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HESPER, BY HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER XXII.

RAYMOND looked back occasionally, half expecting pursuit. He could see in the valley below the town the gleaming white tents of the little army hesitant to march, and its plan of invasion seemed born of folly and madness. He spurred his horse down the trail to meet the night which rose to meet him from the valley like a chill, engulfing flood. An hour's brisk ride brought him to the open, and just at the edge of the peak he came upon a forlorn camp, a small tent under a fir, and a group of four men sitting about a fire. At their call he turned and rode up to them. They were an outpost of Munro's guard, a part of the column he had thrown round the peak and camp.

One of them knew him and, greeting him pleasantly, asked where he had been.

He replied with candor, "I've been down to the Springs to induce those 'rallyer legs' to put off their expedition."

"What luck did ye have?"

"None. They're coming."

Significant glances passed, and the firelight brought out stern lines on their faces. At length Brown, the corporal, said solemnly: "Well, if they want fight they can have it. But say, Rob, does the captain know you're on the road? There was a hullabaloo in town about you last night. A lot of the fellows think you went down to give away the camp, and some said if you ever came back they'd string you up. Now, I guess you better stay here while I ride up and tell the cap you're here."

"I don't think that's necessary, but you might jog along with me if you want to go. Otherwise I'll go alone."

"Well, I'll tell ye, Rob," said Brown in an embarrassed way, "these monies on the peak have got an awful slant against you and Kelly, and they're two or three fellows who are working against you underhand right along. You don't want to take no chances. They'll do ye if they can."

Raymond was impressed with Brown's earnestness and by the admirable loyalty of his fellows camped there in the snow. "Boys, what are you staying here for?" he asked. "This isn't a picnic. What do you do for?"

Brown answered, "We do it because we want to help these miners stand off the 'plutes'."

Raymond mused. "But you're friendly toward Kelly & Raymond?"

"Sure thing. You fellows are all right. You've punched cows, and Kelly is an old broncho buster himself. But let me tell ye this, Rob, we're going to need you and your men if these chaps come up here the way they talk o' doin'—"

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versely. And the two men rode off.

"Good luck, boys."

As he rode up to Kelly's cabin and called out, "Hello, the house!" Matt opened the door and, with a lad on either side of him, peered out. "Is that you, Rob?"

"The very same, Matt."

"Well, now, wait a whilst and I'll come and put out your horse."

Mrs. Kelly called cheerily: "Rob, we're glad to see you safe returned. Are you hungry?"

He slid from his horse. "I am empty as a wolf in March," he replied.

"Where's Louis?"

"Louis! He hasn't returned. Didn't you leave him the strings?"

"No. He left early this morning and Ann thought he had hit the stage road for the camp. I hope he hasn't gone wrong."

This news took away a large part of his pleasure in the friendly hearth to which he was welcomed and, removing his outer garments, he bent to the blaze in silence while Mrs. Kelly spread some food before him.

Kelly listened to the news of Louis' disappearance with less concern. "He's run into some of Munro's men and is probably up at headquarters. He couldn't get lost. He knows the road. What's the word from the valley?"

"They're coming, Matt."

"When?"

"Tonight or tomorrow."

"I've been receiving delegations and posters and all kinds of warmin's. It's been a lively day on the hill. They're buildin' a fort."

"So Frank Brown told me. How do our men feel?"

Matt rubbed his chin. "They're a little uneasy, to tell the truth."

Mrs. Kelly interrupted. "Sit up and eat, Rob. Talk afterward."

Raymond could see that Kelly was disturbed, and that he had something to tell which he did not care to have Nora know. It was plain that he no longer minimized the danger, and his face fell easily into stern lines.

Seizing the moment when his wife left the room to put the youngsters to bed, the big miner laid a sheet of paper before his partner. "What do you think of that?"

Raymond looked at the death's head warning, for such it was, with amazement. It seemed at first sight a rough joke. In one corner glared the conventional crossbones and skull, rudely drawn, and to the right and beneath them sprang the word "Beware!"

All this was amusing, but the logic of the argument which followed gave him thought.

This neutral business is played out. Either you are for us or you are for the dukes. If you are for the dukes, get out. If you are for us, send in your men to help us repel the invaders. This is our first warning. Remember the Red Star!

Raymond rose. "Let's go down to my shack. We can talk matters over there more freely."

"I'll be with you in a few minutes," answered Kelly.

