

HESPER

...BY...

HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER 3 CONTINUED

As Ann looked round the room in which the flies buzzed her eyes fell upon a little case of books in the corner. For lack of something better to do, she rose to inspect them. She was surprised to find them mainly essays, and wondered who of these men read Emerson and Burroughs. One of them was a book of verse. Raymond's name was on the fly leaf.

"How handsome the cook is!" was her inward exclamation as she returned to her seat. She was not one of those who sit in silence when they wish information, and, lifting her voice a little, she said:

"I understood Mr. Barnett to say that you had a woman to cook for you?" Raymond shifted a stove lid. "We did."

"Where is she?"

"Gone—a week ago."

"Isn't there any woman about the place?"

He peered into the coffee-pot. "No one but you."

Ann sat in silence for a moment. "I didn't understand, Mr. Barnett said."

Raymond straightened and looked at her soberly. "If Barnett paid a little more attention to his ranch and less to polo—I wrote him, more than a week ago, that Jones was pulling his freight." He returned to his cooking.

Ann composedly went on. "Was Jones the name of the foreman?"

"No, he was assistant; but he was married, and his wife was our dough-roller. He's gone to Skytown gold camp. The whole count is full of the fever."

Ann, with a note of sympathy in her voice, said: "I don't like to see a big, strong man cook. Do you get extra pay for it?"

"Not a cent. We all take turns at it, to tell the honest truth."

"I hope you're the best cook?"

"That wouldn't be saying much, lady. I cook in self-defense."

Ann opened her eyes at the significance of this phrase. "Then you don't do it as a business?"

"Not by a whole row of steers. Do you like prunes and rice?" he asked hastily.

Ann looked into the dish which he held out toward her and gravely replied: "I don't think I ever ate any. You don't mean they're cooked together?"

"That's what. It sure makes a filling combination," said he, dishing some out before her.

"I can well believe it," she replied, with a humorous intonation. "Let me taste it. Perhaps I'll like it." As she nibbled a little of the mess from the spoon she glanced up at him with a queer little smile that made the room whirl before his eyes. "It seems a nutritious mixture."

He recovered himself. "Oh, it's a heavy mess, all right. My cooking isn't fancy."

"I beg your pardon," Ann hastened to explain. "I didn't mean to criticize. I didn't intend to hurt your feelings. I'm sure it's a very tasty dish."

"Oh, I don't blame you; but, you see, we're not running a summer hotel exactly. Still, we'll make you as comfortable as we can while you stay."

"By which you mean to hint you hope I won't stay long?" She was frankly amused.

He became very sincerely grave. "I didn't say that, lady."

"But you meant it. I'm not obtuse. I know when I am out of place. I shall see tomorrow."

She was forcing his hand, as he well knew, but he remained gravely simple. "I'll be sorry if you grub or anything else should scare you out."

She changed the subject quickly. "I can see that Louis is to be perfectly happy down here. I am glad I came. I shall feel much more resigned to his being here now that I have met Mr. Raymond and you."

Raymond remained inexpressive. "Your brother is an enthusiast, I believe you said. He'll be more charitable than than you, for instance."

Ann didn't like his emphasis. "I don't wonder at your resentment. Our coming is an imposition, but if I had known—please be kind enough to admit that I didn't know how you were situated."

Raymond resumed his cowboy manner. "Now, lady, you let that go. I don't blame you a hair. You're here, and I'll see—I mean, the boss will see—we'll all see—that the boy is treated right, and I'll guarantee that he gets a fair share of what's going. I'm not apologizing, but I hope you won't take us on the wrong side. I hope you'll come often. You brighten up the place wonderfully."

Ann drew herself up. "I don't understand you, Mr. O."

"Call me Cook—Mr. Cook. Anything goes out here."

They were now squared before each other, he with a malicious smile lurking at the corner of his mouth, she with dark and puzzled brow.

"Of course, you cowboys are all strange to me—I mean your manners and customs—but my roommate at college told me a good deal about this life. She was from Colorado."

