



BY
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CHAPTER XVI.

Maud Barrington is Merciless.

DANE overtook the waggon close by the birch bluff at Silverdale Grange. It was late then, but there were lights in the windows that blinked beyond the trees, and, when the waggon stopped, Barrington stood in the entrance with one or two of his hired men. Accidents are not infrequent on the prairie, where surgical assistance is not always available, and there was a shutter ready on the ground beside him, for the Colonel had seen the field hospital in operation.

"Unhook the tailboard," he said sharply. "Two of you pick up the shutter. Four more here. Now, arms about his shoulders, hips, and knees. Lift and lower—step off with right foot leading bearer, with your left in the rear!"

It was done in a few moments, and when the bearers passed into the big hall that rang with their shuffling steps, Maud Barrington shivered as she waited with her aunt in an inner room. That tramping was horribly suggestive, and she had seen but little of sickness and grievous wounds. Still, the fact scarcely accounted for the painful throbbing of her heart, and the dizziness that came upon her. Then the bearers came in, panting, with Barrington and Dane behind them, and the girl was grateful to her aunt, who laid a hand upon her arm when she saw the singed head, and blackened face that was smeared with a ruddier tint, upon the shutter.

"Lower!" said Colonel Barrington. "Lift, as I told you," and the huddled object was laid upon the bed. Then there was silence until the impassive voice rose again.

"We shall not want you, Maud. Dane, you and I will get these burnt things off him."

The girl went out, and while she stood, feeling curiously chilly in an adjoining room, Barrington bent over his patient.

"Well put together!" he said thoughtfully. "Most of his people were lighter in the frame. Well, we can only oil the burns, and get a cold compress about his head. All intact, so far as I can see, and I fancy he'd pull through a good deal more than has happened to him. I am obliged for your assistance."

THE men withdrew. When a rattle of wheels rose from the prairie, Maud Barrington waylaid her uncle in the hall. Her fingers were trembling, and, though her voice was steady, the man glanced at her curiously as she asked, "How is he?"

"One can scarcely form an opinion yet," he said slowly. "He is burned here and there, and his head is badly cut, but it is the concussion that troubles me. A frantic horse kicks tolerably hard, you know, but I shall be able to tell you more when the doctor comes to-morrow. In the meanwhile you had better rest, though you could look in and see if your aunt wants anything in an hour or two."

Maud Barrington passed an hour in horrible impatience, and then stole quietly into the sick-room. The windows were open wide, and the shaded lamp burned unsteadily as the cool night breeze flowed in. Its dim light just touched the man who lay motionless with a bandage round his head, and the drawn pallor of his face once more sent a shiver through the girl. Then Miss Barrington rose and lifted a warning hand.

"Quite unconscious still," she said softly. "I fancy he was knocked down by one of the horses and trampled on,

but your uncle has hopes of him. He has evidently led a healthy life."

The girl was a little less serene than usual then, and drew back into the shadow.

"Yes," she said. "We did not think so once."

Miss Barrington smiled curiously. "Are you very much astonished, Maud? Still, there is nothing you can do for me, and we shall want you to-morrow."

Realizing that there was no need for her, the girl went out, and when the door closed behind her the little white-haired lady bent down and gazed at her patient long and steadily. Then she shook her head, and moved back to the seat she had risen from, with perplexity in her face.

MEANWHILE Maud Barrington sat by the open window in her room, staring out into the night. There was a whispering in the birch bluff, and the murmuring of leagues of grasses rose from the prairie that stretched away beyond it. Still, though the wind fanned her throbbing forehead with a pleasant coolness, the nocturnal harmonies awoke no response in her. Sleep was out of the question, for her brain was in a whirl of vague sensations, through which fear came uppermost every now and then. Why anything which could befall this man who had come out of the obscurity and was he had told her, to go back into it again, should disturb her, Maud Barrington did not know; but there was no disguising the fact that she would feel his loss grievously, as others at Silverdale would do. Then with a little tremor she wondered whether they must lose him, and, rising, stood tensely still, listening for any sound from the sick-room.

