

HESPER

...BY...
HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER XIV CONTINUED

"I am quite well, thank you," he said. "I was not of those whom disloyal eyes abuse. He hugged himself and shivered ecstatically. "Wow, but that was a cold breeze! Some one must have left the bars down. You're not going to draw the line on me, are you? What do you know against me?" "I know nothing against you or for you either," she replied. She was turning to go when he stopped her, and his tone was hard and dry. "You were in Bozle yesterday with Raymond. Don't do that again. When you want an escort let me know. I'll send a man that knows enough not to take a lady into danger and who has 'savvy' enough to keep his horses for the return trip."

"Thank you. You are very kind, but I'm not in need of additional protection," Ann Kelly replied. "Goodly till tomorrow," he called after her in mockery, his voice as musical as a bugle. This interview, short as it was, left the girl with the feeling of having been grasped and shaken by a rude hand. And yet her anger was not unmitigated with admiration. His magnificent audacity and the grace and dash of his advance interested her. Raymond saw Munro riding away and wondered what his errand could have been, and when Louis told him that the gambler had stopped and detained Ann in the path his teeth set in anger. "The little hound!" he growled under his breath. "I'll put an end to that!"

Immediately upon finishing his supper he went up the path to Hanley's to find "the lookout." Munro was in his place, sitting high above his fare lay-out clicking a couple of silver dollars together, talking with gleeful intensity to Denver Dan, who stood at his shoulder broadly smiling. The saloon was packed with men, all in high spirits over the precipitate flight of the sheriff. Munro sighted him at last and called out: "Hello, Bob! How goes it?"

Raymond did not reply till he reached his side. "I want to talk with you, Jack," he said in a low voice. Munro studied him for a moment, then turned to Dan. "Take my place a minute."

Dan complied, and Raymond led the way into the open air, and when they were well out of the crowd he turned and said: "You intercepted Miss Rupert today?"

"I met her, yes. What about it?" "Just this. You're not fit to shake the hand of a decent girl, much less a cultured, high bred woman like Ann Rupert, and you know it!"

Munro was staggered. "What business is it of yours?" he asked, with instant anger. Raymond's wrath was self contained. "Keep your temper, Jack. We've summed and wintered together, and you can't make any mistakes about what I mean. I know the kind of women you live with and the kind of life you lead, and I tell you to keep away from the Kelly cabin."

Munro did not snarl as Raymond expected. His voice became softly insinuating as he said: "Suppose the lady invited me to call? Suppose she was interested in my conversation? The lady had a chance to go. The path was open, but she fingered, she smiled."

"You're a liar!" Munro was now very confident. "Am I? Ask the boy; he saw her talking with me. I say the lady was gracious." The gambler took on the air of an injured comrade. "Now, see here, Bob; you're away out of limits. I acknowledge I've known a whole lot of cheap women, but that's all the more reason why I should be able to tell when I meet the real thing. Her name is as safe with me as with you. Probably she's tied up back in the states anyway, so that neither of us has any chance of interesting her. But it's an open course and no favors, and so long as she doesn't hand me out the 'icy mitt' I'm going to make the most of my chance, and from this moment—she took off his hat—"I reform, I throw up my job at Hanley's, I cut off 'booze' and I shake 'Eau Claire'."

Raymond was impressed by his rival's manner. "You can quit gambling, and I hope you can leave liquor alone, but I see trouble when you shake Claire. But that doesn't matter. For the sake of old times I want to avoid a quarrel with you, Jack. But I warn you that if Miss Rupert finds your presence disagreeable you go, and your presence disagreeable you go, and your presence disagreeable you go, and your presence disagreeable you go."

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"All right. Leave it to her, Bob," said Munro almost jocularly. "If she turns me down I'll pull out of my own accord, lightning sure. Good night!" Raymond walked away with a sense of failure. Munro had adroitly writhed out of his grasp and was probably exulting at his own cleverness. He was ululating at the confident tone which Munro had taken in saying, "The way was open; she fingered."

Out of the tumult of his doubt he emerged with an accession of confidence in himself. "If it comes to a choice between me, he thought, and

and as Jack's. Her tolerance of him is due to ignorance of his real character. Mrs. Kelly must tell her."

