A Question of Courage

BY FRANCIS LYNDE.

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An awed silence fell upon the group in the kitchen after Jeff made this announcement. Bud put his gun together and loaded it carefuly, sitting quietly afterward with the weapon across his knees; and Jed came out of his dark corner to feel mechanically on the high mantel shelf for his pipe. The night had closed in with storm signals flying in the western sky, and the rising wind began to sigh dismally through the trees, sending occasional puffs eddying down the chimney to scatter little clouds of light ashes from the expiring embers on the hearth. The measured sob of the great engine at the furnace rose and fell on the breeze, mingling its tones with the hoarser mutterings of the approaching storm. At the head of the cove there is a deep cleft in the perpendicular wall of rock, known to the dwellers in Harmony Valley as "The Chimney." With the breath of the tempest, the fissure becomes the diapason of nature's great organ, and already its deep reedy voice could be heard, filling the cove with a sound like the rushing of the waves on a sandy beach, or like the distance-softened roar of a mighty cataract. From his watch tower in the blasted oak behind the barn, a great owl added his mournful call to the weird noises of the night, while all the shriller and cheerfuller voices of nature were hushed and silent in the presence of the storm-king. Jeff Bynum continued his monotonous walk up and down the narrow limits of the kitchen, stopping at each turn to peer out of the windows into the thickening gloom.

Bud was the first to speak. "What-all does ye 'low to do 'bout hit, Jeff?" he inquired.

The elder brother dropped into a chair and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "I 'low I don't jest rightly know, Buddy—I don't, for a fact; thar cayn't be no mistake; I ain't nowise likely to forget that thar face; hit's been a harnt to me more'n one night sence I seed hit; hit has, for shore."

Jed got up and threw another stick of wood on the fire. "Ye reckon ye're plum shore, Jeff?" he asked. "'Pears like this yere feller's been mindin' his own business tol'able clost sence he come to the settlement."

"No, Jed, he hain't; that's what's a-rattlin' me. He was a-pryin' round this yere very cove only day before yistiddy: I seed him; an' Jule she took him up the mounting and p'inted him the way back from the McNabb."

"Jule!"

"Yes, Jule. I 'low she didn't know who 'r what he was. She done left him standin' afore the mouth of the tunnel. An' that ain't the mos' curiousest part o' hit; he scrambled into the hole over the broken rocks, an' jest about a minute afterwards he come a-pilin' out o' thar like he seed a harnt, an' the last I seed o' him he was a-makin' the longest kind o' tracks to'rdst the valley."

"What d' ye reckon he seed in thar?"

"I'll nev' tell ye; but that hain't the question: hit looks mighty like he's a-sneakin' round yere to fin' out somethin' 'bout we-all, an' I reckon thar's got to be somethin' done."

Bud glanced around into the gathering shadows in the room, and asked: "Whar's Jule?"

"I dunno," replied Jeff; "gone to baid, I reckon."

Bud stood his rifle in the chimney-corner and went out, coming back in a moment to say: "I reckon she has; leastways, thar's no light."

Another interval of oppressive silence followed Bud's assurance. The three men sat around the hearth, each knowing the others' thought, and each hoping that one of the others would put the pitiless suggestion into words. While they waited the first great drops of rain pattered on the roof, and the soughing of the wind through the tree-tops and the louder growling of the thunder, drowned the roar of "The Chimney." The dusky interior of the kitchen grew more shadowy as the handful of fire on the hearth died down, and the darkness was intensified by an occasional flash of lightning contrasting its glare with the twilight of the room. The red glow from the coals fell upon the faces of the three brothers grouped about the fireplace and sitting in silent judgment upon a man whose only offense was his resemblance to some other man. Each of the three felt that there was a terrible margin of doubt, and yet each knew that it was only doubt and not certainty. If their prisoner and the single witness of Jeff's crime were identical, there could be no safety for at least one of them while the man lived; if not—if Jeff were mistaken, after all — the alternative was sufficiently dreadful to make them hesitate to give it shape in speech.

