HESPER

...BY...

HAMLIN GARLAND

COPYRIGHT, 1905, BY HAMLIN GARLAND

CHAPTER IV CONTINUED

appeared with a pitcher in her "If you'll fill this for me?"

pleasure," he quickly replied. lling it and placing it in her asked: "Now, which bag is ll pass that in."

ne. But where are you and leep?"

here." He caught at a sort of g upon the wall. It fell and formed into a bunk. "Right beside your door. I'll put the I'll not take much sleep to- The boys will need some hot en they come in." He walked oor and stood there looking ward the fire. "I'm afraid n all night job of it. The wind is springing up."

really feel that you ought to began rather feebly.

d you feel safer if I stayed?" possessed a note of tender- he asked this question. His outlined in the outer dark- ain appealed to her with power. ated. "I never was among— I have never been separated kind in this way before. I dweller, and, I confess, I am rvous."

you'd like me to stay?" he in-

I wish you would."

I will do so. I'm sure Barnett me when he knows"—

ng—a whip, a pistol—snapped the darkness, a little slapping puff of dust rose from Ray- road breast, and he put his his heart with a quick, inward ain. "Oh!"

was that?" asked Ann.

ed back against the door d a yellow white pallor came ce. "Some one has touched said slowly through his set It's that cowardly hound o call your driver. I'm shot." o walk to a chair, but reeled

st impulse was toward laugh- s so absurd, so melodramat- ctly impossible. "He is try- hten us," she thought, look- at him, but Louis ran out for Watson.

d partly rose and faced her. of agony sweat gleamed on "It's no joke," he gasped, divine her feeling. "He's t through, just above my n't let me bleed to death," ith guttural harshness, and ar at his coat in the effort As he took away his hand d his palm, which was red Ann's heart grew sick with Her limbs grew numb and en, as she watched him tear- at his coat, the long dormant her awoke. She ceased to d fell on her knees beside

help you," she said, and her calm and clear, her fingers n his coat was off he sank usted, breathing hard.

ay my shirt—get at that hole k," he commanded. "Any-

He tried to walk to a chair, but reeled.

will fill it. You'll find some ere in that box—in the win-

t was wet with blood, and clipped it away with steady looked down at the wound smiled up to her. "I'm all was a steel jacketed 30-30. eed much, and it's above my fool him yet."

er, wild of eye and much of hair, scrambled into the ho did it? Who did it?"

mind who did it. Plug this manded Raymond. "Bring water and pour on it."

that the driver's wits were d to permit of proper action, her tense nerves quivered

she bathed the wound, which was already ceasing to bleed.

"Turn me over, cap," called Raymond. "You'll find another vent on the other side."

Louis and the driver turned him gently on his face, and Ann was horrified to find an uglier wound than the other. Sick with horror as she was, she contrived to cut away the shirt and stanch the blood as before.

Raymond was recovering from the first shock of the wound, and, though his breathing was troubled, his mind was clear. "Now, Watson," he said to the driver, "spread some blankets under me, and then you go out to the corral and take my brown mare, with the saddle on, and slide out for Wallace and bring a doctor. Don't urge the mare—just let her take her gait—and don't ride her back. Leave her there."

After the driver had helped him to a bed on a blanket Raymond added, "Now I've got to be quiet and wait, that's all there is about it." He looked at Ann. "You can go to bed and sleep. Youngster, you're in for sentinel duty tonight"—

Ann interrupted him. "You must not talk, not another word! Lie perfectly still. We will keep cool bandages on your wound till the doctor comes."

He submitted to her directions and lay quiet, moving only to allow her to change the compress. Louis, when he knew what was needed, became almost as deft as Ann and relieved her of the painful task of replacing the bandages. But the powerful frame of the ranchman grew each moment more inert, and at last they could not dress the wound at his back.

CHAPTER V.