He saw the light in Kelly's home, and his allurement was stronger than ever before, but he resolutely held his way to his own freedom, there to bitterly muse the entire evening over his poverty and the false position in which Munro had cleverly placed him.

He repeated of his resolute passing of her door when he heard next day that a couple of the independent operators had spent the entire evening with Kelly and that one of them talked a great deal to Ann. The sting of it lay in the fact that Tracy was a fine young fellow, studious and capable. "You are a fool," Raymond said to himself. "You threw away a chance to be happy. Don't do it again."

CHAPTER XVI. NOT a day passed that the captain of the patrol did not ride down to the door of the Kelly cabin and leap from his saddle with some fanciful greeting, carefully and ornately uttered. So much he retained of his Kentucky breeding. "The sheriff's army grows apace, but does not march," he announced one morning.

Ann could not understand this humorous defiance of law—this colossal recklessness. "What will you do when it does march?" "Meet it and beat it!" "Tell me, now," she said to him at another time, "what is your real motive? Why should you be the champion of the rights of labor?"

He established her by giving back earnestness for earnestness. "I'll tell you, my lady. Labor has got to fight. This union is the coming thing. The toilers have not only got to stand together, but they've got to drill. I happen to have a little military training, and I'm going to give western labor its first lesson in the power of military organization."

"Rob and Kelly both stand for the thing that is going out. They think any man has the same chance they have, but I tell you this union that they despise is the coming order."

In truth, Kelly and Raymond were watching Munro's rise to power with growing uneasiness. He was now in almost complete control of the camp, and though he still deferred to the union and its committees, his reckless bravery, his prompt execution of orders and his knowledge of military forms had made of him the chief source of command, the only adequate regulative force on the peak. Those on the outside did not hesitate to call him "the arch devil of the district," and the whole western world was filled with his doings, his reckless schemes.

His fame had fired the hearts of all the dead shots and restless spirits of the west, and from an irregular squad of twenty-five or thirty men his forces had risen to nearly 200 heavily armed and hardy horsemen.

Raymond, though keeping keen eyes upon Munro, was unable to find cause for war in any word or act of the gambler, nor could he fathom Ann's mind either toward Munro or himself. She appeared to find Munro diverting and spoke of him only in that way. If she understood his "home life," it made no change in her attitude. It was inconceivable that a refined girl should tolerate a man who passed from one ignorant and vicious woman to another, and yet Ann's greeting remained gracious, if not friendly. What it was when they were alone, he dared not think.

As for Raymond himself, he continued to punish himself by putting aside the many opportunities which came to plead his own suit, and took a morbid sort of pleasure in his renunciation. "There will be one man at least who will not persecute her," he said savagely and bent his best energies to the work of developing his mine.

One afternoon as Ann and Mrs. Kelly sat sewing and chatting together a woman suddenly appeared in the open door. She was large and high colored, her hat was awry, and there was a wild glare in her eyes and a look in her face that froze even Nora into silence. Both stared at their strange visitor in breathless apprehension till she pointed her unsteady finger at Ann and hoarsely cried out: "So you're the one that's cut me out!"

The muscles of one cheek contorted and her eyelid drooped like that of a paralytic as she fixed a baleful look on the astonished girl. After a moment's pause she stepped uncertainly upon the threshold and leaned against the jamb. "Well, you'd better watch out. If you don't give him up, I'll kill you!" "She's crazy," whispered Nora. The intruder fumbled in her absurdly flamboyant skirt and at last drew out a pistol. "Now you better hop!" she said, with menacing calmness.

Ann rose, white and calm. "Who are you? What do you want?" "Who am I? I'm Jack Munro's wife, that's who I am, and I want you to let him alone, that's what I want. You can understand that, can't you?" Her big, sabby face again contorted horribly.

Nora found tongue. "You go away or I'll call Matt!" "Call him. What do I care for him? I ain't afraid of no man livin'. No, sir; let him come. But I got no war with you; you're all right. But that thing there, with her fancy dresses—I'll pink her with a bullet if she don't let my Jack alone."

If the drunken creature had swept a handful of mire into her face Ann could not have been more revolted, more degraded. Fixing a look of dislike on the woman, she said: "You are damn on the woman, she said: 'You are quite mistaken. Your Jack is less than nothing to me. I despise him and still he represents.'"

