

HESPER

...BY...

HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER XXIII CONTINUED

"If you feel that way, then the simplest and quickest route is over the old stage road. With a good span of horses and a light cart we can drive to the mine in half an hour."

"Then let us go!" she cried, rising. "I will order a carriage at once and call for you in half an hour."

"I will be ready," he alertly replied. By means of the telephone Ann ordered the liverman to harness his best span of horses to a mountain buckboard. "No, I do not need a driver," she sharply answered to his query. "Get them here quick!"

Before she left the receiver Barnett came rushing into the room. "What's all this? Jeannette tells me you're going back to Skytown today."

"In twenty minutes I shall be on the road."

"Alone?"

"No, Dr. Braide is going with me."

"Impossible! You mustn't do it! Our attack is to be made tonight. The whole hill will be a battleground to-morrow."

"I can't help that, Don. I must go to my brother. He needs me all the more. Think of that poor boy lying there burning with fever and a battle going on! Put off your attack. It's all foolish, wicked, anyhow. What good will it do? You will only kill men or get killed yourself."

Dr. Braide was waiting as Ann drew up to his door. He carried a big bear-skin robe over his arm and held a medicine case in his hand. "Have you plenty of wraps? It's cold up there, they say. Let me arrange this robe around your feet. Shall I drive?"

"No, thank you. I will drive."

The horses were marvelous. They pushed up the steep, winding road with steady stride, their heads swinging. Not till they entered the canyon did they lag into a walk. The clouds hung low, in great gray masses, covering even the secondary peaks. Patches of snow began to appear at the roadside. It was a bleak, inhospitable and silent world.

"There is something ominous in this stillness," Ann said at last. "Where do you suppose we will meet Munro's men?"

"Anywhere after we leave the half-way house, according to report."

"You know this man Munro?"

"I've met him."

"Is he as terrible as people think him?"

"He seemed very boyish to me and not at all terrible."

The morning papers stated that he had assumed absolute control up there, and that his men were drilled in true military fashion.

"So much the better for us," answered Ann, "for he will see that we are protected."

At about 11 o'clock they reached the wide mountain meadow out of which the Bear creek fell. The clouds hung just above their heads, a broad, seamless gray roof.

At the halfway house they found a stage load of people and several freighters, and every man's mouth was agape. The tavern was a survival of the days when railroads were of the far-away future—a long, low log structure with a roof of dirt out of which dead weeds flaunted. The front room, which swarmed with men in rough clothing, seemed to be a country store and post-office as well as an eating house. A small, active old woman met Ann with toothless grin. "Step right this way and get out of the mudrugs."

Ann followed her into a minute bedroom which opened off the dining room. The old woman began to chatter. "Put off your things here. My, but them's fine furs! Did ye drive up from the Springs? Are you going on to the camp?"

"Yes."

"Waal, you'll find it lively up there! As near as I can learn they mean biz!" she whispered. "Some of Jack Munro's men are in there now eatin'. They keep a mighty sharp watch on you comes in these days. Soon's you're ready I'll put you and your man down at my end of the table and I'll look after ye."

"To Skytown."

"Goin' to treat somebody?" asked the old woman, who was hovering near. Ann interposed. "Yes, he is going up to treat my brother Louis, who is lying ill at Mr. Raymond's cabin."

The stranger glowed again. "Didn't see nothin' of the sheriff's army on the way, did ye?" Here he winked at Braide.

The doctor smiled. "Not a thing. I don't think they've left the valley yet."

"I'd advise 'em not to. I'm going over to the camp myself, and if you don't mind I'll just nickerly jog along a rod or two ahead of you—to show you the road."

As he rose to go the stranger said: "If so be it you folks have any influence with Rob Raymond, preach him into joining the movement. I'll be a mighty sight safer for him and a big help to the miners."

After the miner left the room Braide said: "We're in the enemy's camp. He was plainly warning us, and his going along is in the nature of an armed guard."

"His escort may be of use to us," replied Ann. "Who was that man?" she asked of the old woman, who fairly whispered her answer.

"That's old Steve Adams. He's boss of this squad. All six of them men are Munro's pickets."

As Ann and the doctor rolled on the clouds began to lift, rolling slowly, ponderously, reluctantly upward from the timbered slopes.

Their guide rode rapidly, signaling the doctor now and then to keep pace with him, and after nearly an hour of fairly level ground the road entered another canyon and crawled upward along a prodigious wall, which beat back the clashing roar of a small but very swift stream of water.

