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Then I'll Come Back to You

By LARRY EVANS
Author of "On a to Every Man"

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

Allison had not stirred, nor puffed Wickersham, nor the girl who stood with hands at breasts. And now toward them Stephen O'Mara wheeled. His legs would fail him, and he stented them. Blood blinded him, and he wiped it away. Swaying giddily, he managed somehow a smile.

"Wickersham, I have met the man whom you hired to fight for you," he called clearly, "and he has earned his wage! Are you man enough to step forward now and fight for yourself?"

Wickersham clucked drily in his throat and lifted an elbow to shield his face. Shrinking back behind the first shelter that chance afforded him, he put the girl between him and his fear. And then weakness seized upon that sick and swaying man, but he spoke to her—to the unspeakable horror in her eyes.

"Barbara," he called thickly, "Barbara!"

He groped toward her, and she cried out and drew back from such hands as these. Then a black wall rose before him and shut her from his sight. But Joe caught him as he fell.

Like huddled sheep O'Mara's men and Wickersham's watched Joe bear



He Set Himself and Swung From the Waist.

him up the hill. Shayne and Fallon were bending over Harrigan; by the others he lay ignored. It was a mob without a leader until, as is the way in all crises, a new leader arose. Big Louie, stolid face no longer stolid, strode between those two factions and achieved the unknown heights for which his eyes had always hungered.

"I work for no man but is a man!" he boomed. "That bridge—she still is hold!"

Steve had bidden Hardwick Elliott watch these men if their big moment ever came. And Elliott and Allison watched now. They were sheep no longer nor malcontents nor misled tools of cunning. Like wolves they followed that nameless man who was out upon the jam. Wickersham's men were back on the river, but that bridge would continue to hold. And while they worked, while Elliott and her father watched spellbound, blindly Barbara Allison turned, with no thought of what she was doing, and walked into the brush.

The river was running clear by dusk when they raised the first hue and cry for her. It was dark when a runner bore the news to the cabin on the hillside that she was missing. And when men had been beating the woods for her for twelve hours as best they could in the dark and no word came that she was found but Joe no longer dared let lie in sleep his friend, whose body he had cleansed and bandaged. At day-break Joe waked him and told him Barbara was lost. They tried to argue with him, for his knees were still unsteady. Even Allison, whose jovial body seemed to have shrunk during his hours of waiting, tried to convince him that the men now looking for her would find her soon or had already found her perhaps. But he brushed them away while he was dressing. He threw off the hands that tried to detain him. And it was Steve who found her, as he had known it would be, just before a second night of dread was closing in upon her.

In circles of ever increasing radius he traveled at a fox trot, which thoughts of Fallon and Shayne and Harrigan would not let him abandon. But he had run her down when he caught sight of her, for she fled like a wild thing before him. Floundering in a cedar swamp, soaked to the knees, little blue bearded suit heavy with black muck, he came up with her. She was kneeling, shaking with terror, face hidden by her loosened hair, when he bent over her and raised her to her



He Carried Her Now to That Cabin Which Stood on the Balsam Knoll.

"Please," she whimpered, "oh please!"

Yet when he spoke her name her head leaped back, and she recognized him instantly.

"I tried to wait," she chattered with all the voice she had left. "I tried to sit still until some one came for me, but I thought I knew the way. I tried not to listen to the noises. I remembered about the stars, and I knew I shouldn't run. But I thought you were—I thought you were!"

Remembered terror choked her. Consciousness slipped away.

By the same trail which once had led him to the "city" of Morrison he carried her now to that cabin which stood on the balsam knoll in the crook of the west branch.

His head was spinning from fatigue and the throbs of the jagged tear above his temple when the log building, streaked white with clay chinking, loomed up ahead, and yet involuntarily he stopped there a moment with his burden.

He had pictured many times a night when he should bring her there, with both of them watching the moon in the rapids and listening to the waves lipping the banks. This was not that night. That night would never be. But the rebellion and bitterness were gone from his heart. After he had removed her wet shoes and stockings and brush whipped suit and sheer black blouse and she slept the sleep of exhaustion into which she had slipped from unconsciousness without even opening her eyes he built a fire and sat before it, until morning came. And when it dawned and she waked dazedly while he was preparing breakfast he had finished reconstructing many things.

Her eyes went from wall to wall, frightened still and questioning at first, so he merely nodded and went outside and left her to remember alone. Returning with wood on his arm, he found recollection of much in her gaze. She was looking at the thin beeled, buttoned boots before the fireplace, the stockings and furred garments cleaned of mud and dried on the backs of chairs. A cloud of color stole up from the blanket edge at her throat to the line of her hair.

"You were wet," he explained simply, "and you were too spent to help yourself. I could not let you sleep in them."

"I understand," her answer faltered a little. "I was just thinking. I knew such things happened, but I thought it was only in books."

Drowsily she watched him bending over frying pan and coffeepot, content herself to lie and rest. But after a time, with fuller awakening, the bandage about his head claimed her attention. To her it seemed impossible that this smoothly shaven man in clean blue shirt could be the same one who had emerged from a struggle still sickeningly brutish to her. Involuntarily she shuddered a little without knowing that he watched.