He betrayed new interest. "What was your college?"

Ann lifted her eyebrows in surprise.

"No. What made you think it was?"

Raymond began to retreat. "Oh, I don't know. You seemed about that style. I mean to say, you carry yourself like a Smith college girl that came down here once with Mrs. Barnett."

He caught up the water bucket. "Excuse me a minute. I'll run down to the spring and get some water." His going was equivalent to flight.

Ann smiled composedly as she sipped her coffee, which was very good indeed.

Louis burst in at the door. "Sis, you ought to see the corral out here. They have ninety head of horses! Think of that! And I'm to ride all I want to."

Baker, who appeared just behind him, put in a drawing word: "Peared like he wanted to ride four to once, like a circus man. Are you gettin' somethin' to eat, miss?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

Louis, throwing down his cup in imitation of Raymond, cried out, "I'm hungry!"

Ann turned to Baker. "Mr. Foreman, isn't there something mysterious about your cook? Part of the time he speaks like a man of the world and part of the time like a rancher. I think he's playing a part, and playing it badly."

"What makes you think so?" asked Louis. "They say he's a bully rider."

"They ain't none better, miss," replied Baker, who began to look a little uneasy.

Ann pursued her point. "I think he's one of those romantic cowboys who have seen better days—perhaps an English nobleman in disguise."

Baker was always ready when a chance to get even with Raymond offered itself. He puckered his plump face into a frown of deep concern. "I guess you're some right, miss, but he ain't no English lord, I don't think. We never inquire very close into a man's pedigree out here if he can ride a cayuse and flip a gun. But he's American, all right, and a good cook."

"Is Cook his real name?"

Baker became cautious. "Did he say his name was Cook? If he did, that goes. I'm not in the habit of disputing him."

"No, he didn't tell his name, but he intimated that I might call him Cook. Your name is Raymond, isn't it?"

Baker was again slow to answer. "Did he intimate that my name was Raymond?"

Ann after looking at him in silence remarked gravely, "Of course, you're both having fun with us because we're from the east, and I don't think it quite nice in you."

Baker began to look distressed. "Oh, see here, miss, you mustn't think—we're all wrong! Why, we're delighted—we see you!"

Ann turned to Louis. "Louis, you are living out one of Owen's stories this very minute. I want you to stay here until you can meet these people on their own ground." She faced Baker again. "Tell me more about this cook. He's a college man, and there's some hidden mystery, as the story books say. What brought him to this place? Is he a fugitive from justice?"

Baker took a seat and appeared to ponder. "Well, now, I don't like to say. You see, it ain't safe to tell tales on Cook. If you'll swear not to breathe a word—"

"Hold up your hands, Louis, and swear!" cried Ann. "Of course we won't tell."

Baker settled into his chair. "You mustn't blame him till you hear the full story, but he killed a feller back east, somewhere in Illinois."

Ann started melodramatically. "Really?"

Baker, pleased with his success, added, "Two of 'em, in fact."

Louis, wide-eyed with interest, "What did he do it for?"

Baker, glowing with pleasure in the work of his own imagination, cut loose from his moorings. "It was this way: He was courting a girl—the daughter of a rich farmer—and her family was hot because Rob was poor, and her dad put another fellow on to tell lies about Rob's drinkin' and all that, and Rob met up with this feller and just naturally piped him full of soft nose bullets. That led him to seek higher altitudes, as the newspapers say. Now, that's the plain truth of the whole business, as I heard it."

Louis pursued the inquiry. "Who was the other man he killed?"

"The deppity sherr. Had to do that to get away."

Ann looked about. "You say he reads these books?"

"When he has time. He dotes on 'em."

"Do you read them?"

"Great Scott, no! I'd go to sleep over such things. 'The Boy's Own' is about my size."

Ann's tone was reflective. "That's queer. Mr. Barnett said you were a great reader."

