

CAVANAGH FOREST RANGER

BY HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER XV.

THE decision which Cavanagh made between love and duty distinguished the officer from the man, the soldier from the civilian. He did not hesitate to act, and yet he suffered a mental conflict as he rode back toward the scene of that inhuman sacrifice on the altar of greed.

"It will be hours before any part of the sheriff's posse can reach the falls, even though they take to the swiftest motors, and then other long hours must intervene before I can ride down to her. Yes, at least a day and a night must drag their slow course before I can hope to be of service to her." And the thought drew a groan of anxiety from him. At such moments of mental stress the trail is a torture and the mountain side an inexorable barrier.

Halfway to the hills he was intercepted by an old man who was at work on an irrigating ditch beside the road. He seemed very nervous and very inquisitive, and as he questioned the ranger his eyes were like those of a dog that fears his master's hand. Ross wondered about this afterward, but at the moment his mind was busy with the significance of this patient toiler with a spade. He was a prophetic figure in the most picturesque and sterile land of the stockman. "Here, within twenty miles of this peaceful fruit grower," he said, "is the crowning infamy of the freebooting cowboy."

As his hot blood cooled he lost faith in even this sacrifice. Could anything change the leopard west into the tame and serenity of the ox? "No," he decided; "nothing but death will do that. This generation, these fierce and bloody hearts, must die. Only in that way can the tradition of violence be overcome and a new state reared."

At the foot of the tollsome, upward winding trail he dismounted and led his weary horse. Over his head and about halfway to the first hilltop lay a roof of fleecy vapor, faint purple in color and seamless in texture. Through this he must pass, and it symbolized to him the line of demarcation between the plain and the mountain, between order and violence.

Slowly he led his horse along the mountain side, grasping with eager desire at every changing aspect of the marvelous mountain scene. It was infinitely more gorgeous, more compelling, than his moonlight experience the night before.

As he led his horse out upon a projecting point of rocky ledge to rest his love for the range came back upon him with such power that tears misted his eyes and his throat ached. "Where else will I find such scenes as this?" he asked himself. "Where in all the lowlands could such splendors shine? How can I leave this high world in which these wonders come and go? I will not! Here will I bring my bride and build my home. This is my world."

law, attended like a Cheyenne chief by a dozen lesser warriors of various conditions and kinds, but among them—indeed, second only to the sheriff—was Hugh Redfield, the forest supervisor, hot and eager with haste.

As they rode up to the fire the officer called out: "Howdy, ranger? How about it?"

Ross stated briefly, succinctly, what he had discovered, and as he talked other riders came up the hill and gathered closely around to listen in gullible silence—in gullible silence, the ranger could not help believing.

Redfield spoke. "Sheriff Van Horn, you and I have been running cattle in this country for nearly thirty years, and we've witnessed all kinds of shooting and several kinds of hanging, but when it comes to chopping and burning men I get off. I shall personally offer a reward of \$1,000 for the apprehension of these miscreants, and I hope you'll make it your solemn duty to hunt them to earth."

"You won't have far to go," remarked Ross significantly.

"What do you mean?" asked the sheriff.

"I mean this slaughter, like the others that have taken place, was the work of cattlemen who claim this range. Their names are known to us all."

A silence followed—so deep a silence that the ranger was convinced of the fact that in the circle of his listeners stood those who, if they had not shared in the slaughter, at least knew the names of the guilty men.

may be on her deathbed. No; you, better go down with me today," he urged. And at last the old man consented.

Putting some bread in his pockets, Ross rode off up the trail to see how the dog and his flock were faring. He had not gone far when he heard the tinkle of the bells and the murmur of the lambs, and a few moments later the collic came toward him with the air of a boy who, having assumed to disregard the orders of his master, expects a scolding. He plainly said: "I've brought my sheep to you because I was lonesome. Please forgive me."

Cavanagh called to him cheerily and tossed him a piece of bread, which he caught in his teeth, but did not swallow. On the contrary, he held it while leaning for joy of the praise he heard in his new found master's voice.

Turning the flock upward toward the higher peaks, the ranger commanded the collic to their heels and so, having redeemed his promise, rode back to the cabin, where he found Wetherford saddled and ready for his momentary trip to the valley. He had shaved away his gray beard, and had Ross been unprepared for these changes he would have been puzzled to account for this decidedly military figure sitting stately on his pony before the door.

"You can prove an alibi," he called as he drew near. "Gregg himself would never recognize you now."

Wetherford was in no mood for joking. "Lize will. I wore a mustache in the old days, and there's a scar on my chin."

As he rode he confided this strange thing to Cavanagh. "I know," said he, "that Lize is old and wrinkled, for I've seen her, but all the same I can't realize it. That heavy set woman down there is not Lize. My Lize is slim and straight. This woman whom you know has stolen her name and face, that's all. I can't explain exactly what I feel, but Lee Virginia means more to me now than Lize."

"I think I understand you," said Cavanagh, with sympathy in his voice. The nearer Wetherford came to the actual meeting with his wife the more he shook. At last he stopped in the road. "I don't believe I can do it," he declared. "It'll be like a ghost to her. What's the use of it? She'll only be worried by my story. I reckon I'd better keep dark to everybody. Let me go back. I'm plum scared cold."

and the Basque's camp burned and the sheep in charge of the dog, and they'll fancy that you have skipped across the range. But see here, old man," and he turned on him sharply. "You didn't tell me the whole truth. You said you were out on parole."

"I couldn't tell you the whole truth," replied the fugitive. "But I will now. I was in for a life sentence. I was desperate for the open air and home-sick for the mountains, and I struck down one of the guards. I was willing to do anything to get out. I thought if I could get back to this country and my wife and child I'd be safe. I said I'd be willing to go back to the pen if necessary, but I'm not. I can't do it. I'd die there. You must save me for my girl's sake."

