

The Bolt of Lightning.

BY GRACE COOK.



CHUCK ready?"

The girl kneeling before the stove turned a flushed, unsmiling face over her shoulder, and regarded the speaker severely.

"There's some bread in that box on the table," she told him.

"Bread?" with a curious drop in his voice.

"I said bread," returned the girl tartly. "I speak English, and I think I speak loud enough for folks who are not deaf to hear me. Bread!"

"The last time, you gave us doughnuts. Your brother said you made 'em."

"Well, I didn't make any today." The girl rose to her feet with a single lithe movement, and turned toward him. Even in that critical moment, with her eyes blazing unjust and unreasoning anger upon him, the cow-puncher's heart throbbled acknowledgement of the tall, pliant, reed-like grace before him. "I'm not going to stand over a hot stove and cook horse-feed!"

"Bob's been telling you about my feeding that doughnut to Blue Lightning. I can't help it; Blue Lightning's the only friend I've got—sometimes. And he never goes back on me like—like some other folks!"

"So you want me to fry doughnuts for him? Well, Mr. Jim Bradway, it's lucky I found out in time what you'd expect of a woman!"

Jim looked disconsolately from the little ranch-house to where Blue Lightning—innocent cause of this particular storm in his tempestuous love affair with his partner's pretty sister—stood patiently waiting.

"I can't go back on Blue Lightning, for anybody—not even for you, Lodora. He's helped me through more tight places than a girl like you even dreams of. His eyes dwelt lovingly on the pony's sleepy little bulk. He lacked words to say what he felt.

"There's been a plenty o' times in these 'leven years I've had Little Blue, when—well, when I don't know *what* I'd 'a' done without him. He got me a job—an' kep' it—an' earned both our livin's. He's sure a good horse; nothing I've got is too good for Blue Lightning," the big, helpless fellow concluded.

Lodora, herself born and bred on a ranch, knew perfectly what Jim was trying to express. She knew that Blue Lightning, the most notable cutting pony in San Miguel County, had more than once been his owner's sole stock in trade, had more than once saved that owner's life; and she would have despised Jim if he had failed in gratitude and affection toward his equine partner. But the perversity of the spoiled coquette was strong within her. "H'm!" she began. "I reckon if he's such a wonderful horse, he's too good for me. You share everything you have with Blue Lightning—but you wouldn't let me ride him, when I wanted to the other day!"

Jim looked at her dumbly; so sweet, with the little damp curls which her work over the stove had loosened around her forehead, her cheeks glowing pink, and the brightness of an unholy triumph in her already bright eyes.

"I don't know how it is, Lodora," he began dismally. "You treat me all right when I first come in, and just as I'm going away you pick a quarrel with me!"

Innocent Jim! He was not aware that the feminine mind understands perfectly that it is at these parting moments the greatest concessions are always made. And Lodora, deep in her heart, felt the final great concession approaching. She knew herself ready to capitulate, and instinctively laid about her for some extreme cruelty wherewith to signalize her surrender, to make it both costly and memorable.

Jim halted a moment; then he countered with sudden astuteness.

"You don't belong to me," he said. "When you do—when you do—" The

promise came hard; but the girl's laughing, challenging eyes were upon him.

"Will you give him to me for my saddle horse?" she broke in eagerly. Lodora saw the issue squarely ahead of her; and she told herself that she meant to make the conditions so difficult that the harmless, necessary quarrel might be maintained.

Jim set his gaze where Blue Lightning cropped the short, rich plains grass. Then he glanced irresolutely to where his, wicked adorable sweetheart laughed over his indecision.

"No," he said, doggedly, "I can't do it. Blue Lightning has his notions, just like a person. He'd be as apt as not to kill you, first time you tried to ride him!"

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