Baker paled, then got red. He had walked into a clever little trap. He was wriggled in his chair. "Oh, he says that? Well—I used to, but lately—"

Ann looked at him keenly and said calmly: "You also are an impostor. Your name isn't Raymond—you're not the foreman. You are all handlets and have stolen my cousin's ranch and are running it to suit yourselves. I believe

you killed poor Mr. Jones and his wife."

Louis sprang to his feet. "Ann, what do you mean?"

Baker threw up both hands. "Hold on! Don't shoot! I'll come down. I knew I couldn't keep the game going." He rose, and his manner changed.

"Now listen. I'll tell you the square truth. It was my turn to cook, and Raymond—that's our boss—when he heard you was comin', knowin', I couldn't cook your bran mash, says: 'Baker, you'll have to play boss while the company's here. I've got to toss up the bacon and prunes. Now that's the fact, lady.'"

Ann, with conviction, turned to Louis: "Now I believe he's telling the truth. What is your name?"

"John Edwin Baker—Jack, the boys call me. I never had any other name, I'm sorry to say, and I came here from Kansas. I never killed anything bigger'n a coyote. I'm just a plain cow puncher at twenty-six per month."

Raymond, reappearing at the door, put them all into guilty confusion. His eyes were too keen to be withstood, and Ann's lashes fell for a moment as he offered the dipper. "Like a cool drink, lady?"

She recovered herself instantly. "Thank you. If you will be so kind."

Raymond threw a glance at Baker that propelled him through the doorway as palpably as a kick, then turned to Louis. "How does the grub go, youngster?"

"Bully!" replied the boy as he took up a spoonful of rice. His eyes followed the little figure of the rancher with joy.

Ann cut in with a grave face, belied by something in her voice. "I didn't suppose a foreman would stoop to cook."

The young fellow frowned. "What's that?"

Ann went on. "I think it's nice of you, Mr. Raymond, to abase yourself to the rim of a kettle."

"Excuse me, lady, but"—He looked about for Baker.

Ann interposed. "That's twice you've called me 'lady.' No real cowboy ever does that, I'm told, so you must be an impostor."

Raymond's face flushed with anger. "See here! What has that fat jackass been saying to you about me?"

Ann, calmly smiling, made her charges specific. "You're not the cook. You're called Robert Raymond. You're the foreman and a graduate of Harvard university, like all superior cowboys, and you have gallantly volunteered to cook in order that we might eat. Now, isn't this true?"

Raymond was stunned for a moment, but as she went on his head lifted, and into his eyes leaped a spark of red light. "Wait till I sight that scoundrel. You'll have a fine chance to study a cowboy in action. What else did he say?"

"He told us all about your fight with your rival. It was very thrilling. It's like being a character in a novel oneself. I'm quite excited by the thought."

Raymond's eyes ceased to glow, a faint smile quivered at the corners of his lips as he bowed gracefully. "Miss Rupert, permit me to astonish you still more. My name, though alternative, is my own. I have never killed a man—he looked toward the door—"that incredible ass will be my first. I am not a graduate of Harvard, and I did not leave my native town between two days. Does this disappoint you?"

"Most deeply. Are there no mitigating circumstances?"

"None whatever. I am hopelessly commonplace. I'm not even a cowboy. I'm foreman of a hay ranch."

"You destroy our dreams. But these books are yours?"

Raymond's eyes wavered. "Well, yes—some of them, but I don't care to pose as the student rancher. The boys respect me now because I can ride a horse and pitch hay. I make it a point not to air my other accomplishments."

He was interrupted by a series of faint yells, and as they all listened the swift trample of horses' hoofs could be heard. Louis sprang up, all excitement, his eyes glowing.

"What is that—Indians?"

Raymond smiled at Ann. "No, only a bunch of cowboys passing." He stepped to the door to study their approach. "It's a mob of Williams' men. I don't know what they're doing here."

The rush and trample of hoofs swept nearer, and a group of five drab-colored horsemen drew up at the hitching pole with loud ooties, each man setting his pony on end with a wrench at the reins.

"Hello, Bob!" shouted the leader.