It was warm in the cabin, for the faithful Perry had built a fire early in the evening, and after he had lighted a couple of candles and kicked the fire into a blaze the room resumed its cheerful glow, but he was too deeply disturbed over Louis' nonappearance to fully enjoy it. He took out his revolver and was examining it carefully as Kelly entered.

"Did ye meet with any trouble, Rob?"

"None. Some of the committee of safety wanted to arrest me and hold me as a hostage, but Barnett stood 'em off. I didn't see a soul till on my way back I came on one of Jack's picket posts, where I found four men camped in misery and eating snowballs for supper."

"It's strange the power he has over them wild cowboys. Brink or sober, they do as he tells them. His trouble will come with Brock and Smith, who are neither miners nor cowboys, for they are all tryin' to derive their power from Carter, who is dead sick of the business and likely to fly the coop at any minute. Where you goin'?"

"Up to take a look round for Louis."

"You go not! 'Tis a poor time for you to visit the street. They have it in their heads that you are playin' the spy."

"I must find that boy. He left the Springs at 8 this morning, and his sister is worried about him."

"I will go for ye, Rob. It's too dangerous for you."

Raymond rose and laid a hand on Kelly's shoulder. "See here, Matt, I want to talk plainly to you. You've got to bundle up that little wife and the boys and get out of here. I'm going to take a hand in this game. I'm going to call the independents together and make a stand."

Kelly faced him. "If ye make a stand I must be beside ye. What is your plan?"

"I will not tell you unless you promise to take Nora out of danger."

Kelly's face grew stern, and his voice fell to a level hoarseness that sent a quiver through the young man's blood. "See here, boy, we struck hands on this partnership. We share and share alike. I am with ye and so is Nora. I am ready to dig a hole in the ground and stand 'em off. I'm worn out with their comin' and goin', whippin' now on this, now on that side o' the question. They've declared war on us. Now, by the powers, we'll meet 'em halfway!"

Raymond surrendered. "All right, Matt, here's my hand. We'll defend

Nora and the mine too. When your fighting blood is up I don't want any dispute between us."

Kelly's eyes began to twinkle. "I begin to draw me breath natural again. For weeks I've been wanting to put me fist beneath the noses of these rapscallions, but for fear of Ann and Nora I could not."

"Very well, we'll send out a call for a meeting tonight. The quicker we move the better. I feel as you do—now we are acting a man's part. There is a big element here that is sick of this monkey business. Half the camp will rally in our support. I know it. Then we will serve notice on Munro!"

The sound of hurrying feet interrupted him, and a moment later Louis burst into the room.

"Oh, Rob, I'm glad you're here. Hello, Matt!" He shook hands, breathing heavily. His skin was flushed and his eyes shining. "You ought to be up town. Jack is makin' 'em sit up. He shot one man. They were building a fort, and a drunken fellow—"

"Take your time," said Raymond coldly. "There are several minutes left in the box. You might begin at the beginning and tell me why you sneaked away again without saying goodby to Ann?"

The boy was not daunted. "As soon as I heard what the sheriff's plans were I wanted to leave, but it was so dark; that was last night. I was afraid to try it, so this morning I pulled out early."

"Where have you been all day?"

"I've been with Jack. I met his men way down the canyon, and they took me to headquarters, where I told my story, and then I went to supper with Jack; and then this big row came on, and I stayed to see that. Oh, but Jack is fine! He faced the whole crowd alone. One man wanted to clean out your cabin. He said it was a nest of traitors. He drew his gun on Jack, but he hadn't time to pull the trigger. Jack's bullet went through his arm."

Raymond, who had been studying the lad with softening glance, interrupted him: "Now, see here, Louis, you sit down here by the fire. Don't let your words all try to get out of the corral at the same time. We want to know all about it, but we don't want you to hurry. It's only 10 o'clock, and you can get over a whole lot of ground by midnight."

The two men looked at each other with grave eyes. The boy was trembling with excitement, and his voice was high and strained.

Kelly said gently: "My lad, 't would serve your sister better if you kept out of this. I don't like to see you riding between the lines as a spy."

"I didn't intend to be a spy, but when I heard the trick they were going to play I couldn't help hurrying back."

"What trick?"

"Well, they're going to load all their men into freight cars and make them keep quiet, and then they're going to run them through Jack's guard at Boggy clear to the end of the rails."

"That's a very nice plan," said Raymond. "When do they intend to come?"

"Tomorrow night if the guns arrive for which they are waiting."

"How did you drop on to this?"