The suggestion came finally from the one who was most deeply concerned. Jeff rose slowly and took down his rifle from its pegs over the mantel. "I reckon hit's got to be done, boys," he said, huskily. "I hate hit mighty bad, but I cayn't affo'd to take no chainces."

Bud joined him at once, but Jed hesitated. "You don't have to come, Jed," said the elder brother; "two of us is enough, an' I know ye ain't afeard."

"I'm goin' 'long with you-all, only I hope yere pow'ful shore, Jeff; seem like hit's mighty tough to go an' shoot him like he's a rat in a hole, less ye're p'int-blank certain ye got to do hit."

They went out noiselessly, so as not to awaken Jule, and Jeff led the way to the trail up which the woman had piloted Ringbrand two days before. The wind had risen to a gale, and it was wringing and twisting the trees above their heads; but the rain delayed and the storm seemed to be blowing over. When they reached the base of the cliff, they left the path and turned shortly to the right, following the

Jeff rose slowly and took down his rifle.

line of the rocky wall until they reached a narrow ledge affording a precarious passage up to the table-land. Emerging, after a breathless scramble, upon the unsheltered mountain-top, where the wind had full sweep, they pushed on gasping until they stood in the small ravine under the lee of the bowlders marking the entrance to Ringbrand's prison. Jeff uncoiled the rope he had brought, and was preparing to descend, when Jed stopped him:

"Don't ye 'low that'll be sort o' resky? If that thar feller's what ye done took him for, he's gwine fight, for shore. He ain't gwine stan' still an' 'low ye to shoot him in col' blood."

The caution brought back with appalling distinctness the ghastly horror of the deed they were about to do, and they paused in fearful hesitation. Then Bud proposed that they go down into the other cavern, using the narrow crevice for a loop-hole, and a few minutes later he and Jeff were standing in the pitchy darkness of the subterranean chamber, while Jed watched at the aperture above. Jeff felt his way along one of the walls until he came to a niche where they kept a miner's lamp, and, lighting this they cautiously reconnoitered the adjoining chamber as well as they could by its inefficient help. The light from the lamp penetrated but a short distance beyond the narrow opening, but it answered the purpose, and they could see the shadowy outlines of the figure of a man stretched out upon the sandy floor of the cavern. Jeff handed the lamp to his brother and took careful aim at the motionless form; his hand trembled so that he could not hold the gun steady, and he got down upon his knees and rested it against the side of the crevice. Even then he was so long about it that Bud's nerve collapsed and the lamp fell from his shaking fingers; it did not go out, and as he held it up again he whispered: "Shoot—quick! I can't—"

A blinding flash illuminated the cavern, and the dead air of the place jarred with a concussion that put out the light and reverbrated like pent-up thunder in the arches of the vault. The two men fell over each other in their frantic haste to reach the open air, fighting like caged wild beasts for precedence up the difficult stairway; and when they emerged from the mouth of the smoky pit, the contagion of terror communicated itself to their passive accomplice, and the three men scattered in a mad flight toward the cove.

VIII.

A SUBTERRANEAN METAMORPHOSIS.

When Ringbrand opened his eyes he found himself lying on his back in what appeared to be the bottom of a well; at least, that was his second impression. With the first gleams of returning consciousness there was no recollection of the events immediately preceding his fall, and for a moment he had a vague idea that he had stumbled and hurt himself in the road, and that the clouds had covered all but the small patch of sky directly overhead where the stars were still visible. Then memory came back, and he recalled the details of the capture up to the sudden blank following the plunge into the hole between the bowlders. A sharp twinge of pain bridged the interval and reminded him that there were two present and pressing sources of discomfort in the gnarled log across which he was lying and in the vice-like pressure of the rope which still bound his arms to his sides. To wriggle out of the uncomfortable position was easy, but loosening the rope was another matter. The knot had been drawn tight by the jerk of his fall, and it was an hour or more before he succeeded in working it around where it could be reached; even when this was done, it was only a beginning, and the first faint streaks of dawn were filtering through the aperture overhead when he finally rose stiffly and swung his arms to start the suspended circulation.