There was nothing but the sighing of the grasses outside and the murmur of the birches in the bluff, until the doleful howl of a coyote stole faintly out of the night. Again the beast sent its cry out upon the wind, and the girl trembled as she listened. The unearthly wail seemed charged with augury, and every nerve in her thrilled.

Then she sank down into her chair again, and sat still, hoping, listening, fearing, and wondering when the day would come, until at last her eyes grew heavy, and it was with a start she roused herself when a rattle of wheels came up out of the prairie in the early morning. Then a spume-flecked team swept up to the house, a door swung open, there was a murmur of voices and a sound of feet that moved softly in the hall, after which for what seemed an interminable time, silence reigned again. At last, when the stealthy patter of feet recommenced, the girl slipped down the stairway and came upon Barrington. Still, she could not ask the question that was trembling on her lips.

"Is there anything I can do?" she said.

Barrington shook his head. "Not now! The doctor is here, and does not seem very anxious about him. The concussion is not apparently serious, and his other injuries will not trouble him much."

Maud Barrington said nothing and turned away, sensible of a great relief, while her aunt entering her room an hour later found her lying fast asleep but still dressed as she had last seen her. Then, being a discerning woman, she went out softly with a curious smile, and did not at any time mention what she had seen.

It was that evening, and Barrington had departed suddenly on business to

Winnipeg, when Dane rode up to the Grange. He asked for Miss Barrington and her niece, and when he heard that his comrade was recovering sensibility, sat down looking very grave.

"I have something to tell you, but Courthorne must not know until he is better, while I'm not sure that we need tell him then," he said. "In the meanwhile, I am also inclined to fancy it would be better kept from Colonel Barrington on his return. It is the first time anything of the kind has happened at Silverdale, and it would hurt him horribly, which decided us to come first to you."

"You must be more concise," said Miss Barrington quietly, and Dane trifled with the hat in his hand.

"It is," he said, "a most unpleasant thing, and is known to three men only, of whom I am one. We have also arranged that nobody else will chance upon what we have discovered. You see, Ferris is unfortunately connected with you, and his people have had trouble enough already."

"Ferris?" said Maud Barrington, with a sudden hardening of her face. "You surely don't mean—"

Dane nodded. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "I'm afraid I do. Now, if you will listen to me for a minute or two."

He told his story with a grim, convincing quietness, and the blood crept into the girl's cheeks as she followed his discoveries step by step. Glancing at her aunt, she saw that there was horror as well as belief in the gentle lady's face.

"Then," she said with cold incisiveness, "Ferris cannot stay here, and he shall be punished."

"No," said Dane. "We have no room for a lad of his disposition at Silverdale—but I'm very uncertain in regard to the rest. You see, it couldn't be done without attracting attention—and I have the honour of knowing his mother. You will remember how she lost another son. That is why I did not tell Colonel Barrington. He is a trifle—precipitate—occasionally."

MISS Barrington glanced at the man. "You have done wisely," she said. "Ethel Ferris has borne enough, and she has never been the same since the horrible night they brought Frank home, for she knew how he came by his death, though the coroner brought it in misadventure. I also fancy my brother would be implacable in a case like this, though how far I am warranted in keeping the facts from him I do not know."

Dane nodded gravely. "We leave that to you. You will, however, remember what happened once before. We cannot go through what we did then again."

Miss Barrington recalled the formal court-martial that had once been held in the hall of the Grange, when every man in the settlement had been summoned to attend, for there were offences in regard to which her brother was inflexible. When it was over and the disgraced man went forth an outcast, a full account of the proceedings had been forwarded to those at home who had hoped for much from him.

"No," she said. "For the sake of the woman who sent him here we must stop short of that."

Then Maud Barrington looked at them both. "There is one person you do not seem to consider at all, and that is the man who lies here in peril through Ferris's fault," she said. "Is there nothing due to him?"

Dane noticed the sternness in her eyes, and glanced as if for support towards Miss Barrington. "I fancy he would be



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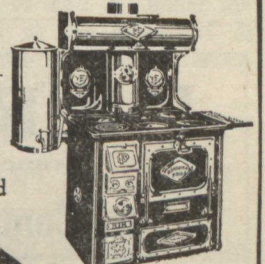
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