Cavanagh, Forest Ranger

The Great Conservation Novel

By HAMLIN GARLAND

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[CONTINUED.]

"I can't do that," replied Cavanagh, but his tone was kindlier, for he perceived that the old fellow was thin, hollow chested and poorly clad. "You knew you were breaking the laws, didn't you?"

This the culprit admitted. "But I was working for Sam Gregg, and when Joe asked me to go show him the trail I didn't expect to get cinched for killing game. I didn't fire a shot—now that's the truth."

"Nevertheless," retorted Ross, "you were packing the head, and I must count you in the game."

Edwards fell silent then, but something in his look deepened the ranger's pity. His eyes were large and dark, and his face so emaciated that he seemed fit only for a sanitarium.

The trip to the Fork (timed to the gait of a lazy pack horse) was a tedious eight hours' march, and it was nearly 9 o'clock when they arrived at the outskirts of the village.

To the casual observer in a town of this character there was nothing specially noticeable in three horsemen driving a pack horse, but to those whose eyes were keen the true relationship of the ranger to his captives was instantly apparent, and when they alighted at Judge Higley's office a bunch of eager observers quickly collected.

"Hello, Joe! What luck?" called Ballard.

"Our luck was a little too good—we caught a game warden," replied the young scapegrace.

The ranger was chagrined to find the office of the justice closed for the day and, turning to his captives, said: "I'm hungry, and I've no doubt you are. I'm going to take you into Mike Halsey's saloon for supper, but remember you are my prisoners."

In fifteen minutes the town was rumbling with the news. Under Ballard's devilry all the latent hatred of the ranger and all the concealed opposition to the forest service came to the surface like the scum on a pot of broth. The saloons and eating houses boiled with indignant protest. "What business is it of Ross Cavanagh's?" they demanded. "What call has he to interfere? He's not a game warden."

"Yes, he is. All these rangers are game wardens," corrected another.

"No, they're not. They have to be commissioned by the governor."

"Well, he's been commissioned. He's warden all right."

"I don't believe it. Anyhow, he's too fresh. He needs to have a halt. Let's do him. Let's bluff him out."

Lee Virginia was in the kitchen superintending the service when one of the waiters came in breathless with excitement. "Ross Cavanagh has shot Joe Gregg for killing sheep!"

Lee faced her with blanched face. "Who told you so?"

"They're all talking about it out there. Gee, but they're hot! Some of 'em want to lynch him."

Lee hurried out into the dining room, which was crowded with men and voicing deep excitement.

A half dozen men were standing before the counter talking with Lize, but Lee pushed in to inquire with white, inquiring face: "What is it all about? What has happened?"

"Nothing much," Lize replied contemptuously, "but you'd think a horse had been stole. Ross has nipped Joe Gregg and one of his herders for killing mountain sheep."

"Do you mean he shot them?"

"Yes; he took their heads."

Lee stood aghast. "What do you mean? Whose heads?"

Lize laughed. "The sheep's heads. Oh, don't be scared! No one is hurt yet."

The girl flushed with confusion as the men roared over her blunder. "One of the girls told me Mr. Cavanagh had killed a man," she explained. "Where is he?"

Lize betrayed annoyance. "They say he's taking supper at Mike Halsey's, though why he didn't come here I don't see. What's he going to do?" she asked. "Won't the marshal take the men off his hands?"

"Not without warrant from Higley, and Higley is out of town. Ross'll have to hold 'em till Higley gets back or else take 'em over to Chauvenet," Lize snorted. "Old Higley! Yes, he's been known to disappear before when there was some real work to be done."

Lee went back to her own task with a vague sense of alarm. "Certainly they will not dare to interfere with an officer in the discharge of his duties," she thought. She was eager to see him, and the thought that he might be obliged to ride away to Chauvenet without a word to her gave her a deeper feeling of annoyance and unrest. That he was in any real danger she could not believe.

It was disheartening to Cavanagh to see how some of the most influential citizens contrived to give encouragement to the riotous element of the town. A wink, a gesture, a careless word to the proper messenger, conveyed to the saloon rounders an assurance of sympathy which inflamed their resentment to the murderous point. It was confessedly one of the worst communities in the state.

"Let's run Cavanagh!" was the suggestion of several of Gregg's friends.