His voice and eyes were wild with a kind of desperate fury of fear, and Cavanagh, moved to pity, assured him of his aid. "Now, listen," he said. "I'm going to shield you on account of your work for that poor shepherd and for your daughter's sake. It's my duty to apprehend you, of course, but I'm going to protect you. The safest thing for you to do is to go back to my cabin. Ride slow, so as not to get there till they're gone. They'll ride over to the sawmill without doubt. If they come back this way remember that the deputy saw you only as a ragged old man with a long beard and that Haines has nothing but a printed description to go by. There's no use trying to flee. You are a marked man in that uniform, and you are safer right here with me than anywhere else this side of Chicago. Haines is likely to cross the divide in the belief that you have gone that way, and if he does you have no one but the deputy to deal with."

He succeeded at last in completely rousing the older man's courage.

Wetherford rose to meet his opportunity. "I'll do it," he said firmly.

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Cavanagh to encourage him. "You can throw them off the track this time, and when I come back tomorrow I'll bring some other clothing for you, and then we'll plan some kind of scheme that will get you out of the country. I'll not let them make a scapegoat of you."

The ranger watched the fugitive as he started back over the trail in this desperate defiance of his pursuers with far less confidence in the outcome than he had put into words.

"All depends on Wetherford himself. If his nerve does not fail him, if they take the uniform for granted and do not carry the matter to the supervisor, we will pull the plan through." And in this hope he rode away down the trail with bent head, for all this bore heavily upon his relationship to the girl waiting for him in the valley. He had thought Lize a burden, a social disability, but a convict father now made the mother's faults of small account.

knocked, and he turned away to conceal his emotion.

Cavanagh put the letter back into his pocket and mounted his horse. "Well, go on back to your work, Swenson. I'm going to town to get the supervisor on the wire and find out what it all means."

He was almost as badly stunned by the significance of Swenson's news as Swenson himself. Could it be possible that the man who had built up the field service of the bureau—the man whose clean handed patriotism had held the boys together, making them every year more clearly a unit, a little army of enthusiasts—could it be possible that the originator, the organizer of this great plan, had been stricken down just when his influence was of most account? He refused to believe it of an administration pledged to the cause of conservation.

As he entered the town he was struck instantly by the change in the faces turned toward him, in the jocular greetings hurled at him. "Hello, Mr. Cossack! What do you think of your chief now?"

"This will put an end to your infernal nonsense," said another. "We'll have a man in there now who knows the western ways and who's willing to boom things along. The cork is out of your forest bottle."

Gregg was most offensive of all. "This means throwing open the forest to anybody that wants to use it—means an entire reversal of this fool policy."

"Wait and see," replied Cavanagh. But his face was rigid with the expression of the fear and anger he felt. With hands that trembled he opened the door to the telephone booth, closed it carefully behind him and called for the supervisor's office. As soon as Redfield replied he burst forth in question. "Is it true that the chief is out?"

Redfield's voice was husky as he replied. "Yes, lad; they've got him."

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"Good Lord, what a blow to the service!" exclaimed Cavanagh with a groan of sorrow and rage. "What is the president thinking of to throw out the only man who stood for the future—the man who had built up this corps, who was its inspiration?" Then after a pause he added, with bitter resolution: "This ends it for me. Here's where I set off."

"Don't say that, boy. We need you now more than ever."

"I'm through. I'm done with America—with the States. I shall write my resignation at once. Send down another man to take my place."

Redfield's pleadings were of no avail. Cavanagh went directly from the booth to the postoffice, and there, surrounded by jeering and exultant citizens, he penned his resignation and mailed it. Then, with stern and contemptuous face, he left the place, making no reply to the jeers of his enemies, and mounting his horse, mechanically rode away out upon the plains, seeking the quiet, open places in order to regain calmness and decision. He did not deliberately ride away from Lee Virginia, but as he entered upon the open country he knew that he was leaving her as he was leaving the forests. He had cut himself off from her as he had cut himself off from the work he loved. His heart was swollen big within his breast. He longed for the return of "the colonel" to the White House. "What manner of ruler is this who is ready to strike down the man whose very name means conservation and who in a few years would have made this body of forest rangers the most effective corps of its size in the world?" He groaned again, and his throat ached with the fury of his indignation.

"Dismissed for insubordination," the report said. "In what way? Only in making war on greed, in checking graft, in preserving the heritage of the people."

The lash that cut deepest was the open exultation of the very men whose persistent attempt to appropriate public property the chief had helped to thwart. "Redfield will go next. The influence that got the chief will get Hugh. He's too good a man to escape. Then, as Swenson says, the thieves will roll in upon us to slash and bury and corrupt. What a country! What a country!"

As he reached the end of this line of despairing thought he came back to the question of his remaining personal obligations. Wetherford must be cared for, and then—and then—there was Virginia waiting for him at this moment. "For her sake, to save her from humiliation, I will help her father to freedom."

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"ALL OVER"

all over again," said Cavanagh. "I'll build a fire here, and we'll cremate your past. How about it?"

"I'm willing," responded Wetherford. "You can burn everything that belongs to me but my wife and my girl."

All through the ceremony which followed ran this self banter. "I'll be all ranger, barring a commission," he said, with a grin as he put on the olive yellow shirt and a pair of dusty green trousers. "And here goes my past!" he added as he tossed his contaminated rags upon the fire.

"What a corking opportunity to make a fresh start," commented Cavanagh. "I see it, but it's hard to live up to your mark."

When every precaution had been taken the ranger led the freshly scrubbed, scoured and transformed fugitive to his cabin.