FOR a long time the silence remained unbroken except now and then when the girl bent over the silent figure to ask, "Can I do anything for you?" Each time she listened with added fear, hoping eagerly for his voice. "Oh, I wish we could do something," she whispered now and again to Louis.

The boy, worn out with his day's excitement, struggled manfully to keep awake, but as the night deepened slumber rose about him like a wreath of benumbing incense. His sense of what had taken place dulled, his head nodded and drooped, and at last Ann lowered him to the floor, where he slept, his cheek pillowed upon her feet.

Again the singularity of the chance, the absurd unreality of the situation, came upon the self contained girl, inciting her to a sort of hysterical laughter. Here now she sat—Ann Rupert, most conventional of persons—in a rude ranch house, alone with a strange, rough man, sleeping in a deathlike trance before her.

The minutes elongated like bands of rubber, attaining the length of quarter hours, and the night stretched away into horrifying distance as she sat tensely waiting, hoping each moment for deliverance, expecting each instant to hear the swift beating of hoofs, the hoarse laughter of the men; but only the wind serpents hissed and the wolf howled.

At last immobility became intolerable, and, lowering Louis' head to the floor, she gently placed his doubled coat beneath it and with a mighty effort of the will bent again above the pallid man, so tragic in his supineness, and whispered:

"Are you still suffering? Can I do anything for you?"

He turned his head slowly and with a glance which made her shiver answered: "No; I have ceased to bleed. I am going to pull through if my pulse keeps down. Won't you take it?"

Timidly taking his brown wrist in her soft finger tips she tried to count the pulsing of his blood.

He waited a little time in silence, then said: "It's there, but it's weak. Don't you feel it?"

"Yes; it is more regular now," she answered.

"I'm not going to die," he continued in a hoarse, flat tone. "I could get up and mount a horse right now, only I'd bleed if I did. It's hard to keep quiet, but I'm going to do it. I can't afford to die now. You've roused me. There's something in the world for me to do."

"You must not talk," she whispered. "Please—it will do you harm."

She put her hand impulsively on his forehead as if he were a child, and he closed his eyes and lay in silence for several minutes. When she withdrew her palm he muttered: "Leave it there. It—is so cool and soft."

"Would you like a wet cloth on your head?"

"No—only your hand—if you don't mind"—

Her feeling toward him at the moment was like that she manifested toward her brother. "I don't mind, if it helps you," she answered, but a flush rose to her face.

"The boys will come in soon, and then you can go to bed and rest. I'm sorry to trouble you. You can go now. I'm all right," he said.

"I shall not leave you," she firmly replied.

"You're mighty good," he said simply.

The night wore on interminably. At a little past 3, faint and far, arose the cheerful crowing of a cock. Her heart burned with joy—the morning was near! As she waited the light came and voices, faint and far away, touched her ear, and then slowly, moving in a disorderly squad, the weary fighters of flames came riding down the slope and across the meadow.

The herders did not ride up to the house, as she expected them to do, but turned aside toward the stables, and she could hear them as they dropped their saddles and turned their tired ponies loose. "Surely they will come now." Then all was still save the crowing of the cocks and that sad howling of the wolf on the hill.

Unable to endure the suspense, she tiptoed across the floor and hurried out toward the corrals, her heart in her throat with fear of the body on the floor. She ran as silently as possible, as if to avoid rousing some fierce animal, and was close upon the men before they saw her.

"What's that?" she heard one quick, keen voice cry out.

Then each man rose from the heap of blankets wherein he lay curled like an arctic dog.

Ann answered them breathlessly. "Come to the house, quick. Mr. Raymond is shot!"

Their responses were like bullets: "Shot! Who shot him?"

"Some one fired out of the darkness—he was standing in the doorway. I'm all alone. He must have help!"

"Where's Watson?"

"Gone for the doctor."

Shaking loose from his bed, Baker started on the run for the house, but Ann cried out sharply: "Wait! Go quietly. You must not excite him." And, walking beside him, she returned to the house, and in a sort of daze the other herders silently followed. The jangle of Baker's big spurs, familiar and penetrating, called Raymond to a knowledge of his surroundings.