"Howdy, boys—howdy?" he replied coldly. It was plain he was not well pleased by their inopportune call.

"Got anything to eat?" asked one of them as he swaggered up.

"Sure thing. Tidy up and come in." Raymond, turning to Ann, said gently: "Perhaps you and the boy had better step into the other room. This gang is coming in."

"They're not dangerous?"

"No, but some of them are not fit to eat in the presence of a lady."

"Louis will want to see your guests."

"Very well," replied Raymond and turned to meet his visitors, who appeared fresh from a hasty toilet.

"Come right in, boys. What's the best word from over the ridge?"

The man who entered first was a big, rawboned, wide-mouthed, freckle-faced fellow, who gaped in amazement as he caught sight of Ann. "Hello! What's all this?" he asked, hunching the man next him.

The insolent vulgarity of his tone brought a flash of anger to Raymond's face. "Shut up!" he commanded in a low voice. Then added in explanation, "Some of Barnett's folks visiting the ranch." At the moment he hated them all with a sudden realization of their essential cheapness and their filthy manners.

As they took seats each man

at Ann with furtive, devouring eyes, and she thrilled under the scrutiny as she would have done beneath the glare of a wolf. She had a sudden sense of danger. "I am getting close to the elemental man," she thought, and by contrast Raymond assumed new interest. Though his clothing was almost as rough as theirs, his face and voice betrayed good blood and refinement. She wondered whether Wayne Peabody could stand between such a mob of ruffians and a woman. This man Raymond dominated them easily.

Louis sat as one entranced studying the groupings in the sunset light, which had begun to dim a little. To him these men were heroic. Their physical hardihood, their slouching grace, their ruffled hair, their tag ends of herchiefs and greasy belts and cuffs were all "bang up material." The avid glare under which Ann shivered was hidden from the eyes of the boy, but Raymond took note of every nuance, every wink that passed, and once or twice he fixed his eyes on the man they called Speckle in a look which stayed a coarse jest upon his lawless lips.

They talked of the great, new mining camp on the side of Moriayon, where they were all bound. "They're striking it rich in the grass roots, and we're going up to take a hand in it. Why, last week they made three strikes on Pine mountain within fifteen feet of the surface. They say the placer is turning out \$10 a day. So we're riding up to turn a rock on our own account. The cattle business is done for. Gold chasing is the game now."

"Say, Raymond," called out a little man down by the stove, "you'd better bustle out your gang and meet that fire. It's coming right over the ridge this way and is getting worse every minute."

Raymond's face betrayed keen interest. "I've been trying to locate that fire all day. It's over about Round Top, isn't it?"

"Oh, no. It's away this side. Looks like it's sure to take Williams' hay if he don't watch out, and yours too."

"Why didn't you ride over and see just where it was?" asked Raymond.

"Too busy," Speckle replied loudly, and the others laughed. "I'm after gold now. I'm sick of forkin' hay."

Raymond's voice grew sterner. "You didn't leave Williams short-handed to fight that fire?"

"No matter whether we did or not; we've got done. Our time was up; we've got our pay. He can fight his own fire; we're not responsible." They all laughed as though this were a good joke.

Raymond's next words were as cold and calm as they were unexpected. "You got up and got out of here, every man of you. I mean now." His anger broke out as they started. "I don't



He landed outside the door on all fours.

feed men who leave a rancher short-handed with a fire rampant down on him." He rose and stood beside the door.

Speckle rose and stared in silence, coffee dripping from his jaws. "You want to go easy with me, Rob Raymond. You've done me dirt enough already."

Raymond's face was pallid with passion. "Get out."

They perceived his deadly earnestness and tramped out, but Speckle blustered: "I see you again. I get you for this. You crawl for this."

Raymond's hand dropped upon his shoulder, and he landed outside the door on all fours. With his hand on his revolver, the young foreman stepped out and watched them mount.

Ann could hear their threats as they rode away, and Louis, breathless, absorbed, his mouth open, stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER IV.

