, with some writing on it. The writing seemed unimportant, but as she turned it, intending to replace it between the leaves of the book, she saw her father's name, and she read, holding her breath with dread, for fresh in her mind was Duncan's charge that her father had entered into an agreement with Dakota for the murder of Doubler. She read the words several times, standing beside the bench and swaying back and forth, a sudden weakness gripping her.

"One month from to-day"—ran the words—"I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union County." Signed:

"David Dowd Langford."

There it was—conclusive, damning evidence of her father's guilt—and of Dakota's!

How cleverly that last clause covered the evil intent of the document! Sheila read it again and again with her dry eyes. Her horror and grief were too great for tears. She felt that the discovery of the paper removed the last lingering doubt, and though she had been partially prepared for proof, she had not been prepared to have it thrust so quickly and convincingly before her.

How long she sat on the doorstep she did not know, or care, for at a stroke she had lost all interest in everything in the country. Even its people interested her only to the point of loathing—they were murderers, even her father. Time represented to her nothing now except a dreary space which, if she endured, would bring the moment in which she could leave. For within the last few minutes she seemed to have been robbed of all the things which had made existence here endurable and she was determined to end it all. When she finally got up and looked about her she saw that the sun had traveled quite a distance down the sky. A sorrowful smile reached her face as she watched it. It was going away, and before it could complete another circle she would go too—back to the East from which she had come, where there were at least some friends who could be depended upon to commit no atrocious crimes.

No plan of action formed in her mind; she could not think lucidly with the knowledge that her father was convicted of complicity in an attempted murder.

Would she be able to face her father again? To bid him goodby? She thought not. It would be better for both if she departed without him being aware of her going. He would not care, she told herself bitterly; lately he had withheld from her all those little evidences of affection to which she had grown accustomed, and it would not be hard for him, he would not miss her, perhaps would even be glad of her absence, for then he could continue his murderous schemes without fear of her "meddling" with them.

There was a fascination in the paper on which was written the signed agreement. She read it carefully again, and then concealed it in her bodice, pinning it there so that it would not become lost. Then she rose and went into the cabin, placing the memoranda on a shelf where Dakota would be sure to find it when he returned with the doctor. She did not care to read anything contained in it.

Marvelling at her coolness, she went outside again and resumed her seat on the doorstep. It was not such a blow to her, after all, and there arose in her mind as she sat on the step a wonder as to how her father would act were she to confront him with evidence of his guilt. Perhaps she would not show him the paper, but she finally became convinced that she must talk to him, must learn from him in some manner his connection with the attempted murder of Doubler. Then, after receiving from him some sign which would convince her, she would take her belongings and depart for the East, leaving him to his own devices.

Looking up at the sun, she saw that it still had quite a distance to travel before it reached the mountains. Stealing into the cabin, she once more fixed the bandages on the wounded man. Then she went out, mounted her pony, and rode through the shallow water of the crossing toward the Double R ranch.

CHAPTER XI.

Langford Lays Off the Mask.

THE sun was still an hour above the horizon when Sheila rode up to the corral gates. While removing the saddle and bridle from her pony she noted with satisfaction that the horse which her father had been accustomed to ride was inside the corral. Therefore her father was somewhere about.

Hanging the saddle and bridle from a rail of the corral fence she went into the house, to find that Langford was not there. Duncan's sister curtly informed her that she had seen him a few minutes before down at the stables. Sheila went into the office, which was a lean-to addition to the ranch house, and seating herself at her father's desk picked up a six months' old copy of a magazine and tried to read.

Finding that she could not concentrate her thoughts, she dropped the magazine into her lap and leaned back with a sigh. From where she sat she had a good view of the stables, and fifteen minutes later, while she still watched, she saw Langford come out of one of the stable doors and walk toward the house. She felt absolutely no emotion whatever over his coming; there was only a mild curiosity in her mind as to the manner in which he would take the news of her intended departure from the Double R. She observed, with a sort of detached interest, that he looked twice at her saddle and bridle as he passed them, and so of course he surmised that she had come in from her ride. For a moment she lost sight of him behind some buildings, and then he opened the door of the office and entered.

He stopped on the threshold for an instant and looked at her, evidently expecting her to offer her usual greeting. He frowned slightly when it did not come, and then smiled.