In a little while it was light enough to enable him to see his surroundings, and he found that he was imprisoned in a crevice-cave much like the one he had explored two days before. It occurred to him at once that it might be a continuation of the same cavern, or that possibly he might be in the very chamber into which he had tried to penetrate; but this seemed unlikely, for two reasons. One was that he could not make the locality of the McNabb tunnel agree with the general direction of his wanderings of the night previous; and the other was even more convincing, for, while his cell terminated at one extremity in a narrow fissure like the one in which he had lost the pick and the lamp, he could not find the missing articles, though he lost no time in making a careful search for them. In doing this, however, he stumbled upon another discovery which was of much more immediate importance: reaching down into the crannies of the fissure, his hand found a pool of water, and he drank gratefully, dipping up the cool liquid by spoonfuls in his hollowed palm.

After this, he gave an hour to minute examination of the boundaries of his prison, scrutinizing the walls and carefully weighing every possible chance of escape. At the end of this preliminary survey he sat down upon the log, which proved to be the trunk of a small tree hurled by some accident of wind or lightning through the opening above, and began to go over the events of the past few days, in the hope of finding something to account for the mysterious attack and imprisonment. In this effort he racked his brain to little purpose, and, after repeatedly scouting the idea as absurd, he finally accepted the conclusion that the Bynums had in some manner connected him with the fortunes of their enemies, and had taken prompt measures to deprive the Latimers of a possible ally.

"If that's the case," he mused, speaking aloud for the sake of the companionship of his own voice, "what do they mean to do with me? If they had wanted to kill me, they certainly had it all their own way last night; a very small domestic cat would have made a better resistance than I did. No, that isn't it; they don't mean murder; they're only trying to get me out of the way for awhile. And the next thing is, for how long? Keeping in view the comforting conclusion that they don't intend making away with me, the question will answer itself in a few hours at the most, for they haven't given me anything to eat. Which reminds me that I'm pretty hungry, now;" he looked ruefully at his watch. "Tom Ludlow had his breakfast two hours ago, and at the present moment, I suppose, he's sitting in his office with the comfortable under-thought that it'll be dinner-time before long. Lucky fellow, not to know what it is to sit in a crack in the face of the earth, speculating on the doubtful possibilities of future meal times. Well, I presume the next thing is to decide whether or not I'm to sit here and wait for some one to come and pull me out; and if I'm not, what's the alternative? Let's have another look at the resources."

After overhauling the rope and coiling it beside the log, he searched his pockets, but found nothing useful therein, except a small penknife. "There they are—say 40 feet of rope, a piece of wood six or seven feet long, and a toy pocketknife; and this hole is about 30 feet deep, I should judge. There isn't very much to work with, but I've pulled many a hero out of worse scrapes than this with much less."

The humor of the comparison provoked a laugh, and then he wondered what had become of his depression of the previous day. The explanation came suddenly when he ran his soliloquy back to the point where he had concluded that his connection with the Latimers was the reason for the assault upon him. It seemed in a way to bring him nearer to Hester, and for a time there was a cheerful enthusiasm in the thought that other and compelling hands had pushed him over the dividing line between his pusillanimous resolution to run away and an active participation in the quarrel which involved her family. There was little comfort in the contemplation of the part he might be required to take in the feud; the battle was still to be fought with his weakness, and he had the fresh and humiliating example of a few hours before to remind him that he had not yet made a beginning. The recollection of this discouraged him again, and all the arguments that had presented themselves in defense of his plan of retreat came back with redoubled emphasis. He was not sure that Hester loved him; if she did, she would despise him when she found him out; it would be inexcusably wrong for him to win her love under false pretenses; she had told him only last night what she would expect in the man of her choice. He pushed the tormenting thoughts aside, and brought himself down with a jerk to the present and its demands. "I'm not going to dispute with the weak-kneed devil any more," he muttered; "the first thing to do is to get out of here, and then I'll leave it with her; if she honors me enough to make me her defender, I'll make a shift to fight her battles if I have to hire some one to hold me while I do it."