The fact that the ranger was a commissioned officer of the law and that the ram's head had been found on the poacher's pack made very little difference to these irresponsible instigators to assault. It was wonderful how highly that loafing young rascal, Joe Gregg, was prized at the moment. "It's an outrage that the son of a leading citizen should be held up in this way by one of the forestry Cossacks," declared one of the merchants.

The discussion which took place over the bars of the town was at the riot heat by 9 o'clock, and soon after 10 a crowd of howling, whooping bad boys and disreputable ranch hands were parading the walks, breathing out vile threats against the ranger.

Accustomed to men of this type, Cavanagh watched them come and go at Halsey's bar with calculating eyes. "There will be no trouble for an hour or two, but meanwhile what is to be done? Higley is not to be found, and the town marshal is also 'out of town.'" To Halsey he said: "I am acting, as you know, under both federal and state authority, and I call upon you as a law abiding citizen to aid me in holding these men prisoners. I shall camp right here till morning or until the magistrate or the marshal relieves me of my culprits."

Halsey was himself a sportsman—a genuine lover of hunting and a fairly consistent upholder of the game laws; but, perceiving that the whole town had apparently lined up in opposition to the ranger, he lost courage. His consent was half hearted, and he edged away toward the front window of his barroom, nervously seeking to be neutral—"to carry water on both shoulders," as the phrase goes.

The talk grew less jocular as the drinks took effect, and Neill Ballard, separating himself from the crowd, came forward, calling loudly: "Come out o' there, Joe! Come out and have a drink!"

His words conveyed less of battle than his tone. He was, in fact, urging a revolt, and Cavanagh knew it.

Gregg rose as if to comply. The ranger stopped him.

"Keep your seat," said he, and to Ballard he warningly remarked, "And you keep away from my prisoners."

"Do you own this saloon?" retorted the fellow truculently. "I reckon Halsey's customers have some rights. What are you doing here, anyway? This is no jail."

"Halsey has given me the privilege of holding my prisoners here till the justice is found. It isn't my fault that the town is without judge or jail." He was weakened by the knowledge that Halsey had only half consented to aid justice, but his pride was roused, and he was determined upon carrying his arrest to its legitimate end. "I'm going to see that these men are punished if I have to carry them to Sulphur City," he added.

"Smash the lights!" shouted some one at the back.

Here was the first real note of war, and Ross cried out sharply, "If a man lifts a hand toward the light I'll cut it off!"

There was a stealthy movement in the crowd, and, leaping upon the counter, a reckless cub reached for the lamp.

Cavanagh's revolver shattered the globe in the fellow's very palm. "Get down from there!" he commanded.

CHAPTER XI.

LIZE PLAYS A MAN'S PART—ALSO LEE.

THE mob besieging Cavanagh in Halsey's saloon had not found its leader. It hesitated and blustered, but did not strike and eventually edged out of the door and disappeared. But the silence which followed its retreat was more alarming to the ranger than its presence. Some slier mischief was in these minds. He feared that they were about to cut the electric light wires and so plunge him into darkness, and to prepare for that emergency he called upon the bartender (Halsey having vanished) for a lamp or a lantern.

The fellow sullenly set about this task, and Ross, turning to Gregg, said, "If you've any influence with this mob you'd better use it to keep them out of mischief, for I'm on this job to the bitter end, and somebody's going to be hurt."

Gregg, who seemed quite detached from the action and rather delighted with it, replied: "I have no influence. They don't care a hang about me. They have it in for you, that's all."

Edwards remained silent, with his hat drawn low over his eyes. It was evident that he was anxious to avoid being seen and quite willing to keep out of the conflict; but, with no handcuffs and the back door of the saloon unguarded, Ross was aware that his guard must be incessant and alertly vigilant.

"Such a thing could not happen under the English flag," he said to himself, and at the moment his adopted country seemed a miserable makeshift. Only the thought of Redfield and the chief nerved him for the long vigil. "The chief will understand if it comes up to him," he said.

Lize Wetherford came hurrying in, looking as though she had just risen from her bed. She was clothed in a long red robe, her grizzled hair was loose, her feet were bare, and she carried a huge old fashioned revolver in her hand. Her mouth was stern.