The other wildly laughed. "Ah, yes, you can talk—your smooth—but I know you!" she began to breathe. "If you

with him? I saw you yesterday." She raised the pistol. "I tell you, I'll blow you into kingdom come if you don't promise right now to give him up!"

As she advanced the two little lads at play just outside appeared in the doorway, and the sight of them steeled the little mother's heart. "Go away, darlin's," she called to them. "Quick, run for dad!"

The woman turned to see who was behind her, and the desperate Nora seized her by the wrist. "Give me the gun!" she called.

"I won't! Let go me!" shrieked the intruder, jerking hard in the effort to free her hand.

Ann seized the other arm. "I promise," she said quietly, fixing her eyes full upon those of the infuriated woman, who ceased to struggle. "Now go away."

"You promise?" "I promise!"

The woman again laughed harshly, drunkenly. "I don't trust you. I'll kill you; then I know. Let go me!" she called. "Let go or I'll smash your face!"

"Matt! Oh, Matt!" called Nora as she clung desperately to that terrible wrist.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. Like a flash, Woo, the new Chinese

cook of the household, rushed into the room and flung himself on the mad wretch. His long fingers encircled her throat. "Dlop it!" he curtly commanded. "Dlop it!" For a few moments the woman struggled, then the revolver fell to the floor, and Nora snatched it up.

Woo turned the gasping, hiccupping creature to the door and flung her out upon the ground. "You drunk. Go home. Stop home. Me sabbe you—you sabbe me," he said as he bent above her.

Ann interposed. "Don't hurt her, Woo!"

He stood beside her while she slowly regained a sitting posture. "She belly dangerous. Me go tell Munro. She fight—me kick!"

The poor creature now seemed dazed and broken and began to weep, and with her tears became as abjectly pitiful, as pathetically tawdry, as she had been hideous and menacing in her wrath. Ann shuddered with a bitter nausea, a disorder that was half physical weakness, half mental repulsion. There was something ghastly beyond words in this creature sitting in utter abandonment in her rumpled finery, which the pitiless sun dissected. Stopping, she took the miserable one by the arm. "Get up. You must not sit there."

Slowly the woman rose, all thought of revenge swallowed up in a wave of maudlin self pity. "You're all right—me—all of ye! I guess you wouldn't like it to have your husband stolen by another woman. You let me alone!" she said to Woo, with a flash of anger. "You pigtail, what business you got to lay hands on a white lady?"

The creature began to pour forth a flood of vile epithets, directed toward the patient Woo, who tried again and again to lift her and was in the midst of a howl of wrath when Matt came round the corner of the house.

"What's all this?" he asked sharply. The woman suddenly rose to her feet, well aware that a man had arrived, and began to mumble and weep again.

Nora ran to her husband. "Oh, Matt, drive her away. She tried to kill us." "Who is she? Who are you, and what are you doing here anyway?"

The woman, quite dismayed, began to retreat. "It's all right. She promised. I'm going now."

Woo explained: "She Munro's wife. Belly drunk—alike same crazy. Take um gun—go shoot lady." He pointed at Ann. "Me choke um. She fall on ground. No get up. Noia catchie gun."

Kelly followed the intruder. "You go back to where you came from and stay there or 'twill be the worse for ye, ye murderin' omadhaun."

Ann went to her room and flung herself down upon her bed in such abasement as she had never known in all her life. She could not deceive herself. She had brought this horrible assault upon herself by something more than tolerance of Munro.

The woman's ignorance and tastelessness, her common voice, her badly fitting garments, her incredible baseness of speech, all came back. "Ann Rupert a rival to that being?" Of course she had never for an instant doubted that she was a rival.

had appealed to her and she had listened. "Rob should have warned me," she complained, her mind going back to the man she could trust. At the moment she could not see or would not acknowledge that Raymond had ventured as far as he dared in revealing Munro's private life. She was too angry with herself and every one around her to be just. As her flaming wrath died she grew cold and bitter. "This is what comes of going outside one's own proper world. I shall leave the peak at once, and I hope I shall never see it or hear it spoken of again."

