

HESPER

—BY—

HAMLIN GARLAND

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CHAPTER XI CONTINUED

The lad's face was suddenly illuminated. He threw out his small palm. "I'll do it!" he cried out, and his tone carried conviction.

Raymond continued: "You like me, and I like you. You can't live in the Springs, and your sister can't live here. So it seems that I must be your big brother and look after you. And, boy, you must mind what I say, or I'll take a birch to you."

This threat seemed not to appall the boy. "Can I work in the mine?" "No; you can't work in the mine, but I'll do something on top for you to do. You must take care of those lungs of yours for awhile. But come, let's see if we can't catch the stage."

"Oh, let me stay till tomorrow!" pleaded the boy. "I don't want to go today. It's too beautiful to miss."

Raymond reflected a moment. "Very well, but you'll want that stage ride. It's one of the finest roads in the mountains. You rattle down the canyon tomorrow, sure thing. Remember that!"

Together they went down toward the mine, where a group of men were building a log cabin. "Here is where we are to live, provided your sister consents."

Barnett came riding up the hill about sundown and immediately at sight of Louis began a jocose tirade. "You scamp! You young dandy! A nice interlude you've given us. Ann hadn't slept a wink for a week till she got your message yesterday. How long have you been here?"

Raymond hastened to say, "I induced him to wire as soon as he turned up."

"Had you been here all the time, you young rattlepate?"

Louis was not afraid of Barnett. "Yes; I was down there looking for Rob." He pointed toward the town of Bozle.

"Well, I'm to bring you home—instantly!"

Louis took shelter behind Raymond. "No, you don't. Tell him, Rob."

Raymond winked at Barnett. "He's going tomorrow on a promise to me. Don. I've made a bargain with him. He can tell you about it on the way. Moreover, he is going by stage. He's on honor."

When they were alone Barnett said: "The most unaccountable of all things is the human heart. That boy is crazy about you. By the way, how's the lung?"

"Almost as good as ever."

"Your constitution is a wonder. And the mining deal?"

"Very promising."

In the talk that followed Raymond learned for the first time of the proposed consolidation of the Red Star with two or three other heavy properties, and they fell into a discussion of the camp.

"If I had my way," said Barnett, "I'd have this meddling idiot Larned thrown out of the camp. What business has he here? He's a rank outsider anyway, and this union is a breeder of war."

Raymond raised a warning hand. "Careful, Don. It doesn't do for you to say such things up here. This union has come to stay, and you who employ labor will do well to treat it with a certain measure of respect."

"But you're an employer too."

Raymond laughed. "Oh, my little crowd don't count. They're all prospectors or cowboys, and, besides, I work right with them and am classed as a working miner. Your case is different."

Barnett went away calmly superior, but came back from a conference with Mackay, the superintendent of the Red Star, less haughty of manner, but distinctly more acrid of tone. "Mackay says this confounded union is growing rapidly and that practically every incoming miner joins at once. I told him to nip the thing in the bud, and he has begun to formulate a plan to do so."

"Wait a year," warned Raymond. "Wait till I pay for my mine."

That night as Louis sat before the fire in the center of the unfinished cabin his face shone with joy and the heart of the tall miner grew very tender toward him. It was good to have this gay young brother of his love to keep him company. A new sensation arose from having some one to plan for and to protect.

The dreaming lad, outstretched on a pile of blankets with his hands under his head and his small feet, clothed in moccasins, extended to the blaze, suddenly turned and said: "Rob, this is the kind of life for me. Wouldn't father have liked this? I'd be perfectly happy if I didn't have to pack off down the hill tomorrow. Why couldn't Ann come up here?"

"Maybe, by and by, when we get our cabin fixed up, we will ask your sister and Mrs. Barnett to come up and visit us," said Raymond.

Louis started up. "Oh, will you? If Ann were here I would never want to be back east again—never! I could live here always."