Stopping abruptly as she caught sight of Ross standing in the middle of the floor unhurt, she exclaimed: "There you are! Are you all right?"

"As a trivet," he replied.

She let her gun hand relax. "What was the shooting?"

"A little bluff on my part."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No."

She was much relieved. "I was afraid they'd got you. I came as quick as I could. I was abed. That fool doctor threw a chill into me, and I've been going to roost early according to orders. I didn't hear your gun, but Lee did, and she came to tell me. Don't let 'em get behind you. If I was any good I'd stay and help. What you going to do—hold your men here all night?"

"I don't see any other way. Halsey turned the place over to me, but"— He looked about him suspiciously.

"Bring 'em into my place. Lee has had new locks put on our doors; they'll help some."

"I don't like to do that, Mrs. Wetherford," he replied, with greater respect

"THERE YOU ARE! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

than he had ever shown her before. "They may attack me there."

"All the better; I'll be on hand to help. But they're less likely to boil in on you through a locked door."

"But your daughter? It will alarm her."

"She'll be in the other house, and, besides, she'd feel easier if you are in my place. She's all wrought up by the attack on you."

Ross turned to his prisoners. "Follow Mrs. Wetherford and—eyes front!"

"You needn't worry about me," said Joe. "I won't run."

"I don't intend to give you a chance," replied Ross.

Edwards seemed to have lost in both courage and physical stature. He slouched along with shuffling step, his head bent and his face pale. Ross was now profoundly sorry for him, so utterly craven and broken was his look.

As Ross brought his two prisoners to the Wetherford House Lee was waiting on the porch of the hotel, tense with excitement, straining her ears and eyes to see what was taking place.

The night had started with a small sickle of moon, but this had dropped below the range, leaving the street dark save where the lights from the windows of the all night eating houses and saloons lay out upon the walk, and while she stood peering out the sound of rancorous howling and shrill whooping came to her ears with such suggestion of ferocity that she shivered.

A few of the hotel guests had gone to bed, but the women were up, excited and nervous, starting at every fresh outburst of whooping, knowing that their sons or husbands were out in the street "to see the fun" and that they might meet trouble.

At last Lee discerned her mother returning from Halsey's, followed by three men. Withdrawing from the little porch whereon she had been standing, she re-entered the house to meet her mother in the hall. "Where is Mr. Cavanagh?" she asked.

"Out in the dining room. You see, Mike Halsey is no kind of use. He vamoosed and left Ross down there alone with his two prisoners and the lights likely to be turned out on him, so I offered the caffy as a calaboose. They are sure in for a long and tedious night."

Lee was alarmed at her mother's appearance. "You must go to bed. You look ghastly."

"I reckon I'd better lay down for a little while, but I can't sleep. Ross may need me. There isn't a man to help him but me, and that loafer Ballard is full of gall. He's got it in for Ross and will make trouble if he can."

"What can we do?"

"Shoot!" replied Lize, with dry brevity. "I wouldn't mind a chance to plug some of the sweet citizens of this town. I owe them one or two."

With this sentence in her ears Lee Virginia went to her bed, but not to slumber. Her utter inability either to control her mother's action or to influence that of the mob added to her uneasiness.

The singing, shouting, trampling of the crowd went on, and once a group of men halted just outside her window, and she heard Neill Ballard noisily, drunkenly arguing as to the most effective method of taking the prisoners.

"Come on, boys!" said Ballard, his voice filled with reckless determination. "Let's run him."

As they passed the girl sprang up and went to her mother's room to warn her of the threatened attack.

Lize was already awake and calmly loading a second revolver by the light of the electric bulb. A jarring blow was heard. "Hear that? They're breaking in!" said Lize. She started to leave the room.

Lee stopped her. "Where are you going?"

"To help Ross. Here!" She thrust the handle of a smaller weapon into Lee's hand. "Ed Wetherford's girl ought to be able to take care of herself. Come on!"

With a most unheroic horror benumbing her limbs, Lee followed her mother through the hall. The sound of shouts and the trampling of feet could be heard, and she came out into the restaurant just in time to photograph upon her brain a scene whose significance was at once apparent. On a chair between his two prisoners and confronting Ballard at the head of a crowd of frenzied villains stood the ranger, a gleaming weapon in his hand, a look of resolution on his face.