It must have been about 5 o'clock when they rounded the great base of the Black Cone at the head of the canyon and looked away across the big camp and far out upon the valley to the west.

Adams, their guide, was a considerable distance in advance when a couple of horsemen encountered them. After a moment's conference one turned back, and the other came on swiftly.

Ann's heart glowed with the hope that it might be Raymond with a message from the sick one, but it proved to be Munro. He came up swiftly and, setting his horse upon his haunches, leaped cavalierly to the ground.

"Good evening, lady," he called as he approached the wagon. "Have you journeyed far?"

"How is Louis?" asked Ann quickly, with instant revolt of his assurance. He felt the impersonal rebuke of her manner and replied simply: "He is better this afternoon, so I hear. I better not had time to call. It is a pleasure to see you again." He fixed his eyes on her companion. "I don't think I know you," he said, with a challenging inflection in his voice.

"I am Dr. Braide of Valley Springs."

Ann explained. "Dr. Braide comes to attend my brother."

Munro's face lost its reckless smile, and he looked worn and pale. "Doctor, I'm glad to meet you."

"We must hurry on," interrupted Ann, warmly impatient of Munro's glances.

Braide chirped to his horses and Munro swung to his seat and followed after. At the foot of the hill he called: "Keep that winding road. It will bring you to the top near Kelly's. I'll meet you there."

The peak was more than quiet—it was silent. It was as if a palsy had fallen upon every abled-bodied workman, causing a swift devouring decay to set in.

"What a change!" exclaimed Braide. "I was here just before this trouble broke and these hills teemed with men!"

"There is one smoking chimney. It must be the Raymond & Kelly mine."

Ann pointed away up the hill.

"How do they keep going?"

"The strikers fear them, and, besides, Munro and Raymond are old acquaintances. I think he protects them."

Ann went to her for an instant, then put her aside and knelt beside the bed. Her heart grew icy cold with the horror and the pity of seeing that blithe, boyish face set and livid, the brows grave with the gravity of battle. His eyes were closed, and, at the moment, he appeared to be dying. She caught his lax hand and kissed it passionately.

"Louis, speak to me! Speak to sister!"

Her low cry pierced Raymond's heart, and while he stood helpless, sick with sympathetic pain, the doctor took Ann gently by the arm. "Please leave me alone with Louis for a few minutes. Trust him to me."

Raymond turned comforter. "The doctor is right. His case is not decided yet. You must remember how strong and well he has been. He's not the pale slip he was when he came here. Please go over to the house and let Nora make some tea for you," he pleaded, and at last she yielded and, with a final look at the sick boy, went out with Mrs. Kelly.

With that half superstitious confidence which even the most intelligent feel when the doctor is present, Raymond soon followed. He was tired—tired! His long ride to the valley and a final look at the sick boy, went out with Mrs. Kelly.

At this moment Kelly opened the door. "Is it you, Ann?" He stepped aside. "Go in, girl, ye're supper's waiting." Ann slipped in, glad to escape under the great arm which barred Munro's passage. "You stay outside," Kelly said to the young desperado, and his voice was dangerously calm. "I want a word with you. The blood of this night's work will be on your head, me lad. You can't excuse yourself by sayin' the committee demands it. You are the committee. Man, you're crazy!"

The young leader laughed. "They're the crazy ones, to come up against my men on this hill with a lot of old socks, one lingers and ex-politicians dead on their hoofs. But don't worry, there'll be no battle—the clatter of a tin can will scare 'em into bug house fits. Now, Matt, let me finish what I came to say. We've been good friends, and I want to keep friends. You're a fair man, but let me tell you, the boys are getting bitter against you independents in this fight. You have no business to stand out against the union."

Kelly lifted his big fist in a gesture of menace. "Listen to me, Jack Munro. I've been a working miner all me life, whilst you were at school; whilst you were playin' hooky and stealin' plums, and all the years you've been runnin' a roulette wheel I was pickin' at the rocks. If any man is fitted to advise 'tis Matt Kelly and not a play actor and celluloid bunko steerer like yerself. Go yer ways, Jack Munro, but lave me and mine alone. This ends it. Ye'll have no welcome from the Kellys' door after this night's work, and if ye put so much as the toe of ye're foot across me path I'll kill you for the reckless, murderin' devil that ye are!"

Munro reeled under this gusty blast, but recovered himself. "You'll be coming to me for help inside of twenty-four hours, and you'll get it. Good night."

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"How did you get here?" he asked. "I drove with Dr. Braide."

"I'm pretty sick. I'm glad you came, sis, and he put his hand feebly into hers. "Where's Rob?"