He turned his head and looked at the men in a way that made them shrink and asked: "How's the fire? Did you stop it?"

Baker replied, "Yes, we got her under."

Raymond half closed his eyes. "I'm glad you're here. This lady needs a rest. Somebody did for me. Baker, you and Jones and Skuttle stay here. Perry, you saddle a horse and get Abe and his wife. Miss Rupert, you go to bed; the boys will look after me now. I can't let you wear yourself out for me."

But Ann could not so easily be put aside from her plain duty. "No, I will stay till the doctor comes."

At last, when the wounded man was lying comfortably on a thick pile of blankets and the white light of the morning filled the cabin, Ann yielded to his entreaties, went to her room and threw herself down upon her bed with a sense of having put all her easeful, careless girlhood behind her. It was as if she had suddenly been flung into a gray and bitter sea far from shore.

Louis, who had been roused by the return of the herders and who sat watching their slow and painfully cautious handling of the sufferer with the mute, unemotional gaze of a sleepy kitten, followed his sister into the inner room and stood in silence till his bewilderment left him and his perplexity crystallized into words. Then he said:

"Jupiter! I didn't know you could do such things. What do you think? Is he going to die?"

"I don't know, laddie. I hope not. I've done all I can."

Ann must have dropped asleep thereafter, for when she woke the horizontal rays of the flaming sun filled the room and the loud and hearty voice of a woman could be heard out in the kitchen. Her words came distinctly to Ann's ears. "Now, Rob, you've got me to deal with. I'll cuff your ears if you don't do as I say. You've got to eat to keep your strength up."

Ann rose hastily, but paused before the closed door with a new and singular timidity. The coming of another woman made her own position embarrassing. With a return of resolution she opened the door and met the big gray eyes of a tall, broad shouldered, slatternly woman, who stood over Raymond with a bowl of steaming broth in her hand. She was neither deft nor dainty, but Ann perceived that she was capable and good tempered, a natural nurse, experienced in the ways of the border.

"Good morning," she called, and her inflections and many of her phrases were masculine. "You must 'a' had a right hard night of it. Friend of the Barnetts, Rob tells me."

Her familiarity and the essential commonness of her tone repelled Ann, who asked, with cool dignity, "Can I do anything?"

"Not a thing. I'm Mrs. Scribbins, Rob's nighest neighbor. We come a-runnin' the moment we heerd of this thing, for Rob's a mighty good man and neighbor."

Ann repented and held out her hand. "I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Scribbins. I'm Miss Rupert, and this is my brother." She turned to Louis, who had crept to her side, pale and silent.

Mrs. Scribbins shook hands, carefully guarding her broth. "I don't see how you kept Rob down. I've had to just about throttle him once or twice since I came. He's a headstrong cuss and hates being bossed or nussed."

"Has the doctor come?"

"Good Lord, no! But I've sent Abe up the road. That fool Watson is more'n likely to get lost and never get in. Even if he did he couldn't get a doctor here before noon, and that Wallace doctor ain't worth the powder to blow him up anyway. We need a bone doctor from Valley Springs. As soon as Don Barnett hears of this he'll come a-runnin' with the best there is in the Springs."

Raymond lay on his pile of blankets, his face expressionless as that of a dead man, but his eyes called to the girl, and she bent to ask, "Are you better?"

His lips moved a little. She bowed lower, and he whispered, "Yes—bring Don"—

"They have gone for him."

"They must hurry." Then he added, "Don't leave me."

With a conviction that he knew he was about to die, she spoke, and her tone was tense with a desire to help him. "I will not leave you. Do not worry."

He closed his eyes again and lay so still, so breathless, it seemed that he had entered upon the last coma, beyond the reach of any medicine.

Louis, awed quite out of his sprightly self, drew Ann aside and whispered, "How is he?"

"He is worse. Oh, I wish the doctor would come!"