What he had said or what he intended to do she did not learn, for her mother rushed at the invaders with the mad bravery of a she bear. "Get out of here!" she snarled, thrusting her revolver into the very mouth of the leader.

They all fell back in astonishment and fear.

Ross leaped to her side. "Leave them to me!" he said. "I'll clear the room."

"Not on your life! This is my house. I have the right to smash the fools." And she beat them over the heads with her pistol barrel.

Recognizing that she was minded to kill, they retreated over the threshold, and Ross, drawing the door close behind them, turned to find Lee Virginia confronting Edwards, who had attempted to escape into the kitchen. The girl's face was white, but the eye of her revolver stared straight and true into her prisoner's face.

With a bound Ross seized him and flung him against the wall. "Get back there!" he shouted. "You must take your medicine with your boss."

The old fellow hurriedly replaced his ragged hat and, folding his arms, sank back into his chair with bowed head, while Lize turned upon Joe Gregg. "What did you go into this kind of deal for? You knew what the game laws was, didn't you? Your old dad is all for state regulation, and here you are breaking a state law. Why don't you stand up for the code like a sport?"

Joe, who had been boasting of the smiles he had drawn from Lee, did not relish this tongue lashing from her mother; but, assuming a careless air, he said, "I'm all out of smokes; get me a box, that's a good old soul."

Lize regarded him with the expression of one nonplused. "You impudent little cub!" she exclaimed. "What you need is a booting!"

The ranger addressed himself to Lee. "I want to thank you for a very opportune intervention. I didn't know you could handle a gun so neatly."

She flushed with pleasure. "Oh, yes, I can shoot. My father taught me when I was only six years old."

As she spoke Ross caught the man Edwards studying them with furtive glance, but upon being observed he resumed his crouching attitude, which concealed his face beneath the rim of his weather worn hat. It was evident that he was afraid of being recognized. He had the slinking air of the convict, and his form, so despairing in its lax lines, appealed to Lee with even greater poignancy than his face. "I'm sorry," she said to him, "but it was my duty to help Mr. Cavanagh."

He glanced up with a quick sidewise slant. "That's all right, miss. I should

THE EYE OF HER REVOLVER STARED STRAIGHT INTO HER PRISONER'S FACE.

have had sense enough to keep out of this business." He spoke with difficulty, and his voice was hoarse with emotion.

Lize turned to Lee. "The doc said 'no liquor,' but I guess here's where I draw one. I feel faint."

Ross hurried to her side, while young Gregg tendered a handsome flask. "Here's something."

Lize put it away. "Not from you. Just reach under my desk, Ross; you'll find some brandy there. That's it," she called as he produced a bottle. Clutching it eagerly, she added, "They say it's poison, but it's my meat tonight." Little remained of the woman in Lize, and the old sheep herder eyed her with furtive curiosity.

"I was afraid you'd shoot," Lize explained to Ross, "and I didn't want you to muss up your hands on the dirty loafers. I had the right to kill. They were trespassers, and I'd 'a' done it too."

"I don't think they intended to actually assault me," he said, "but it's a bit discouraging to find the town so indifferent over both the breaking of the laws and the doings of a drunken mob. I'm afraid the most of them are a long way from law abiding people yet."

Joe, who did not like the position in which he stood as respecting Lee, here made an offer of aid. "I don't suppose my word is any good now, but if you'll let me do it I'll go out and round up Judge Higley. I think I know where he is."

To this Lize objected. "You can't do that, Ross; you better hold the fort here till morning."

Lee was rather sorry, too, for young Gregg, who bore his buffeting with the imperturbable face of the heroes of his class. He had gone into this enterprise with much the same spirit in which he had stolen gates and misplaced signs during his brief college career, and he was now disposed (in the presence of a pretty girl) to carry it out with undiminished impudence. "It only means a fine, anyway," he assured himself.

Cavanagh did not trust Gregg, either, and as this was the first time he had been called upon to arrest men for killing game out of season he could not afford to fail of any precaution. Tired and sleepy as he was he must remain on guard. "But you and your daughter must go to bed at once," he urged.