"I am going to the spring for fresh water," he told her then. "There will be time for you to dress, and breakfast will be ready when I come back."

Submissive before his tone she replied that she was hungry; that she would be ready too. She had donned blouse and skirt and stockings and shoes and finished braiding her hair when he re-entered. He showed her a tin basin outside filled with icy water for her face and hands. And then they sat down in silence to breakfast.

"I told you that you would find out some day," Barbara murmured finally. "I warned you you would wake suddenly and see how shallow I am."

"Waking has been no sudden thing with me. I finished with dreams a long time back, but you are what you have been always in my thoughts. It's conditions I've waked to, not you!"

With unwitting gruffness he had sometimes spoken to her, but never with such constrained vehemence.

"Why should I find fault in anything you have done or failed to do?" he demanded of both her and himself. "Why should you be apologetic or regretful? Such a thing as I had to do two days ago has held no place in your world and never could, but I can't find it in myself to be apologetic, either, because it is a part of mine. I meant to kill him—wanted to kill him—because I was certain of your scorn! That was vindictive; that was foolish for a man. But as for the rest of it—I know I may have it all to do over again any day. It was a vulgar brawl to you; to me?"

"Not just a brawl," she contradicted quickly, anxious to be understood. "Just—oh, so needlessly brutal. At first it left me only dazed and nauseated, but after I had had time to think I made myself see your side of it. You must crush insubordination. And still it seems as though there might

have been a less horrible way." "He had balked my work," he told her sternly. "He has fired upon me from cover when he dared not come out into the open. He has been taking money for his work from a man who was bent on beating me at any cost. Could I ask him please not to spoil my bridge? Is that your idea of a man's way? This is my work, and while I continue in it men who oppose me with their brains I will fight with my brain. But men who force me to meet them with fists I must beat with like weapons. There is no alternative. I have no choice—unless I quit. And that is the reason I know that this is the end for you and me! My ways would have had to be your ways, and we have learned at last what I have feared for long and long. They lie too far apart for them ever to meet."

"I promised to teach you to love me, and I've failed. And knowing that my failure is not all my own fault is not going to make it any easier for me. You've taught me loneliness I'm never going to forget as long as I live, but I don't love you any the less for that. I dreamed big dreams for both of us."

His voice was dreary of a sudden. "I promised I'd make those dreams come true, because I thought my life could be your life. I've not done so. That thing could never be. I've talked bigger than I could practice, and that is not going to help my self confidence any, but as it stands now I can earn it back. I couldn't have done that if I had married you and waked some day to find you shrinking from me. It would have killed it and my self respect, too, to have learned too late that you believed still in your own greater fitness."

"I tell you it is not that!" she cried out. "Can't I make you understand?"

"You have made me understand till I am sure," he stated. "I am no longer vexing myself with trivial things. You have been uncertain. I have seen that. You are certain now. And the fundamental thing remains unchanged. In me there is that man who once man-handled Harrigan—and you didn't want me to touch you! You don't have to tell me any more that you can't love me. When you drew away from me, that was enough."

She sat and watched him put the room in order, and that hurt her more than anything else, for he would not let her help. He made her change her high heeled boots for moccasins, which he brought and laced upon her feet. But the remainder of the day it was the old Steve who helped her over the bad bits of going and talked disconnectedly of many things meanwhile. And yet no longer the old Steve, who had been so entirely her own. Hers was the sad face when they entered the clearing at Thirty Mile, and a hoarse shout saluted her return. In her father's embrace she clung and wondered that she did not cry. And two pages had turned for her that day, for she sent Wickersham back his ring the same night the private car rolled down to Morrison.

Harrigan was with Archibald Wickersham when the package, unaccompanied by explanation, reached the latter in his hotel room in town.

"Go out and get him," said Wickersham. "And see that you get him—for good."

CHAPTER XXI. "You Cannot Leave Me Now."

FOR two days and two nights the girl fought on alone against the outcry of her heart until she recognized the futility of it, and then she ordered Ragtime to be saddled. And Miriam Burrell, sighting Barbara's face as the latter wheeled toward the hills, flew from her window to scratch off a note to Garry—her third note that day, for she seemed always omitting most important things which needed saying.

"It's come," she scrawled in delighted haste. "When are we going to be married?"

Once before Barbara had ridden that road with him alone in her thoughts. Now she realized that she had loved him then as she must have loved him always and marveled at such blindness. Once, on that other day, she had told herself that all ignoble and unworthy comparisons of herself and him were done and gone. Now she did not need such reassurance, when her lips were tremulous.

She grew pensive at times. At times in an abandon of gaiety she chattered back at a quarrelsome squirrel in the thicket. She could rest later, and if she could not go to him immediately at least every step the horse took was bringing them for a little while closer together. And her tomorrow was only one twilight and one dawn away. Her tomorrow would be his as utterly as was she herself.