ANN had been absorbed in a study of the cowboys. In her own walk of life even the basest of men approached her clad in linen and broadcloth—sleek beasts—with civility; but here were males whose lean jaws clamped upon food with the eager haste of wolves, men primitive as Picts, with less of law than Zeus. They were not outlaws from society, for they had never known society. They were desperadoes for diversion.

Raymond's motive in thrusting them out appeared more and more a deed to win applause. He hovered him, made him less able in every way, and when he spoke to her she withdrew into herself with a glance which chilled and depressed him.

"Of course his character is of no consequence to me," she thought, "except in so far as he is likely to influence Louis." The situation suddenly lost its spirit of comedy and took on a very serious cast. The plea of leaving a sensitive, poetic boy to the company and influence of men like these became questionable, even dangerous. Baker was a foolish and stupid person, and these rough riders troubled her; but Raymond, to whom the boy's eyes already turned with fervent admiration, was more corrupting still, for whatever weaknesses he might have would surely come to be active and vital forces in debasing others. The whole design, in the light of this encounter, assumed the face of folly.

The powerful young rancher, a mixture of barbarism and culture, engrossed her quite as a mountain lion might have done. His action could not be foretold, and she was amazed to find herself carried entirely outside herself, shaken and dismayed. As he set to work to put the table in order, silent and sullen as before, she watched him from her corner with intent gaze. "How deeply can I trust him?" she asked herself. "Don't admire him, and he certainly is a man of intelligence."

Louis, who had gone to see the sunset, called to her excitedly, and as she stepped outside the door she, too, caught her breath in wonder and admiration.

She turned to the dim purple range, crumpled into ridges and slashed with deep valleys. "They may be alluring to you, lad, but they scare me—a little. Well, perhaps you'll be able to go and see what they are like by and by, when you are stronger."

"Perhaps Rob will take me. I would not be afraid of anything with him."

He's a splendid type. Don't you think so?"

Ann smiled, but answered doubtfully. "He seems a fine, resolute fellow." His sisterly anxiety reappeared. "But I don't like to leave you here, Bessie. These men, the best of them, seem rough and reckless. I think you'd better go back with me—really I do."

"Oh, no! I'm all right here, sis. Rob will look after me. It's just what I need."

"Maybe it is for the best, but I have a feeling that something is going to happen to you. I don't like to go back without you. I'll stay on a day or two longer anyhow. I want to find out more about conditions here. I have a queer feeling at my heart. I don't want to leave you. Let us go in."

A kerosene lamp stood among the dishes, and the driver of their team and two late coming horsemen and the Mexican boy were all eating together. Raymond was not to be seen, and Ann realized, with a pang of dismay, how wholly she was depending upon him. "Without him I shall be scared," she admitted to herself. The other men paid very little direct attention to her beyond a moment's awkward pause and a lowering of their voices. They continued to discuss the fire and their day's work. It was plain that they were of different temper from the crowd Raymond had thrown from the door, and yet they were not prepossessing.

The liverman, a short, dirty and very assertive man of small wit, was maintaining himself against one of the riders in an argument. "I punched cattle all over them hills," he was saying. "I know it's all another fake like that old Mount Horeb business in '70. It's nothin' but a cattle range—a lot of smooth hills."

"But they've found the gold. They can't be no question about it now. I've got a brother up there, and he writes me."

"They told the same kind of yarns about Horeb, and see how it turned out. They ain't an ounce o' gold in this whole Rampart range. It ain't the right kind of formation."

"Well, I'm gun' up there anyhow," said Baker. "As soon as Barnett can fill my place."

"So am I," said one of the other cowboys, a dark, smileless fellow nearly forty years of age.

"They're talking about Sky camp," whispered Louis, "the new mining town."

The talk among the men shifted again to a discussion of the fire. "I hope Bob won't order us out to fight it tonight. I'm tired as a dog," said one of the men.