Spring, he said, indicating Louis. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, old man. Just lined you out today. I heard that a man named Raymond had taken a lease with Kelly, but I didn't know it was you till I saw you with Barnett today. Well, this is wonderful! Where you from? What have you been doing since we graduated?" There was something in his voice that eluded Louis. Raymond gave Munro a warning glance.

"Oh, a little of everything—cattle ranching, hunting, mining. I saw you last night in Hanley's saloon."

"Why didn't you speak up?"

Raymond hesitated. "I didn't know whether you—"

"Oh, rats! I'm not one to dodge. What did getting fired amount to anyway? I was ready to leave."

Raymond repeated his warning sign. "Have you been back—home?"

Munro smiled broadly. "You bet! I went back and swelled around in high feathers—told my side of the story—understand? I didn't let the institution get the drop on me. But, see here, come up to the saloon; I want to talk things over with you. The boys are bound to make me take a hand in this union."

"Can't do it now, Jack. But come down again. Louis is going back tomorrow, and I'll be alone for a day or two, and then we can talk freely."

"All right. There are a whole lot of things I want to turn over. By the Lord, this is wonderful—our meeting up here!" He was reluctant to go. "You bring up the old days. Well, so long."

When Raymond returned to his seat his face was grave and his eyes deep reflective.

Louis was much interested in the stranger. "Who was that, Rob?"

"A chap I used to know."

Next morning after breakfast Raymond hurried Louis off down the canyon to the stage and in his letter to Ann repeated his pledge to look carefully after the boy's health and to keep him out of mischief.

Louis, arrived at the Springs fairly hysterical with joy over his wonderful day's ride and set about to describe Skytown.

His absence had been a revelation of his value to Ann. She had not realized up to that moment how deeply his care was woven into her daily life. It was jealousy of Raymond's power—an acrid juice—which had turned her pity for him, while wounded and helpless, into resentment, and now that he was well and triumphantly drawing the boy to his side her heart was bitter with hatred, but she gave her consent to Louis' return because she dared not do otherwise, and in a letter to Raymond she said:

I resign Louis into your hands, because his happiness is more than my own and because he no longer regards my wishes. I have heard much of the gambling and drinking of mining camps, I beg of you to guard him. He is so fine and sweet now, and gentleness is so easy.

Upon reading this letter the camp suddenly became a dark and dangerous place to the young miner. He found it harder to make excuse for profanity and foul jests of the miners, and he went less and less among them and spent more of his time with the lad watching him draw or listening to him while he read.

Their cabin became the center of the finer spirits of the camp. Dolan and one or two of his friends often came in of an evening to smoke a pipe and play a friendly game of cards. "A visit to the bungalow always pays," said one young fellow whose weakness was drink. "They send a fellow away feeling respectable."

Mrs. Kelly supervised the house-keeping as well as she could, and the

place was at least warm and cheerful. Once a fortnight Louis rode down to town to spend Sunday with Ann, but Raymond steadily refused to join him. "I am a miner now," he said. "I've

taken myself out of the life." And Louis did not know when he carried these words to his sister that they conveyed a deeper meaning. Ann was aware that Raymond was holding aloof from her, and while she respected him for his consideration, she was, after all, a woman and resented his self mastery a little.

She was beginning to be bored to hopelessness by the narrow life at the Springs, under conditions which seemed to the outsider ideally beautiful. But Louis came down each time browner, more manly in bearing—almost comical in his assumption of Kelly's walk and Raymond's impassive face. He always had exciting tales to tell and seemed so entirely happy and so well that Ann had not the heart to ask him to return east with her. She even found herself listening with interest to his account of the doings of his heroes, for he had placed Matthew Kelly on the same pedestal with Robert.

Mrs. Barnett responded graciously to his invitation to come up and see the peak, but explained that the high altitude was destructive to her, and Ann shrank from meeting Raymond again, though she expressed to him in a letter a tepid sort of gratitude for his care of her brother.

CHAPTER XII.