"Hello!" he said cordially. "You are back, I see. And tired," he added, noting her position. He walked over and laid a hand on her forehead and she involuntarily shrank from his touch, shuddering, for the hand which he had placed on her forehead was the right one—the hand with which he had signed the agreement with Dakota—Doubler's death warrant.

"Don't please," she said.

"Cross too?" he said jocularly.

"Just tired," she lied listlessly and with an air of great indifference.

He looked critically at her for an instant, then smiled again and dragged a chair over near a window and looked out, apparently little concerned over her manner. But she noted that he glanced furtively at her several times, and that he seemed greatly satisfied over something. She wondered if he had seen Dakota; if he knew that the latter had already attempted to carry out the agreement to "persuade Doubler to leave the county."

"Ride far?" he questioned, turning and facing her, his voice casual.

"Not very far."

"The river trail?"

Sheila nodded, and saw a sudden interest flash into his eyes.

"Which way?" he asked quickly.

"Down," she returned. She had not lied, for she had ridden "down," and though she had also ridden up the river she preferred to let him guess a little, for she resented the curiosity in his voice and was determined to broach the subject which she had in mind in her own time and after the manner that suited her best.

He had not been interested in her for a long time, had not appeared to care where she spent her time. Why should he betray interest now? She saw a mysterious smile on his face and knew before he spoke that his apparent interest in her was not genuine—that he was merely curious.

"Then you haven't heard the news?" he said softly. He was looking out o' the window now and she could not see his face.

She took up the magazine and turned several pages, pretending to read, but in reality waiting for him to continue. When he made no effort to do so her own curiosity got the better of her.

"What news?" she questioned, without looking at him.

"About Doubler," he said. "He is dead."

Her surprise was genuine, and her hands trembled as the leaves of the magazine fluttered and closed. Had the nester died since she had left his cabin? A moment's thought convinced her that this could not be the explanation, for assuredly she would have seen any one who had arrived at Doubler's cabin; she had scanned the surrounding country before and after leaving the vicinity of the crossing and had seen no signs of any one. Besides, Langford's news seemed to have abided with him a long time—it seemed to her that he had known it for hours. She could not tell why she felt this, but she was certain that he had not received word recently—within an hour or two at any rate—unless he had seen Dakota.

This seemed to be the secret of his knowledge, and the more she considered the latter's excitement during her meeting with him on the trail, the more fully she became convinced that Langford had talked to him. The latter's anxiety to relieve her of the task of riding to Lazette for the doctor had been spurious; he had merely wanted to be the first to carry the news of Doubler's death to Langford, and after leaving her he had undoubtedly taken a roundabout trail for the Double R. Possibly by this time he had settled with Langford and was on his way out of the country.

"Dead?" she said, turning to Langford. "Who"—— In her momentary excitement she had come very near to asking him who had brought him the news. She hesitated, for she saw a glint of surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

"My dear girl, did I say that he had been 'killed?'"

His smile was without humor. Evidently he had expected that she had been about to ask who had killed the nester.

He looked at her steadily, an intolerant smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "I am aware that you have been suspicious of me ever since you heard that I had a quarrel with Doubler. But, thank God, my dear, I have not that crime to answer for. Doubler, however, has been killed—murdered."

Sheila repressed a desire to shudder, and turned from Langford so that he would not be able to see the disgust that had come into her eyes over the discovery that in addition to being a murderer her father was that most despicable of all living things—a hypocrite! It required all of her composure to be able to look at him again.

"Who killed him?" she asked evenly.

"Dakota, my dear."

"Dakota!" She pronounced the name abstractedly, for she was surprised at the admission.

"How do you know that Dakota killed him?" she said, looking straight at him. He changed color, though his manner was still smooth and his smile bland.

"Duncan was fortunate enough to be in the vicinity when the deed was committed," he told her. "And he saw Dakota shoot him in the back. With his own rifle too."

There was a quality in his voice which hinted at satisfaction; a peculiar emphasis on the word "fortunate" which caused Sheila to wonder why he should consider it fortunate that Duncan had seen the murder done, when it would have been much better for the success of Dakota's and her father's scheme if there had been no witness to it at all.

(To Be Continued.)

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