

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

"Don't go, sir," said the sergeant, eagerly stretching forth a hand. "It isn't as you think, sir. I have been kindly cared for. They're not all ruffians down there, and the men who assaulted me will be fully punished. I've been quite as well nursed and fed and brandied and bandaged as though I'd been carried right to hospital. Indeed, I don't need anything but rest. I'll be all right in a day."

"But I think Dr. Quin ought to see you and satisfy us you are not injured."

"Be satisfied, sir. The doctor has seen me."

"Why, but how?—where? He was here all day, and only went away at sunset. He joined me at Dunraven about nine o'clock, and hadn't returned when I came in. Did he find you and bring you back?"

Gwynne hesitated painfully again:

"The doctor saw me this evening,—down near where I was hurt; but I got back here without his help, sir Lieutenant," said the soldier, suddenly, "there are one or two things connected with this day's work that I cannot tell. Come what may, I must not speak of them even to the captain."

Perry was silent a moment. Then he kindly answered,—

"I do not think any one here will press you to tell what you consider it might be ungrateful or dishonorable in you to reveal. I will do what I can to see that your wishes are respected. And now, if you are sure I can do nothing for you, good-night sergeant." And the officer held out his hand.

"Good-night, sir," answered Gwynne. He hesitated one moment. It was the first time since he entered the service, nearly five years before, that an officer had offered him his hand. It was a new and strange sensation. It might not be "good discipline" to take advantage of it, but there were other reasons. Gwynne looked up in the frank blue eyes of his lieutenant and read something there that told a new story. Out came a hand as slender and shapely as that of the young officer, and the two were silently and firmly clasped.

"How can I question him?" said Perry to himself, as he walked slowly homeward. "Is there not something I am holding back?—something I cannot speak of? By Jupiter, can his be the same reason?"

IX.

At just what hour the post surgeon returned to Fort Rossiter that night no one seemed to know. He was present at sick call, and imperturbable as ever, on the following morning, and the few officers who were at headquarters after guard-mounting were able to affirm that the colonel had been courteous as usual in his greeting to the medical officer, and that nothing whatever had been said about his being away so late the previous evening. Captain Stryker came home soon after midnight, had a brief talk with his colonel, and went over to the stables to inquire into Gwynne's condition before he went to bed. Parke went into Perry's room after morning stables, and told him as he was yawning and stretching in bed, that the captain had had quite a long talk with Gwynne that morning, and that "something was up,"—he didn't know what. Later in the day Perry was sent for by Colonel Brainard, and found the commanding officer in consultation with Captain Stryker and two other troop-commanders. At their request he repeated the story of his adventure at Dunraven, beginning with his instructions to the men he left at the gate, and ending with old Maitland's swooning; and about an hour after he had finished he saw the adjutant with a small escort ride away down the valley, and rightly conjectured that the colonel had sent a letter to Dunraven, inquiring into the cause of the assaults on two members of his command.

Battalion drill kept him occupied all the morning; a garrison court convened at noon and sat until skirmish began at 3 p. m.; and so it happened that not until near parade did he find a moment's time to himself. He longed to see Mrs. Lawrence and question her as to the nature of the "Dunraven stories" she had mentioned; for what had been a matter of indifference to him then had suddenly become of vivid interest. There were ladies sitting on the Lawrences' gallery, he could plainly see, as the cavalry officers came tramping in from afternoon stables, but he could not hope to ask or hear anything about a matter so near his heart in the presence of so many sympathetic and interested listeners. He kept away towards his own gate, therefore, until he saw that there, leaning on the gate-post, and apparently awaiting him, stood Dr. Quin.

Perry would gladly have avoided the doctor. The antagonism he was beginning to feel for him was of a character that would hardly brook concealment. Cordial and joyous in manner as he was to almost every man, woman, and child he met, it was all the more noticeable that to the very few whom he held in dislike or distrust his bearing was cold and repellant in the last degree. Something told him the doctor was there to speak to him about their chance meeting at Dunraven. He did not want to speak to him at all, just now. Yet how could he hope to have these matters explained without a meeting and a talk? While the other officers strolled over and stopped, most of them, in front of the group of ladies at Lawrence's, Perry stalked straight across the parade and the boundary road, with his blue eyes fixed on the doctor's face.

The latter was studying him as he came, and doubtless read that expression of coldness and distrust; possibly he resented it. At all events, something prompted him to speak in a tone less cordial than he had ever employed towards Perry,—a youngster whom he thoroughly approved of, as he said before he had known him a week. Still leaning on the gate-post, and resting his head on his hand, the doctor began:

"Mr. Perry, I have been to see you twice to-day, but could not find you, and I wanted to speak with you on a matter of some importance."

