

"I can't imagine how you know which way I am bound, my friend," responded the prisoner, with a sort of mild sarcasm.

"I know more about you than you think," answered Mr. Willis. "There now; better save your breath to defend yourself where you will have need," he added.

"I don't know what you mean," came in slow, horrified tones from the closet.

"I presume not, but you'll find out," rejoined Mr. Willis.

The prisoner said no more, and Clara and her father conversed in subdued tones, as they watched and waited. Meanwhile, Tom galloped in mad haste over the road, and brought up, in grand style, before the door of the hotel in the narrow street, where a knot of men, who were talking together, turned to see the meaning of the uncommon hurry.

"Where's Jim Meade?" shouted Tom, as he neared the group.

"The sheriff, you mean? Well, he's gone over to Drayton; he—"

"The murderer is caught," shouted Tom again, as he slipped to the ground and fastened his saddle more securely.

"Reckon we knowed that, when we seed Jim a leadin' him, an' him a wearin' his new bracelets he'd jest had a present of," drawled a tall, lank Missourian, sending a mouthful of tobacco juice critically in a diagonal direction.

Tom stared stupidly for an instant, then faltered out, "Did—did he say Meade has got the murderer?"

"That's about it, youngster," replied a good-natured Maine man, shutting one eye quizzically.

"Well, if that's true, who in the nation has Cal got?" exclaimed Tom, helplessly. Then he rapidly repeated the story of how Clara had captured two men who answered the description given of the murderer and his accomplice. Before he had finished, his words were lost

in a roar of laughter, as the men threw back their heads and shouted—

"Pretty good!" "Plucky girl!" "She'll do!" etc.

"But what are we to do?" asked Tom, divided between his desire to laugh and to cry; for he was young enough to feel disgraced by an exhibition of the ridiculous.

"Do! Why, ride home as fast as you came, and loosen your prisoners, an' treat 'em to the best the ranch affords," called out an Ohio man, giving Tom a slap on the shoulder, as he burst into a hearty laugh, adding: "That girl deserves the best husband in the Rockies, I vum!"

Tom immediately acted on the suggestion, and Firefly made good time home. Clara sprang to her feet in excitement, expecting to see a string of horsemen; but only Tom appeared. He hastily dismounted and tied his horse to the gate-post, and ran up the walk.

"Let 'em loose, quick!" he shouted. "You've made a blunder. The sheriff's got the criminal."

Clara sank on the top step in an agony of shame and mortification. "Is that true?" she murmured, faintly.

"True! Of course it is! Better make a spread that'll make 'em forget the jailer in the cook," added Tom, enough recovered to joke his thoroughly humiliated sister.

Mr. Willis, almost as bewildered as before, at last understanding affairs, hastened to the closet, sending Tom to the cellar.

The stranger emerged from the tiny closet in a state of perspiration rarely witnessed, and as he energetically wiped his red face, Mr. Willis poured forth most profuse apologies.

"Enough!" cried the stranger, with astonishing good humor. "I heard enough of your conversation to gather that your daughter believed my nephew