Lize, under the spur of her dram, talked on with bitter boldness, berating the town and its people. Gregg listened to her with expressionless visage, his eyes dreamily fixed on Lee's face, but his companion, the old herder, seemed to palpitate with shame and fear. And Ross had the feeling at the moment that in this ragged, unkempt old hobo was the skeleton of one of the old time heroes. He was wasted with drink and worn by wind and rain, but he was very far from being commonplace.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAW STEPS IN.

"HERE they come again!" called Lize as the hurry of feet along the walk threatened another attack. Ross Cavanagh again drew his revolver and stood at guard, and Lize, recovering her own weapon, took a place by his side.

With the strength of a bear the new assailant shook the bolted door. "Let me in!" he roared.

"It's dad!" called young Gregg. "Go away, you chump!"

"Let me in or I'll smash this door!" retorted Gregg.

"You smash that door, old Bullfrog," announced Lize, "and I'll carry one of your lungs away. If you want to get in here you hunt up the judge of this town and the constable."

The old rancher muttered a fierce curse, while Ross explained the situation. "I'm as eager to get rid of these culprits as any one can be, but they must be taken by proper authority. Bring a writ from the magistrate and you may have them and welcome."

Gregg went away without further word, and Lize said: "He'll find Higley if he's in town, and he is in town, for I saw him this afternoon. He's hiding out to save himself trouble."

Lee Virginia, with an understanding of what the ranger had endured, asked: "Can't I get you something to eat? Would you like some coffee?"

"I would indeed," he answered, and his tone pleased her.

She hurried away to get it, while Cavanagh disposed his prisoners behind a couple of tables in the corner. "I guess you're in for a night of it," he remarked grimly, "so make yourselves as comfortable as you can. Perhaps your experience may be a discouragement to others of your kind."

Lee returned soon with a pot of fresh coffee and some sandwiches, the sight of which roused young Gregg to the impudent remark: "Well, notice that! And we're left out!" But Edwards shrank into the shadow, as if the light hurt him.

Ross thanked Lee formally, but there was more than gratitude in his glance, and she turned away to hide her face from other eyes. Strange place it was for the blooming of love's roses, but they were in her cheeks as she faced her mother, and Lize, with fresh acknowledgment of her beauty, broke out again: "Well, this settles it. I'm going to get out of this town, dearie. I'm done. This ends the cattle country for me. I ought to have turned you back the day you landed here."

The feet halted. A sharp rap sounded on the door.

"Who's there?" demanded Lize.

"The law!" replied a wheezy voice. "Open in the name of the law!"

"It's old Higley," announced Lize. "Open the door, Ross."

"Come in, law," she called ironically as the justice appeared. "You look kind of mice eaten, but you're all the law this blame town can sport. Come in and do your duty."

Higley (a tall man with a rusty brown beard, very much on his dignity) entered the room, followed by a short, bullet headed citizen in a rumpled blue suit with a big star on his breast. Behind on the sidewalk Ballard and a dozen of his gang could be seen. Sam Gregg, the moving cause of this resurrection of law and order, followed the constable. Higley opened upon Cavanagh. "Well, sir, what's all this row? What's your charge against these men?"

"Killing mountain sheep. I caught them with the head of a big ram upon their pack."

"Make him show his commission," shouted Gregg. "He's never been commissioned. He's no game warden."

Higley hemmed. "I—ah—oh, his authority is all right, Sam; I've seen it. If he can prove that these men killed the sheep we'll have to act."

Cavanagh briefly related how he had captured the men on the trail. "The head of the ram is at the livery barn with my horse."

"How about that?" asked Higley, turning to Joe.

"I guess that's right," replied the insolent youth. "We killed the sheep all right."

Higley was in a corner. He didn't like to offend Gregg, and yet the case was plain. He met the issue blandly. "Marshal, take these men into custody." Then to Ross: "We'll relieve you of your care, Mr. Cavanagh. You may appear tomorrow at 9."

It was a farcical ending to a very arduous thirty-six hour campaign, and Ross, feeling like a man who, having rolled a huge stone to the top of a hill, has been ordered to drop it, said, "I insist on the maximum penalty of the law, Justice Higley, especially for this man!" He indicated Joe Gregg.

"No more sneaking, Higley," added Lize, uttering her distrust in blunt phrase. "You put these men through or I'll make you trouble."

Higley turned and with unsteady solemnity saluted. "Fear not my government, madam," said he and so made exit.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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