Dusk came, and regretfully she told herself that she must be turning back home. Two rifle shots, sharp and stinging close, whipped through the quiet of that lazy afternoon, but they meant nothing to her. She had reached the height of land, where he had found her the day her roan mare strayed off while she sat mooning on a log. She was holding out both arms toward the spot where the valley of Thirty Mile must be when a team of heavy horses broke around a turn in the road, slowed to a trot at the sight of her and came to an abrupt standstill. When the girl rode nearer to them, merely surprised and curious at first, they snorted and showed the whites of their eyes and shied back nervously.

Something chill clutched at Barbara's heart while she spoke peremptorily to Ragtime who was dancing in sympathetic panic. There was nothing to tell her, but she knew that these were Big Louie's horses. And Big Louie was a dreamy incompetent. He had left them for a moment, that was all, and they had become frightened and bolted. But Big Louie never neglected his team—they were not wet—they

had not been running for two days. The fright became less when she dismounted and approached them, soothing them with her voice until they let her touch their sleek sides without rearing away.

Dusk had come and gone, for it was growing dark. Uncertain, more and more unnerved as she stood and gazed at the forbidding, black shadowed ridges beyond her, the girl had to fight suddenly against an impulse to turn and race back to the lower country and Morrison and home. Even then the rifle shots meant nothing to her—pride would not let her run. She remounted and rode on a rod or two and stopped to look back at the team which was watching her. She pressed on and rounded the curve. Ragtime reared and snorted there, and she barely stifled the cry which his strange behavior brought to her lips. Because of her senseless panic she punished him the more severely and sent him on. And then she saw what the horse had already seen.

A blue shirted figure lay half in the road, half in the undergrowth that fringed it, one arm crooked under him and his face prone in the dust. A bulkier mass was stretched wholly within the trail—and she recognized him too. Big Louie's face was upturned, and the explanation of the two rifle reports and the driverless team was here, for Big Louie's hand still clutched the handle of a canvas pail. They had stopped to water the horses; they had been shot down from behind. And first of all, unable to move, while horror parched her lips, the girl remembered words which the limp one half in the road and half in the underbrush, had spoken to her in a moment of sternness.

"He has fired upon me from cover," the man who loved her had said. "He has been taking money from a man who was bent on beating me at any price!"

"Blood sickens me!" she whimpered aloud. "Blood sickens me!" But she managed to turn him over upon his back. With brown head against his heart she listened—listened and would not believe that her tomorrow might come too late. And then she caught the slack pound of his pulse.

From there on she was less panic-stricken. She gained control of faculties shocked for a time into uselessness. Method marked her acts—deliberation mechanical, but sure. She was horribly afraid of Big Louie, but she finally disentangled the handle of the pail from those loose fingers and ran to the brook which bubbled near at hand. Returning, she drenched Steve's face with icy water. She lifted his head and propped it as comfortably as she might upon one thigh and opened his flannel shirt. The ball had passed through, for back and front the shirt became immediately wetter with fresh blood. Blood sickened her, but she whipped off the coat of her boyish riding habit and wrenched the sleeves from her linen blouse. They were desperately scant, yet they provided pads with which to check that dreadful oozing. And when they were in place she turned again to bathing his forehead.

A folded sheet of paper came to view when she tried once to ease his heavy body from the position which was numbing her leg, and she seized upon it fiercely. It was only a brief line, bidding him come to her, but it bore her name. With instant, bodiless clarity which had marked all her mental processes so far, its purport was hers. She had not written—the hand that had traced her signature had been unstrung for once. She understood, though such knowledge seemed of little moment now.

She kept the pads cold and wet. She went for fresh water and stumbled and fell more than once because of the treacherous footing in the deepening shadows. But she was no longer afraid of the dark. She had grown to fear Big Louie less, even though there was no help for Big Louie any more. It was the first time that Barbara had looked upon the face of a man who had died in violence. Big Louie's face was growing indistinct now, but she knew that he was smiling—knew that his eyes were dreamy and mild. Death, like life, had been a quite incomprehensible puzzle to that slow witted one who had no name. But he had smiled seldom in life. In death his smile was almost childish, almost sweet and questioning beyond all else.

Alone with him who still lived, the pallid girl sat and waited and wondered how long—or how soon—it would be. When she bade him wait until she could bring the team he nodded his comprehension. He was watching for her return. And he came to his feet with a readiness that made her heart leap with hope. But he fell twice before she lifted him, half with her hands, half with her voice, to the seat.

She crawled in beside him, and the next moment she had to struggle madly to prevent his returning to Big Louie.

"He will wait quiet until we come for him," she protested. "There isn't room for Big Louie—and he won't mind!"

Her logic made an impression upon him, for he smiled. There was no sequence in his acquiescence, however.

"Big Louie never could find his way alone," he mused, "and that is strange, too, for he was born in these hills. He was always getting lost"—And with that he must not desert Louie! She had even more trouble with him this time. "He will lose his head," he expostulated mildly—his old, unflinching attitude of gentleness toward her. "He will lose his head and waste his strength in running from things which do not exist."

"Big Louie will find his way this time." She was whimpering again in her helplessness. "He is—already home."

(To be continued next week)

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