

A Tenderfoot's Wooing

By CLIVE PHILLIPPS WOLLEY
(Author of "Gold, Gold in Cariboo," Etc.)

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Cont'd.)

"Thank you, Anstruther. Will you take his feet? Here, Rolt, strike a light. We've got to chance their shooting."

Rolt struck one, and in the short gleam of it the others saw Jim and Anstruther lift the body from the floor and put it upon the table where the red fire had been.

"That's the first to go," muttered Jim. "Always wanted the leg? and would have it. Shot through the head from behind. Some of the devils must have been behind when he lit his fire."

"I heard no shoot."

"Not likely to with the noise we were making. What's wrong with your neck, Anstruther? Cut it?"

"Just touched, I fancy. I got it when they hit him. Shall we take him into the house?"

"Better not, and better say nothing about it to them upstairs. We can't do any more for him now, Boss," and Jim drew a large worked table cover over the dead man's face and turned to see that the barricades were as strong as they could be made.

When he was at his post again he drew from his pocket that which the doctor had given him. It was a common playing-card and on it was written in pencil a London address. Beneath this the doctor had written in big letters which wandered uncertainly over the blank space: "So long, Jim. See you again some day."

"So he knew it was coming, did he?" mused Jim, "and he took it all back at the last, all his talk about science and annihilation of matter. Well, I guess the Handicapper knew the Doc's handicap, and will be the best judge of his running."

And then, as he looked out in the reddened gloom, whilst his eyes tried to pierce through the fog, his mind tried to peer into that Next Room where the doctor now was, and if he failed to place the doctor, he at least managed to place himself. He saw the triviality of the things which had so embittered him for the last few days, and even confessed to himself that when it came to fighting, his rival was not much of a muf after all. If that which had made the scratch on Anstruther's neck had been an inch or two to the left Jim Combe felt that his memory of the last few days would have been a load for him to carry all the rest of his life. But the first grey light of the morning brought Jim back from the Unknown to the present with a shock. As the mists rolled away the temporary absence of the Indians was explained. They had withdrawn to gather force for their real attack. Whatever answers to the fiery cross amongst the red men had been flying around the country in the last two days, and Jim Combe had never known until that moment how many Indians there were scattered through the timber of British Columbia.

The hog's back was dotted with their camp fires and tents; a line of them stretched across the big meadow; another body of them held the road to Sa'a Creek. The ranch was as regularly invested as if its foes had been European troops instead of mere redskins. With infinitely more cunning than even Combe had given them credit for, the Chilcotens had allowed the white men to return unmolested to their lair, only to find themselves in a trap from which there appeared to be no escape unless Toma or Fairclough had won through and could bring help.

Until this last morning Jim had felt certain that one or other would succeed in getting through; but now, seeing the methodical way in which the Indians had conducted the campaign, he not only doubted, he disbelieved it, and when he met Kitty a little later, her pretty face pale and troubled, a great wave of pity and remorse almost unmanned him.

In his anguish of mind he tried to speak to this little friend in the old way that had been so dear to both of them, but his tongue failed him, and she, not realizing that it was the old Jim, treated him with the coldness he had been at such trouble to teach her.

CHAPTER XXV.

You cannot hide death any more than you can escape it. There is a subtle influence which spreads from a devil man so that even the dumb beasts feel and acknowledge it, and this atmosphere of horror has spread through the ranch house in spite of the men's reticence.

The women knew, though they asked no questions. Their eyes cumbered men as they gathered for their morning meal; but if they guessed nothing.

Scarcely a word passed between them until the men gathered in the room after the meal, and for a while no one spoke. At the moment the besieged forest, everyone knew that which surrounded them was their destruction but a few hours.

"The men had better sleep in watches during the day, Jim. We shall want all hands on guard to-night; if Toma does not bring help before then. Horsely and his posse could hardly get through by daylight if they came."

Jim made no reply.

"Don't you think that they will get here to-day?"

In spite of his courage there was a shake in Rolt's voice which he could not hide. For himself he cared little; but the thought of the sweet woman who was all the world to him broke the strong man's nerve.

"It's no good fooling ourselves, Rolt, any longer. No. I don't think any of our messengers are alive to-day."

The younger Fairclough turned very white, but he pulled himself together, and laughed bravely.

"You don't know my brother, Combe. There's no fear that any pack of niggers will wipe him out."

"I hope not. He is a good man and I darsay that you are right, in which case we shall have help before nightfall, but we must not calculate upon that. We've calculated too much on such things already. We've got to do something for ourselves now, right away."

"That's talking," assented Al. "and there's only one thing we can do."

"What is that?"

"Shoot the women, and die fighting, or save them."

It was brutally said, but it had the advantage of bringing the issue plainly before every one.

"How can we save them?"

"There's only one way. The Indians are all here now. If a man could get through that ring he'd have a clear course to Sody. There's five horses in the kitchen."

"But we can't leave the place unguarded."