"The way I put it up is this," bleated the liverman; "that fire started from somebody campin' over on Birch creek, and it's way beyond the ridge. It's got to cross that rocky wash before it can do any damage."

"Well, we'll know when Rob gets back," replied Baker, and Ann inferred from this that Raymond had ridden away to locate the fire, and heartily hoped he would not be gone long.

The men shovled back one by one and with sly, curious glances at the girl, sitting so cold and white and still against the wall, went out to smoke and discuss her with the driver. Baker, mindful of his duties, remained. "Don't be uneasy, miss. One of us will stay here anyhow."

Louis was looking over his sketching material, his mind busy with plans for work, when a shout outside announced Raymond's return. The lad rushed to the door. "Oh, Ann, come quick!" he called a moment later. "Here he comes! Oh, can't he ride?"

Ann reached the door just as Raymond dashed up and swung from his saddle. His voice was not loud, but it was stirring. "Boys, the fire is climbing the ridge, and we've got to fight it. Gather up your blankets and gunny sacks. We'll find Williams over there with some water barrels. Hustle now! I'll be along a little later. Tom, you'll charge till I come."

With groans and half-jocular curses the weary men, loyal to their duty, scattered to raise fresh ponies and saddle up. "I'll be along a little later," said Louis.

for fighting flame, while Raymond came to the door and brusquely said to Ann: "I'll leave Baker to look after you, Miss Rupert. I hope you want mind."

"Oh, certainly not," said Ann as firmly as she could.

"I'd like to go along!" cried Louis. "May I?"

"You're needed right here. It's most steady replied. 'We're likely to be out all night, and your sister needs you.'"

"Couldn't Baker go in your place?" asked Ann very quietly.

"Jack isn't very energetic. No, it's my duty."

"That's why I'd rather you stayed," Ann said. "If we should be attacked by Indians or anything, Mr. Baker might be asleep."

He laughed. "Indiana! There aren't any within 200 miles of here."

"But you said you'd take care of us, and Mr. Barnett has assigned me to your care."

He warmed beneath the allurement of her glances. "But how would it be for the boss to remain comfortably at home while a fire?"

"You're not the boss. You're only the cook."

His face lighted up. "True enough." After a moment's hesitation he added: "Very well, consider my protector and cook. Baker is in for it." And he went away filled with a delicious sense of having suddenly been honored above his desert.

Ann was accustomed to men who drew to her bidding, but this instant victory over the big rancher pleased her unaccountably, and she laughed softly, acknowledging a glow of confidence and relief in the promise of his presence.

Out by the corral the trampling and snorting of excited ponies could be heard mingled with the muttered ooties of the men as they hurriedly roped and saddled. The sky was darkening rapidly, and the pillar of smoke already gloved like a brazen tower. It came straight into the air for hundreds of feet, then spread away into a long, level cloud, showing that the wind had not yet begun to fan the flame.

At last the men were all mounted, and with a final command from the boss, spurred away into the gloom, complaining, weary, but faithful. Raymond felt a little foolish as he faced the livermen from Wallace.

"No, I'm not going—at least not until I get Barnett's people fixed for the night. You'll have to bunk in the shed, I reckon."

"That's all right. I'll curl down close to my team. I don't want to run any risks with a lot of toughs like that Williams gang exhortin' around. They had just liquor enough aboard to make 'em reckless. I'd advise you to look out for old Turkey Egg there. He has it in for you."

Raymond was unimpressed. "They're halfway to Wallace by this time, and besides, Speckle is a big bluff anyway. We're rid of him forever."

"Well, all is, when you meet him next you pull first," the little man replied very seriously.

Raymond walked slowly toward the house, filled with a guilty joy. Instead of a night of hard riding and laborious wet bag swinging he had given himself the pleasure of sitting in conversation with a beautiful and cultured girl. "I haven't earned this," he admitted. "I don't deserve it. It's too good to be true, but Barnett will approve. Anyhow, I'm going to enjoy it while I can."

Nevertheless, this sense of being a sneak and a cheat threw over him a gloomy and preoccupied air which