"The boys say that big, speckled faced fellow did it. He had it in for Mr. Raymond. Do you know, Perry, the Mexican boy, took a horse and was going to chase them up, but the boys wouldn't let him. They've sent word to the railway, and they'll have Speckle before night. Uncle Don said that these fellows were only hired men, but seems to me they're a good deal like the old time cowboys."

CHAPTER VI.

BARNETT was at breakfast when a telegram was laid at his elbow by the maid. He opened it leisurely, thinking it some matter of business, but his hands stiffened as he read:

Bob Raymond is shot. Send best doctor in town quick. WATSON.

For just a moment he sat in silence, then rose and walked slowly to his library. Seating himself before the little desk on which stood a movable telephone receiver, he began to "make things hum." He reached his friend, Dr. Braide, and set him in motion. He ordered out his racing automobile. He telegraphed Watson to take fresh horses and return by way of Junction and get the best doctor there. "Burn the air as you go," he added.

After giving orders for his valise to be packed he walked up to Mrs. Barnett's room and kissed her good morning without betraying his excitement.

"I'm going out to the ranch," he said. "The boys are having trouble with the hay, and I want to see how they're coming on. You won't mind, will you?"

"Of course not, Don. I'm going to be all right in a few hours. I'm glad you're going. You can bring Ann home. You should have gone with her yesterday."

"I see that now," he answered dryly. "It will be a startling world for her. Well, I'm off. Better stay in bed today. I'll be back by tonorrow night, I think."

When he took his seat in his big, flat, powerful auto car his face was set in grim lines. "Is she all right, Henry?" he asked of his engineer.

"In perfect order, sir."

"She needs to be. This is to be a record breaker."

With his big goggles over his eyes and his cap drawn low down on his forehead, Barnett seized the wheel, and the ponderous, panting organism began to move. Wheeling into the street, he let on the full power of the engine, and when he drew up at Braide's gate the mechanism was hot with speed, its joints oiled and frictionless—in racing trim.

Braide, a small, smiling, trig young fellow, came out. "What is it all about, Don?"

"Got your tools?"

He pointed at his bag, "Emergency kit."

"Then all aboard!"

Henry leaped out and caught up the bag, while the doctor climbed in beside Barnett on the front seat.

"This looks ominous. How much of a trip is it going to be?"

"Just a short run," answered Barnett as he swung the shining red bulk of the car into Mogalyon avenue, which led directly east over the plain.

Beneath their feet the puff and click of the piston and the pur of cogs grew each moment more furious until all sounds fused into a humming roar. The keen air of the morning smote the riders jovially. The flaming sunlight slanted upon them with growing heat, and backward, beneath them, the sod swept like a tawny carpet, while Barnett, watchful, intent, composed, worked the levers and valves with the skill of a practical engineer. When they had crossed the two railroads and were climbing the long, low ridge he casually remarked:

"My foreman, Raymond, is shot, and you've got to pull him through."

"Great Scott, Don, I can't afford the time! It'll take all day. If I'd known"—

"You'd have gone just the same," asserted Barnett calmly. The machine was again running swiftly. "You're here, and you daren't jump out, and you might as well enjoy yourself. This is to be a record run. I'm going to pull in by noon."

Braide was young and a man of red blood and shining eyes. "Very well; go it, old sport! I can stand it if you can. I'll make it a holiday and charge you double for every hour."

When they had reached the top of the pass between two pinon spotted hills the road could be seen for miles, driving straight into the mist of the mighty Missouri valley.

"It's all the way down grade from here to Omaha," remarked Barnett. "I could make the run in two hours, only I mustn't invite a breakdown."

"You seem to value your foreman."

"He's something more than my foreman. He's a splendid chap. You've met him—the fellow who went on the 'coyote drive' with me."

"Why, certainly I remember him. I've met him at the club. But he was very reticent. I didn't get at him. Who is he? How does he come to be your foreman?"