"You could have found me on drill or at the court, if anything immediate was needed. I have been nowhere else, except to stables," said Perry, shortly.

"It was a personal matter—a somewhat embarrassing one,—and I thought best to see you alone."

"Well, here I am, Dr. Quin: drive ahead and let us have it."

"I wanted to ask you if, while you were at the ranch last night, you saw anything of a large signet-ring, with a crest and motto engraved on the stone."

"I did not,—unless you mean the one Mr. Maitland wore."

"The very one! You noticed that, did you?"

"I noticed he had something of the kind on his left hand when he came down."

"And it was nowhere to be found after you went away. You may remember you were chafing and slapping that hand; and I thought you might have accidentally removed it at that time."

"The reflection is not a pleasant one, Dr. Quin," said Perry, with an angry light in the blue eyes.

"Pardon me, Mr. Perry: I put it awkwardly, but I mean no reflection whatever. Miss Maitland mentioned your efforts to restore the old gentleman to consciousness, and together we searched the sofa and the floor after we had put him safely to bed and discovered the loss of the ring. It is one to which he attaches peculiar value, and its loss has preyed upon him. While I know very well you could not have the ring, I was asked to ascertain if you remembered seeing it, and so establish Mr. Maitland's belief that it was on his finger when he went to that room."

"It was; but I do not recollect its being on his hand after he was carried to the sofa. It would surely have attracted my attention while chafing it."

"The parlor, hall, and piazza have been swept and searched, I am told by this note," and the doctor indicated a little missive he held in his hand, whereat Perry's face did not brighten, "and with no success. I was asked to inquire of you, and if it has annoyed you, as I infer by your manner, pray let that be my apology. Then I am to say you saw it when Mr. Maitland entered the room, but not again?"

"Precisely; unless you choose to add to your correspondent that the next time I am associated with missing property at Dunraven I would prefer to be questioned direct, and not through a third party."

A quiet smile shone for an instant on the doctor's grave face:

"I fear that I have not accomplished my mission very diplomatically, Mr. Perry, and I am sorry to have vexed you. The colonel tells me, by the way, that I ought to say to you that the reason I was so long in reaching your party last night was that I was detained attending to another case,—one of our own men. Good-evening, sir." And, raising his forage-cap, the doctor walked slowly and with dignity away, leaving Perry too surprised to speak.

"The colonel told him to tell me!" was Perry's wondering soliloquy at last. "Then I suppose he must have told the chief some story to account for his being away." It was pretty evident from the young fellow's manner as he entered the house that the story was not one which struck him as being entitled to confidence or consideration.

On the table in his little sitting room lay a dainty note. It was not the first he had received under that superscription, and he had not been slow to open and read them. If anything, the cloud upon his forehead seemed to deepen at sight of it. He picked it up, looked impatiently at the address, hesitated a moment, tossed it back on his desk, and went into the inner room. He would not read it now; it was almost parade-time; he had to bathe and change his dress, for after parade he was to dine at the quarters of an infantry friend, and Captain and Mrs. Lawrence were to be of the party. Already it was noted that when any of the few infantry people at the post gave a little tea or dinner at which only eight or ten were gathered together, the Belknaps were not invited on the same evening with Mr. Perry, and *vice versa*. When Parke came in, whistling and singing and banging doors and making all manner of uncouth noise in the exuberance of his boyish spirits, he balked into Perry's domain, as was his wont, and began a rattling comment on the events of the day.

"By the way," he broke in, suddenly, "we can't both go to-morrow; and I suppose you want to."

"Go where?"

"Why, out with the hounds: to-morrow's the day, you know."

"Perry gave a whistle of perplexity. The colonel had promised the ladies that there should be a big run this very week. All the fleet hounds of the cavalry battalion were to be out, and all the officers who could be spared from the day's duties: a detachment was to go over into the valley of a stream some ten miles away, pitch tents in the shade, and there set luncheon for the entire party; horses were to be provided for the ladies who cared to go mounted, buggies and "buck-boards" were to convey the others, and it was to be a gala occasion. Antelope, coyote, or jack-rabbit,—any four-footed game the prairie afforded was to be "coursed" in due state and ceremony; the ladies "in at the death" were to be crowned and subsequently presented with trophies of the chase more sightly than the mask or brush *au naturel*. The affair had been gaily talked over that very evening of the colonel's dinner, but the events of the previous day and the perplexities of the one just closing had completely driven it all out of his head.

And yet he was engaged to ride with Mrs. Belknap,—the Amazon of Fort Rossiter! and for the first time in his life Ned Perry would have been glad of an excuse to get away from a gallop with an accomplished equestrienne.

"You don't mean to say you had forgotten it?" asked Parke in amaze.

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