"No, of course not, it's got to be one at a time till we do get through, and if no one gets through—well, then, Boss, we'd most os well take a turn at praying."

For a moment there was silence, and then someone asked:

"Is it to be by day-light, or at night?"

"I guess it don't make no odds," replied Al. "We should have had a good show last night, but the fog has all gone. They won't do much attacking in broad daylight, our people shoot too straight, and the Injuns know it, but they'll do mighty little sleeping at night. I'd leave that to the man as goes. Kin I have that roan as Jim rode for a first shot, Boss?"

It was said so quietly, that no one ignorant of the circumstances, would have guessed that the rough and grizzled old rider was offering his life, but the color came to the Boss's eyes as he answered:

"The stakes are mine, Al. and I play them."

"Pardon, sir, I think you forget," said Anstruther, courteously, "the stakes are not all yours. Volunteers for a forlorn hopes should be unmarried men. The captain's duty is to stay by his ship to the last. Al and Combe have had their turn. You will let me go."

"Nonsense, boy, you couldn't sit a horse now."

"Nor couldn't find his way if he did get through. See here, Rolt. It's Al or me for this job, and Al's wounded, so it's me," and Combe turned to leave the room.

But Anstruther caught him by the arm.

"No, by heaven, you don't Combe! It is for Mr. Rolt to decide. You are not master here. What do you say, sir? Will you shame me? Is it not my right? Combe went for me. The whole trouble is my fault. I can never hold up my head again if you don't let me go."

There was such a genuine ring of entreaty in the young fellow's voice that Rolt, looking at him, wavered.

He understood that, to a man like Anstruther, there might be worse things than death.

"Couldn't we settle it by drawing lots? That's what they always do in books."

It was Fairclough who spoke, and in the impasse to which they had come the suggestion met with some favor.

"If I agree to Mr. Fairclough's suggestion," said Rolt, seeing that the feeling of the meeting was with the last speaker, "it will only be on the understanding that all draw. I will waive my right to go first if you will all agree to that. Otherwise I go."

For a few minutes Combe and Anstruther tried to argue with him, but though the easiest-going man in British Columbia as a rule, Rolt could be sufficiently resolute upon occasion.

"It ain't no use argufying," said Al, irritably. "Seems to me we had ought to know the Boss by now. He's that blank contrary that if every one else was keeping Christmas, he'd put in the day hauling gravel. May as well cut for the deal if he says so."

This settled it, and Rolt, turning to Anstruther, asked him to get a pack of cards from Mrs. Rolt.



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When Anstruther had gone to the cards, Rolt turned to Combe:

"Is it any good keeping this for the ladies? They might prevent going if the lot should fall to them. Nothing else will, and I don't believe that he could sit a horse for a year. His ribs can't be knit yet."

"Don't you worry about that, Boss. He ain't used to our riding, but he's a bit of good stuff harder nor you think. Let him and give him a fair show. It's to one against his getting the lot anyway. But you kin tell the ladies they aren't the sort to holler."

"Thank you, Al, old friend. I we might come in."

It was Mary Rolt herself who was having come in quietly while they were talking, with Kitty by her side whose young beauty was somewhat marred by the strain of the last days.

If any one had had time to think such things then, he might have been struck by the contrast between the two women. A face is after all the window which a soul looks through, so that whereas the pink white had fled from Kitty's cheek, the pretty curls lost their coquetry, the dimple became almost a hollow, and she herself a very wistful shadow of the spoiled darling of the ranch; in the other man the strain had only emphasized every brave line in her clear-cut face, made firmer the curve of her swollen lips, and given depth to her fearful eyes.

Rolt looked at her and in his eyes was the pride without which love is not perfect.

"You know what we are going to do, Mary, and you know that I am going with the rest?"

"Of course. You could do nothing else. I will cut first for you, Dick. Lowest deals, of course?"

She had cast the cards on the table and now stood facing the men, a slight figure, as calm to all outward seeming as if this were but the beginning of a game of bridge.

(To be continued.)

GERMAN PEOPLE SUFFER.

An Editor Blames the Newspapers for the Present Condition.

A significant light is thrown upon the present state of public opinion in Germany by the following publication published in the Tag, of Berlin, over the signature of Herr Julius Bichen, the editor of the Volkeszeitung, of Cologne:

"Even for the so-far victorious Central Powers, and above all for Germany, which carries the heaviest weight, the war is very hard.

"The battlefields are soaked with the blood of our youth, and more and more one feels the terrible void left in every domain of our life. It is not surprising that everywhere in Germany there is manifested a pessimistic opinion about our situation. The main responsibility for this state of spirit rests with the German press, which has always under-estimated the strength and courage of our enemies.

"Our German papers are responsible for the pessimism which increases every day in Germany, they also were responsible for the open-mouthed and foolish optimism not less dangerous, which preceded the present depression."

That statement suggests that they see things more plainly in Cologne than in Berlin.

The Headache Excuse.

"Does your wife suffer from headaches much?"

"Only when I want her to do some thing that she doesn't want to do."

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