"I heard Consta Don tell Dr. Braide. He wanted Dr. Braide to follow next day in case of accidents."

"You've told this to Jack?"

"Yes, I wanted to come and see you, Matt, but he said I could tell you afterward."

Raymond again looked at his partner. "Well, I don't see that there is anything for us to do now."

"Jack told me to tell you to be on your guard tonight. He said he'd come down and see you if possible. Oh, I feel so cold," he ended, drawing nearer the fire. "I'm all trembly over my chest."

"I reckon you better strip off your clothes and go to bed. This has been a hard day for you."

He seemed stiff, and was shivering convulsively. "I believe I will. Rob, I don't feel any good."

As Raymond helped him to undress the boy's teeth began to chatter, and he drew his breath with a hissing moan. "I guess I've taken an awful cold, Rob. My breast aches so."

"Matt, go ask Nora to come over and bring her little medicine case. This boy's got a chill right now."

A swallow of whisky will fix that," answered Matt as he went out. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Raymond bundled Louis into bed and heaped him with blankets and furs, his heart deeply stirred with anxiety, for as the boy's mind turned from the excitement of his day's experiences to his condition he became deeply depressed. He fairly collapsed.

Mrs. Kelly, with her "emergency case" of medicine and a knowledge of sickness gained in years of maternal care in the rough country, was a great comfort to Raymond, but she could not keep down his growing anxiety. The boy's body was so small and frail when stripped of its clothing! Under their vigorous ministrations the sufferer ceased to shake and at last fell into a hot, uneasy doze.

Raymond, seeing this, whispered: "You must go home. I will watch."

"No, Rob, you must sleep. I forgot you had no sleep last night."

"Oh, yes, I did. I took a nap at Barnett's. Please go to bed."

To this arrangement she submitted, and taking his seat close by the boy's couch, Raymond studied his flushed face more concerned at that moment

over his temperature and pulse than with the bawling crowds, the invading force or the fate of his mine. When Munro knocked on his door he went out upon the threshold and repeated the failure of his mission, while the captain of the valettes listened with his horse's rein across his arm. At the end he merely said: "All right. Let them come; they will find us ready. Did the kid turn up all right?"

"He turned up, but he has taken a chill and is burning with fever."

Munro seemed concerned. "He had nothing on but that little gray jacket. I tried to warm him up with some whisky and a supper. I hope he won't be laid up. Well, now, old man, what are you going to do—help us or the dukes?"

"I can't decide anything tonight. I'm worried about this boy. If he is better in the morning I'll have something decisive to say to you."

"All right; take your time, only don't take too long. It's up to you to decide. Good night. Keep me posted on the boy's condition."

A half hour later Jim Dolan and two or three of his fellow reporters tumbled in, eager to know what Raymond had seen in the valley.

To them he said: "Boys, I haven't a word to say. I'm sorry I can't offer you a bed, for Louis, my boy friend, is very sick. Dolan, I wish you would send up the best doctor in Boggy. Tell him there's money in it if he comes tonight."

To Matt, Raymond turned. "Go on with your meeting without me. I can do nothing till this boy dodges this fever." And Kelly went away, reluctantly, to meet with the leaders of the neutral party, robbed of half his resolution, for he, too, loved the sick lad.

At 12 o'clock, when some of the men were passing, Raymond went out and called Baker and said in the tone of one who had at last decided on a plan of action, "I want you to carry a message to Boggy and see that it gets there."

And Baker, having a long training as cowboy behind him, accepted his order like a soldier.

The telegram was addressed to the sheriff and read:

"They're on to your box car game. Look out!"

A PEACE LOVER.

At 1 o'clock Kelly returned with lowering brow. "I wish you'd been there, lad. They're afraid of Munro and voted me down. We are to do nothing."

Raymond, submerged in the rising flood of his anxiety, looked at his partner dully. "Well, perhaps it's better so, Matt. I gave my word to Ann that I would care for this boy as if he were my brother, and I'm going to do it, regardless of every other consideration. If he grows worse I shall send for Ann, and then I will have double reason to keep out of the movement."

Toward daylight Raymond called Kelly. "Send a message to Ann. Louis is a mighty sick boy and needs her care."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE morning paper, which the maid brought to Ann while she still drowsed in her bed, contained the news of Louis' arrival at Raymond's cabin and his collapse.

"All the early part of the night," the reporter went on to say, "bands of clamorous men marched from mine to mine, calling upon the gangs to lay down their tools. Only two firms remained unharmed—Becke Bros.