ONE day Barnett telephoned to his wife that he would not take lunch at home. There was nothing unusual in the world of this announcement, but Jeanette's keen ear detected restrained excitement in his calm drawl.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing, my dear; nothing," he glibly responded.

"Don't Barnett, I know better. Tell me this instant!"

He was in for it. "Well, Mr. Mackay, our superintendent, was tarred and ridden on a rail by the miners this morning."

"Gracious heavens!"

"—and I'm getting off up the stage road to meet him."

"What did they do to him?"

"Oh, it's the same old business. The men didn't like some regulation of his and struck, and—but it's a long story; I won't go into it now. I'll get back in time for dinner, probably."

In an hour Millionaire row was humming with news of the outrage. Reports, confused, conflicting, flew along the wires east and west, and the afternoon papers were filled with dramatic details of the opening of a big strike in Skytown and the story of how the union leaders had mishandled Mackay, the superintendent of the Red Star Mining corporation.

All this would have interested Ann very little had not her brother been in the midst of the disorder. She immediately wired him to come down and get a reply from Raymond saying, "Louis is on the way—no danger," and the boy himself came riding into the yard at dusk.

Raymond's letter to Barnett took serious view of the situation:

I don't think Mackay the proper man to attempt to reorganize the working hours of this camp. Don't try to put him back, and don't make too much of this little affair. The whole camp is uneasy at this time. The union is getting very strong and likely to make it hot for independents like Kelly and myself.

"What is it all about?" asked Jeanette.

Don looked bored. "Oh, really now, don't ask me to go into the cause of a strike. A woman never understands such a situation. However, here is what Rob says:

Mackay posted his notices Saturday night, putting the new nine hour schedule into effect Monday morning. Sunday the camp boiled. The union put forth its forces, and of course at the morning hour a big crowd gathered to see Mackay face his men. He came riding up the hill, and the whole camp was uneasy at this time. The union is getting very strong and likely to make it hot for independents like Kelly and myself.

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Jack Munro came with their holsters tied down I threw up my hands. You are from the east, where things are different. About one-third of the men on the peak are old prospectors and free miners, and if they stay by the proposition you've got to take a sneak or put up the fight of the age."

"We stand pat," said Barnett, "and we shall insist on your arresting the men who assaulted Mr. Mackay."

The sheriff made an elaborate bow. "Right you are, Mr. Barnett, but I'll want a hundred deputies to do it with."

Moving with such secrecy as he could, the sheriff collected and swore in some ninety men, the boldest and hardest to be found in all the towns of the valley. They were not sedate and considerate citizens, but they were brave, or at least reckless, and without exception experienced wearers of guns. They professed themselves quite able and willing to bring down anybody in the hills. After being armed and provisioned they were to be sent round by way of a railroad which was building toward the camp from the south.

Barnett was hopeful of his words at home and made light of the probable opposition of the miners, but Louis, with a boy's ability to discern what was going on, soon acquired a pretty clear idea of the plan, and when Ann asked him not to return to the heights on Monday he was ominously calm, but asserted his right to go where he pleased.

"Rob wants me and needs me, and I'm going. You can put me in jail, but that is the only way. If there is going to be war, I am going to be in it, and I'm going to be on the side of the miners."

Ann wrote a swift and fervent note to Raymond:

I am trusting Louis to your care because he will not stay. You have won his heart from us, and we are powerless to prevent his return. Guard him, for the sake of his boyish sweetness, for my sake.

She wrote no further, for as her mind dwelt upon that camp of ruffian miners and their desire for battle a bitter resolution swept over her. "I will test his love for me." With cold intensity she announced her purpose. "If you insist on going back to that camp I shall go too."

"You must not go," said Louis. "It's no place for you."

"It is no place for you."

He asserted himself again. "I can take care of myself."

"Mr. Raymond has asked me to keep you here." She went to him and put her arm about his neck. "Stay with me, laddie. I am missing you these days."