"He's a little slow about telling his own life story, but he's all right. I think I know the cause of this shooting. He got into trouble with a couple of fellows out there, and one of them has done him."

As they entered upon a particularly smooth stretch of road the man at the wheel relaxed his hold and said, with deep feeling: "I don't mind saying that I'm anxious about Rob. I've grown mighty fond of him. He's not one given to confidences, and I've respected his reticence. I don't know quite why he is here, but I trust him and count myself fortunate to have him on the place. He made $40,000 for me last year on hay and cattle, and must have a little bunch laid up for himself. I've felt for a year that I ought to put Rob into something better. I owed it to him. Now, if he dies"— He broke off and bent to his wheel to hide the emotion that made his lips quiver.

"I don't mind saying that I'm anxious about Bob."

It lacked ten minutes of noon as Barnett rose above the last great wave of the tawny sea and sighted the clump of cottonwoods in which his ranch buildings sat, and two minutes later he swept into the yard and up to the door amid a throng of singularly silent cowboys and ranchers. The first one to speak was Mrs. Scribbins, who exclaimed:

"Jerusalem the golden! You hain't come from home this mornin' in that doggone thunder cart, have ye?"

"That's what. How's Rob?"

"Quiet as mice; but I hope ye brought help."

Barnett rose from his seat stiffly and climbed painfully down, while Braide seized his case of tools and hurried into the cabin.

Barnett, feeling a small hand gripping his arm, turned to meet Louis. "Hello," said he. "How is Ann?"

"She's all right. She saved Bob's life," answered the boy.

Ann, who stood just outside the door, answered very quietly: "I am quite well. How is Jeannette?"

"I left her feeling very well. But tell me the truth, is Rob dying?"

"No," said Ann. "But he needs help. He was shot last evening and has lain all night in pain. He is very weak now."

Barnett hurried into the hot dusk of the ranch house, smelling of the dinner, which was cooking, and bent above his foreman.

"Hello, Rob! How do you feel?"

Raymond whispered, "Oh, I'm all right; a little weak"—

The doctor interposed. "Clear the room of everybody but this woman." He indicated Mrs. Scribbins. "We must find this bullet."

Barnett turned to the men who filled the doorway. "Clear out, boys; the doctor wants to be alone now."

Raymond smiled a little. "The bullet went on. It's in the wall somewhere."

Barnett came to the door and said to Ann: "You better go out under the trees and rest. You look tired."

"I will stay if I can be of any use."

"We don't need you. Mrs. Scribbins will help us. Please go. Louis, take her away till this is over."

Released from her benumbing load of responsibility, Ann laid her hand on her brother's arm. "Come, Louis," and together they went out along the little winding path which led to the spring.

"What do you suppose they will do to him?" asked Louis.

Ann turned sick. "Oh, I don't know! Don't speak of it! It's too horrible!"

When they re-entered the cabin Barnett met them with a smile. "The doctor says Rob's all right. He insists that Ann saved his life. You poor girl! What a night that boy let you in for! I didn't know till ten minutes ago that you were here all alone and that Jones and his wife had vamoosed. I hope you'll forgive me, Ann."

"Oh, I blame no one but myself," she wearily replied. "I shouldn't have come to this miserable, ghastly region."

"Rob wants to see you. Will you come in and speak to him?"

Ann reluctantly followed Barnett into the inner room where Raymond, with his wounds dressed and limbs properly clothed, lay stretched on the bed. He was very pale, but his eyes were calm and quiet. He reached a feeble right hand toward her, saying painfully: "You've been mighty good to me. By and by I will try to thank you. Without you I would have bled to death."

"I beg you not to give it a moment's thought. I did very little," Ann coldly replied.

His eyes were round and soft and appealing, like those of a big wounded dog. "Don't leave me now. I want you"—

She glanced at the young doctor, who stood listening. He nodded as if to say, "Grant his request." And so she put his hand away gently as if the clinging fingers were those of a sleeping babe and said, with a return of pity: "I will stay till tomorrow. Now please go to sleep."