"Then let us go!" she cried, rising, and Kelly & Raymond. In the midst of all this turmoil," said the reporter, "Raymond, one of the men most concerned, was standing guard over a sick boy and would not leave his side for a moment." Ann glowed with a sense of deep obligation to that watcher.

Mrs. Barnett knocked on her door and called, "Have you seen the papers, Ann Marie?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going up there."

Mrs. Barnett entered. "How can you go, with that mob in possession? You must not go! It isn't safe for you, and I will not consent to have Don go again. Who will protect you?"

"I am flamed with wrath. 'Have you no law out here that will protect a girl who goes to nurse her sick brother? I have nothing to do with your idiotic wars. I am going up there as a citizen of New York, not as a partisan of your side in this struggle. I shall not leave that boy there to suffer alone.'

"I can't find Don," said Mrs. Barnett. "He must have gone downtown. Some one has just phoned a message from Rob. He says Louis has taken a chill and that you are to come, if you can, but not to worry. He is well cared for."

"Can we reach him by telegraph?" asked Ann.

"The operator says there is no direct connection with Skytown, but that the wire from Boggy to the south is uncut. We can try."

"Tell Don to wire Mr. Raymond that I am coming at once, and that I will bring Dr. Braide if possible," answered Ann, alert and self-contained.

She rang Dr. Braide's telephone a few moments later and called firmly, "Dr. Braide, I want you to go with me to Skytown."

His cool, indifferent voice cut her short. "Who is it, please?"

"It is Ann Rupert."

"Ah!" His voice changed—became swift, eager. "Certainly, certainly, Miss Rupert. I understand. I saw the note about your brother. It will be a privilege. I will run over at once and discuss the best plan for getting there."

Ann was eating her breakfast when the bell rang, and the maid at her order brought the doctor into the dining room.

"I am asking a great deal of you, doctor. I will gladly recompense you for any loss of patients," said Ann.

"Please don't trouble about my patients. It is a pleasure for me to serve you. I beg you not to bring it down to so mercenary a plane."

"That's very kind of you, but I must insist on making it a matter of professional service," replied Ann, for he, too, was a suitor, and she liked him, but at this moment she wanted his skill—his training as a physician, not his adoration. This he had insight enough to perceive.

"We can go by the Southern railway and drive from Sage Flat, or we can go over the stage road. In either case we must meet and pass Munro's guard. According to all accounts, he has a complete circle."

"I am not afraid of Munro or his men," she answered. "In fact, they will be our safeguard. I will telegraph to Mr. Munro that we are coming, and he will see that we are protected."

"If you feel that way, then the simplest and quickest route is over the old stage road. With a good span of horses and a light cart we can drive to Boggy by 4 o'clock and reach Skytown before dark."

"Then let us go," she cried, rising. "I will order a carriage at once and call for you in half an hour."

"I will be ready," he eagerly replied.

By means of the telephone Ann ordered the liverman to harness his best span of horses to a mountain buckboard. "No, I do not need a driver," she sharply answered to his query. "Get them here quick!"

Before she left the receiver Barnett came rushing into the room. "What's all this? Jeannette tells me you're going back to Skytown today."

"In twenty minutes I shall be on the road."

"Alone?"

"No; Dr. Braide is going with me."

"Impossible! You mustn't do it! Our attack is to be made tonight. The whole hill will be a battleground tomorrow."

"I can't help that, Don. I must go to my brother. He needs me all the more. Think of that poor boy lying there burning with fever and a battle going on! Put off your attack. It's all foolish, wicked, anyhow. What good will it do? You will only kill men or get killed yourself."

Dr. Braide was waiting as Ann drew up to his door. He carried a big bearskin robe over his arm and held a medicine case in his hand. "Have you plenty of wraps? It's cold up there, they say. Let me arrange this robe around your feet. Shall I drive?"

"No, thank you. I will drive."

The horses were marvellous. They pushed up the steep, winding road with steady stride, their heads swinging. Not till they entered the canyon did they lag into a walk. The clouds hung low, in great gray masses, covering even the secondary peaks. Patches of snow began to appear at the roadside. It was a bleak, inhospitable and silent world.

"There is something ominous in this stillness," Ann said at last.

"Where do you suppose we will meet Munro's men?"

"Anywhere after we leave the half-way house, according to report."

"You know this man Munro?"

"I've met him."

"Is he as terrible as people think him?"