In the end she seemed to prevail, but she took no pleasure in her victory, for she went about the house like a young eagle plighted. Nothing save the news of the camp interested him, and when the time came for the sheriff to start on his new raid he became greatly excited.

"There's going to be a battle," he said to Ann. "I'm going."

"No, no!" she pleaded.

He turned upon her with a resentful stamp of his heel. "I can't stay here like a kid."

She changed her tone. "Very well. When shall we start?"

He looked at her steadily, and into his eyes came a softer gleam. "I've just thought," he began reflectively; "you can stay with Mrs. Kelly till we build a wing for you. She's a nice woman and lives in the cunningest little log cabin. That settles it! We will go right away, today!"

Ann was at a loss, but did not show it. "If you are determined to go, then there is no use in waiting. Let us start at once!"

While Mrs. Barnett suggested that to wear Don ordered a carriage to take Ann and himself to the train, and Louis saddled his horse for his return trip up the stage road. "I'll beat you up," he shouted to Ann and galloped away with shining face.

The railway which ran up Bear canyon was still building and had not yet reached the divide, so that a stage ride of some twenty miles connected the town of Grand View with Sky camp. Ann and Barnett were noticeable persons in the car, which was filled with roughly clad workmen of all kinds. Ann was conscious of their admiration for her, and it deeply annoyed her. Two or three of the better dressed men, who were on speaking acquaintance with Barnett, came up to ask him what he thought of the strike.

"I didn't know it was a strike," said he, ignoring their evident desire to be introduced to Ann.

"Oh, it's a strike all right. Your man Mackay wasn't much hurt, was he?"

"Not badly."

"He was a little too previous. I hope the sheriff won't try to do anything more about it. The boys up at Sky are a little sharp set about that business. Ain't you up there yourself, are ye?"

"Yes; I've always been on good terms with my men. I think I can help to arrange some sort of a compromise."

The two miners looked at each other. At length the older of them said in a tone that meant a good deal to ears accustomed to western intonations: "Well, I reckon the whole thing has been exaggerated. My claim is just below Bozle, and so, of course, I don't know much more about Sky than you do. Still I wouldn't advise your going in at this time."

At Grand View a couple of stages met them, and as A. O. waited on the platform for Don to secure a carriage he observed that on the seat of each of the coaches two guards sat, negligently nursing rifles which glittered in the sunlight. Soon the whips began to crack, and the coaches rolled away one by one, leaving Barnett to follow in a road wagon, which he had hired for their own special use.

All glory of ermine and saffron. The air was keen and crisp, the sky cloudless, and the road, except for an occasional mudhole, was very good. Barnett remarked, "We ought to pull into Bozle before dark on these roads."

Night came abruptly. A thin gray scum rose swiftly on the western sky and suddenly grayed the brightness of the sun. The world grew instantly stern and cold. The road, after climbing a ridge, descended into a gorge with firs on either side, and when they came out upon the flat meadow to the northwest of Mogalyon only the lights of Skytown could be seen.

At the moment that Don was pointing out the lights two horsemen appeared in front and in the middle of the road.

"Halt!" cried a clear voice.

The driver pulled his tired horses to a stand so energetically that his hands rose above his head.

"Is Donnelly Barnett with you?" asked one of the men as he rode nearer.

"I'm Barnett. What do you want of me?" asked Don coolly.

"Not a thing," answered the horseman. "That's just it. We have no use for you, and I've been watching to meet you and say that the boys want you to continue your quiet, uneventful life at the Springs."

"Who are you?"

"We're a couple of Skytown vedettes. Who is the lady?"

"That doesn't concern you. Go on, driver."

The driver took up the reins, but the voice of the vedette grew sterner. "Stay where you are!" Then, turning to Barnett: "I'm your best friend, Donnelly. The boys understand that you are backing Mackay in his plans, and it isn't safe for you to enter the camp. I advise you to turn around right here and go back."

Ann spoke up: "Please let us go on. Mr. Barnett is taking me in to meet my brother, and I am cold and hungry."