CHAPTER XVII. ANN'S disgust and bitterness of self accusation wore away as she faced the resolving sunlight and measured her scars against the breast of mighty Mogalyon. In the dawn of the second day the incident, having lost much of its shame and terror, was debatable, and under Matt's kindly counsel she reached a certain resignation.

"No one but ourselves need know what took place," he said in conclusion. "Woo is no talebearer, and when the woman herself sobers off she'll not remember a word of it. Furthermore, I warned her that Jack would wring her neck if he knew what she had done. So I wouldn't give another thought of it—not one."

"I'll try to forget it," she promised humbly, but she could not at once put the experience out of mind. She could only wait for that besotted face to fade into a grisly apparition. In the end she pitied the poor woman who loved and was willing to defend her love.

Raymond was chilled by the change in Ann—by a return to the cold aloofness of her manner at Barnett's—and was profoundly troubled by it.

The day following the woman's visit Munro rode down as usual to call and seemed amazed when Mrs. Kelly greeted him coolly. "Ann does not want to see you or any one else this morning—your best of all."

Munro whistled. "Another cold blast. It's sure drifted up here on the side hill, isn't it? What do you suppose is the cause of it?"

From the inner room a clear, low voice, lay as a mountain stream, replied. "Miss Rupert is not receiving Captain Munro today or at any other time."

He took a step toward the door. "What have I done to get a crack like that?"

The door closed with a decided jar and a bolt slid.

Munro bowed. "I understand. I take the hint. But some day when you are feeling jolly I'd like to know what has frosted the air down here among the aspens."

"I can tell you," said Nora, with the directness of a woman who has known rough men all her life. "Ann has learned the kind of life you live, and she despises the sight of your face."

For the first time in his life Munro was confounded. He stood for a moment revolving an explanation. At last he said, "You mustn't take an enemy's report of me."

"We do not," said Nora calmly. "Your wife has called on us." "My wife?"

"The woman who calls herself your wife. 'Tis all one so far as we are concerned."

Munro frowned. "Claire called! Here? Then with a her that was characteristic of him, he added, "I hope you had a pleasant chat."

"Ask her. She did all the talkin'!"

Munro became very serious and very winning. "Now, see here, Nora—" "Call me Mrs. Kelly," she interposed shortly.

He was not smiling now. His heart was in his voice. "You tell Ann not to meddle with me. She must give me a chance to square myself. I don't claim to be a saint, but I've been open and aboveboard with every man or woman I've ever had any dealings with. Whatever my past has been, I'm living on a different plane now. I've cut off all my old habits for her sake. I'm trying to live up to her standard of things. I know she's better than I am, but I can climb. My family is as good as hers. I started right, and with the help of a good woman I can get back to where I was. I claim the work I'm doing here is worthy her approval. Ask her to let me see her again."

Nora turned her face toward Ann's door and both waited in silence, but no sound came from the inner room, and Nora, seeing suffering in the lines of his face, said more kindly: "Ye may as well go. The door will not open to you this day nor any other."

Munro turned and went out with bowed head, and Nora could not doubt the sincerity of his pain.

One morning Ann rose to a singular light. In place of the clear, golden sunshine which had so often glorified her room a blue-gray mist lay thick against her window pane. Raising the sash, she put her hand into it—it was like smoke, dry and cold! Dressing hurriedly she entered the sitting room, where Matt was helping his sons to dress.

She stepped to the door and looked out with vague alarm. The vapor had blotted out the world. Nothing could be seen but the faint forms of one or two cabins and a clump of nearby trees, and she went back shivering and a little depressed. "I don't like to leave the peak on such a day," she said at last. "I think I'll stay till the sun comes out. I want to think of it as it has been—radiant and inspiring."

The cloud hung motionless for hours, impenetrable, yet resisting. A hush was in the air as though some disaster, concealed as yet, was about to be discovered. About 10 o'clock as she stood on the steps wondering whether to cross to the bungalow or not Raymond burst from the obscurity.

"What a beautiful day!" he called.

"There's no gift of earth or sky, which your rich stores withhold, it is the breath of life to me. Your famous Rocky Mountain Tea Lion Drug Co."

Continued Next Week

The town pump in the west park is a popular institution these days.



"Dlop it!" he curtly commanded. "Dlop it!"