Under the inspiration of this conclusion he went to work patiently and resolutely, trying the first plan that suggested itself. Using his knife for a chisel, he attempted to cut niches for hand and foot holds in the wall, persevering until both blades of the small tool were worn down to useless stumps. When the failure of the knife put an end to the expedient, he examined the narrower part of the crevice to see if he could not climb to the roof by bracing himself from wall to wall. As it was reasonably evident that the cavern had originally been nothing more than an irregular crack in the sandstone, open at the top through its entire length, and afterward gradually covered in by slow accumulations of earth and debris interwoven with twigs and grass roots, he argued that it would be comparatively easy to dig through this thin covering if he could obtain a foothold near enough to the roof to enable him to attack it. To make the most of his strength, he dragged the log to the place selected for the experiment, with the intention of using it for a ladder from which to begin the ascent; and, having braced it against one of the walls, he took off his coat and shoes and made an attempt to work his way up the desired vantage-ground. The first trial was a failure. He lost his hold before he had ascended to twice his height, and slid back to the sandy floor of the crevice; but there was enough of a promise of success in the undertaking to make him wear away the remainder of the day in repeated endeavors, and to encourage him to try again and again, even after the long abstinence from food had begun to have its effect on his tired muscles and overstrained nerves. The final attempt, made just at dusk, carried him to within a few feet of the roof; but the darkness baffled him; he again lost his hold, and it was only by the utmost exertion of his failing strength that he saved himself from falling heavily to the bottom of the cavern. As it was, he knocked the log down in his descent, and, realizing that nothing could be done without the help of daylight, he lay down in the sand and tried to go to sleep.

Lying there in the darkness and listening to the microscopic noises sifting through the entrance to the cave, he fancied he heard a sound as of some light object falling upon the sand. He first thought of wild beasts, but, reflecting that no animal large enough to attack him would be likely to enter the trap-like crevice, the incident was soon forgotten in a train of suggestions having the indistinct noises of the day for a starting-point. Now that he recalled them, he remembered hearing sounds like the echoes of dull blows at irregular intervals all through the day, and he speculated over their probable origin until weariness overcame him and he fell into a doze from which the growling of the rising storm awakened him. Since there seemed to be a sort of companionship in the roll of the thunder and the sweep of the wind, he sat up to listen, and in one of the lulls he thought he heard a voice at the mouth of the cavern. Wondering if his captors were coming to liberate him, he got upon his feet and felt his way to the farther end of the cell, standing under the aperture and staring up into the gloom. While he stood there listening and looking, a small star of yellow light made its appearance at the extreme end of the rocky corridor, and he saw the shadows of two faces framed between the walls of the narrow slit in which the chamber terminated. His first impulse was to make his presence known; but before he had taken a step he recoiled in horror at the sight of a gun barrel thrust through the crevice above the wavering star of light.

Under some conditions mental processes are instantaneous. Ringbrand saw and understood the purpose of his enemies as clearly as if his sentence had been pronounced with formal verbiage. With the understanding came a frenzied fit of terror, and he shrunk with chattering teeth and trembling limbs into the deepest recesses of the cave; the wavering light danced in fantastic gyrations before his fascinated gaze; a noise like the beating of a hundred drums filled his ears; and he could feel the cold perspiration pricking from every pore. The suspense was horrible, and for a few moments he thought he should die from the very abjectness of his fear; then suddenly he felt a sharp pang as if something had given way in his brain, and the overpowering nausea of terror vanished as if by magic. In its place came a strange feeling of exaltation that sent the blood tingling to his finger tips; the roaring in his ears ceased, and his sight became once more keen and steady. Springing to his feet, he drew the colonel's revolver from his pocket and took careful and deliberate aim at the face behind the yellow star of light; his finger pressed the trigger, and the crash of a double detonation filled the cavern. With the flash and the report the light disappeared, and he felt a sting of pain in his arm; he knew he was wounded, but the hurt seemed only to augment the violence of the fit of ferocity that had taken complete possession of him. Rushing toward the point where the light had disappeared, he wedged himself into the crevice, grinding his teeth in impotent rage when he found that he could not reach far enough to get the range for a second shot.

(To be Continued.)

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