He closed his eyes under her palm, and tears of gratitude came stealing down from his brown lashes. For the moment she forgot that she had known him but a day; that she, too, was a stranger—far removed from him in every thought and purpose—and consented to stay because he clung to her and needed her. A hand seized her throat, and an emotion which alienated her from her old self rose within her bosom and for a moment frightened her. In the end it irritated her, this pity, and yet it could not be shaken off. A deeper self which she had not known insisted that she keep her word to the wounded man, and so for two days she oscillated between a pitying tenderness for him and a disgust and bitterness with herself and her weakness.

On the third day Braide pronounced his patient out of danger, and then Ann's pity died.

"I am going home," she said to Louis, "and you must go with me. They are going to take the foreman to the Springs, and I cannot leave you here."

Ann said goodby to the wounded man in Barnett's presence, and a sense of irritation caused her to be very distant with him.

"I hope you will soon be able to be removed," she said, evading his glance. "This is a distressing place in which to be sick, and now I must say goodby."

He took her hand in both of his. "I shall miss you, but I won't ask you to stay any longer. You've been very sweet and helpful to me, and I hate to have you go. You will let me see you again, won't you?"

"My cousin intends to take you to his house as soon as you can be moved," she answered formally. "No doubt we shall meet again there."

"I will live in hope of that," he answered gallantly.

CHAPTER VII.

ONCE more in Valley Springs, Ann's old self returned, and the scenes through which she had passed became as unreal as the happenings of a dream, but her sense of injury deepened into dislike of Raymond and the life he represented. Therefore she took care not to see him as he was borne into Barnett's house. "He is nothing to me, and I must decline to be troubled by him further," she said as she was dressing to go out.

Mrs. Barnett, however, was waiting and when the carriage in which he lay came to the door hastened to take his hand in both of hers and make him welcome. "I'm glad you came, Rob. We are going to have you out in a few days. How do you feel?"

In his weak state he could only boyishly say: "Oh, I'm on the up grade! You and Don are mighty good to me."

Thereafter Raymond abandoned himself to the joy of traveling back to life along such ways of wanton luxury as he had never known. He permitted himself to be waited upon, even by Mrs. Barnett, without protest, and when Louis came stealing into the room in awe and love his heart went out to the boy as to a brother.

"Hello, younker!" he called. "You needn't walk so soft voiced. I'm worth a dozen dead men yet."

The boy's face shone. "I thought you were asleep. Can I do anything for you?"

"No; only come and sit down and talk to me. What have you been doing since you came back to the Springs?"

Louis took a seat. "Nothing of any consequence, except to make some drawings of the ranch. It's dull here. I want to go into the mountains."

"You're a wonderful youngster. Wait till I'm able to travel, and we'll go up into the high country together."

Louis clapped his hands. "Won't that be glorious? I'd rather do that than anything else in the world."

"How is your sister?" asked Raymond, with abrupt change of tone.

"She is well. She's always well. We just came in from a drive. That's the reason I wasn't here to help you. Did it hurt you going upstairs?"

"Not a bit. The boys handled me as tenderly as a side o' pork. Let me see your drawings, will you?"

The boy's face glowed. "Well, you just wait." And he rushed away to get them.

Mrs. Barnett upon meeting Ann said, with deep feeling: "Rob's illness has transformed him. He said to me a few moments ago: 'If you can find the man who shot me, reward him. He has done me a great service. I am lost in a dream of luxury.' He asked after you with emotion and said he would like to thank you for your service to him."

Ann, listening intently, remained coldly impassive of face. "Mrs. Scribbins was the really efficient person. I have a horror of sick people, and as for wounds"— She shuddered for lack of words.

Continued Next Week

In beauty town there dwelt a lass,
Her face was fair to see;
The secret of her beauty lay
In Rocky Mountain Tea.
Linn Drug Co.