There was something thrilling in the calm, clear sweetness of her voice, and the first of the vedettes, pressing nearer, leaned from his saddle to ask:

"Who is your brother, lady?"

"His name is Louis Rupert. He is only a boy, and I am going in to care for him."

"Rob Raymond's kid. I know him," replied the vedette. "But I thought he was visiting you in the Springs."

"He was, but he went back to the camp today, and I am very anxious about him."

"He's all right, lady, so long as Rob Raymond has him in hand. You are welcome, but Barnett is on the outside and must stay there."

"I decline to acknowledge your authority," responded Barnett, now thoroughly angry.

The horseman laughed softly, irritably. "Manners don't go with us at the present time. I must ask you to camp right here or go back to Grand View till I can communicate with the president of the union. If you are here to talk compromise the men will be glad to meet you, but my judgment is that you better retire to Grand View. I will see that this lady gets to her brother."

Ann was not a timid girl, but the thought of riding away into the blackness of the night with these sinister guards made her flesh chill and her nerves creep. "Don't leave me, Don," she whispered.

Barnett stormed at the horsemen. "It is impossible! If I am forced to go back she must go with me. What right have you to interfere in our plans?"

The answer came quickly, coldly, every word telling. "I'll tell you. The boys have learned that you have been chiefly instrumental in pushing the sheriff into another raid, and if trouble comes they'll kill you. It isn't safe for you to be on the hill tomorrow. Now you needn't be afraid to trust the lady to me." The vedette removed his hat. "I am not a man to be feared by women."

Ann again spoke. "I can't consent to your going into danger for me, Don. Turn back, and I will go on."

"It is madness!" he said in a low voice. "These men are not fit escorts for you. We will both go back and wait—until morning."

Ann's teeth were chattering with cold. "I dread that long drive. We must be almost at our destination."

The two horsemen conferred together, and at last one of them returned to say: "Driver, you may come on until you reach the first cabin at the foot of the hill. There the lady will get out, and you will drive Mr. Barnett back before daylight tomorrow morning."

As they drew up before the shanty door the leader of the vedettes rode forward and said gently: "Lady, the road from here to the summit is lined with cabins, and no horse can possibly come to you while I have you in charge. Or, if you like, you can stay here till morning; but I would advise you to go on to Mrs. Kelly's. There is no cabin suited to your needs on this side of the peak."

"Yes."

"Well, I will put you on my saddle, and I will walk and lead the horse." The light from the doorway fell upon him as he approached her, and the sight of his boyish face reassured her.

As Barnett saw her rise to the saddle he burst out: "This is preposterous! You must not go up there. The boy isn't worth it. I'm going with you or fight!" He drew his revolver, but some one caught his hand from behind, and twisted the weapon out of his grasp.

"Go on, Jack. We'll take care of him," called the man in the cabin door.

As the light of the lamp was left behind and the darkness settled round

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her a convulsive terror seized upon the girl. The horse, stumbling over loose rocks in the road, which ran back and forth on the hillside like folds of braid, passed now and again under dark and silent pines.

Once, as her guard came back toward her, something rose in her throat, some elemental dread, and her breath rushed hoarsely through her lips. "If Robert only knew my need of him," she thought, "he would surely come to me."

The man's voice was gentle as he said: "You see, lady, the camp is in a terrible excitement. We heard today that the sheriff was coming with a posse, and the boys kind o' hold five or six o' those one lungers in the Springs responsible. They are particularly down on Barnett for putting Mackay up to that trick. But you'll be perfectly safe at Kelly's."

At length Ann's leader turned toward a dark, high point of rocks, the trail began to descend and a few minutes later they came to a warmly lighted cabin, on the door of which the guide resolutely knocked. The latch was immediately lifted, and a small, pale woman with a blur of yellow hair about her head appeared in the light.

"Mrs. Kelly, I've brought you a boarder," began the vedette.

Ann caught sight of a boy at the table and gave a cry of