"He's sleeping. You must be quiet now or you'll wake him."

"He's been good to me."

"Sh, dearest," she pleaded. "Don't talk now. Go to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. I've slept enough. It makes my head ache worse."

In the end the boy ceased to groan and twist and at last slept, but Ann refused to go to bed. Her anxiety and the many questions pressing to be answered engaged her so deeply that she felt no need of sleep. Toward midnight Braide, in despair of inducing her to sleep, stretched himself in a low chair and fell into a doze.

It was exactly 2 o'clock when a single gunshot rang out sharply, like the voice of a sentinel questioning the silent night. As the girl listened tensely, three others, deeper throated, answered in quick succession. Then silence again intervened for a moment, only to be torn by a fusillade, a rattling of assault which brought Braide to his feet.

Ann hurried to Raymond, calling sharply. "Rob, they are shooting! Don't you hear them? Quick! Quick!"

Raymond rose to his feet dizzily and looked at her blankly, the mist of sleep thick in his brain. Other shots and cries followed, and though faint and far they cleared his vision. Catching a belt of cartridges from the wall and turning to Braide he sternly asked, "Can you shoot?"

Before Braide could answer another shrill chorus of yells, fierce as the outcry of wolves, arose, a vivid light filled the room, and a second later a dull concussion shook the earth beneath their feet. Ann shrank and cowered, but Raymond, menacingly quiet, remarked: "Well, our turn has come. They've blown up our shaft house."

"Oh, no!" cried Ann. "They wouldn't do that. They daren't do that."

"That's what they've done. He's bitterly assured her. Then a thought entered his mind which staggered him. "The men—the men were in the mine!" he shouted and rushed into the darkness.

Ann heard his blows upon the door.

"You shouldn't have listened. He is only a boy."

"It is no more than fair, lady, that one member of your household should be loyal to labor." His eyes burned into hers as he bent toward her. "What has changed you toward me?" he asked, with stern abruptness. "You give me nothing but 'marble brows' these days. What have I done that you shut your door in my face?"

"What you do is of no consequence to me except so far as my brother is concerned."

He was too keen not to perceive his advantage. "No woman can play with me and not get cinched at some part of the game."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You were amused with 'the wild man' for a time. You played me against Rob for the fun of it, and then pulled out with Peabody."

Ann recoiled before a certain savagery in his voice, and, with her hand on the latch of the door, answered very slowly: "You interested me, I admit. You're very amusing at this moment, but you have no reason, no right, to say that I gave you the slightest encouragement to take this attitude toward me. It is the blindest presumption on your part."

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The young leader laughed. "They're the crazy ones, to come up against my men on this hill with a lot of old socks, one lingers and ex-politicians dead on their hoofs. But don't worry, there'll be no battle—the clatter of a tin can will scare 'em into bug house fits. Now, Matt, let me finish what I came to say. We've been good friends, and I want to keep friends. You're a fair man, but let me tell you, the boys are getting bitter against you independents in this fight. You have no business to stand out against the union."

Kelly lifted his big fist in a gesture of menace. "Listen to me, Jack Munro. I've been a working miner all me life, whilst you were at school; whilst you were playin' hooky and stealin' plums, and all the years you've been runnin' a roulette wheel I was pickin' at the rocks. If any man is fitted to advise 'tis Matt Kelly and not a play actor and celluloid bunko steerer like yerself. Go yer ways, Jack Munro, but lave me and mine alone. This ends it. Ye'll have no welcome from the Kellys' door after this night's work, and if ye put so much as the toe of ye're foot across me path I'll kill you for the reckless, murderin' devil that ye are!"

Munro reeled under this gusty blast, but recovered himself. "You'll be coming to me for help inside of twenty-four hours, and you'll get it. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOUIS came to himself just before midnight and recognized Ann, and though his breath was laboring, and his face lined with suffering it was good to feel his familiar self reaching out to her from his house of pain.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "I drove with Dr. Braide."

"I'm pretty sick. I'm glad you came, sis, and he put his hand feebly into hers. "Where's Rob?"

"He's sleeping. You must be quiet now or you'll wake him."

"He's been good to me."

"Sh, dearest," she pleaded. "Don't talk now. Go to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. I've slept enough. It makes my head ache worse."

In the end the boy ceased to groan and twist and at last slept, but Ann refused to go to bed. Her anxiety and the many questions pressing to be answered engaged her so deeply that she felt no need of sleep. Toward midnight Braide, in despair of inducing her to sleep, stretched himself in a low chair and fell into a doze.