

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

I couldn't explain then, and decided to go at once and explain afterwards. When I met you all of a sudden the next morning, the first impulse was to get away out of your sight, and I obeyed it simply because of the unpleasant experience I had been having with your fellow cavalymen. I did not want to have to answer questions. See? I was ashamed of it, but too late to turn back."

Perry nodded. "I understand it—now," he said.

"Well, what I want to ask is about Sergeant Gwynne. Did you meet him before you got back?"

"Yes,—a mile or so out from the post."

"You stopped and talked with him, didn't you?"

"Yes,—for several minutes."

Mrs. Cowan's needle-work had fallen in her lap. She was seated near the window, and had been busily sewing. Now she was looking up, eager and intent.

"You've known him a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes,—ever since he joined. He's one of the best sergeants I ever knew."

"You would hardly think him guilty of any dishonesty, would you?"

Mrs. Cowan was rising from her chair; the needle-work had fallen to the floor.

"Dishonesty! Not by a—good deal!" was the reply that bade fair to be even more impulsive, and was checked only in deference to the presence of a woman.

"Well, neither would I, from what I've seen of him; and yet Mr. Maitland's seal ring was found on him last night."

"My God! Of course he could explain it in some way?"

"He couldn't,—or wouldn't. He simply stood there, white as a sheet except where those bruises made him green and blue. He had denied the charge flatly when accused; and yet there it was in his chest. I never saw any man so taken aback as Captain Stryker: he said he would have sworn to his innocence."

"So would I!—so I do, by Jupiter! It's some foul plot!—it's—"

But he got no further. To his own amaze, to the utter bewilderment of Dr. Quin, Mrs. Cowan precipitated herself upon her patient, seized the hand that lay nearest her on the coverlet, and burst forth into half-articulate, sobbing, indignant words, mingled with kisses showered passionately on that astonished hand.

"Oh, bless him for the words! Oh, God bless you, Mr. Perry! . . . Oh, the fools! the lunatics! . . . A thief, indeed! . . . The idea of his being accused! . . . Oh, God! what would his mother in heaven say to this? . . . As though he had not borne far too much already! . . . It's his own—his own ring, I tell you! Who else should wear it? . . . Who dare take it from him now? . . . Oh, the infamy of it all!"

In her wild excitement, in her incoherent praise and lamentation and wrath and indignation, her voice, her sobs, rang through the room and out along the broad corridor. Even in their amaze the two men heard a hurried step approaching, a limping, halting, painful step, yet rapid and impulsive. Quin, absorbed in his contemplation of the excited woman, paid no attention: Perry's eager eyes were strained upon the door-way, where, the very next instant, with pallid features and startled mien, Gladys Maitland suddenly appeared and stood staring in upon the spectacle of Mrs. Cowan kissing and sobbing over Perry's hand. Already he had divined the truth and strove to warn the tear-blinded woman of her presence; but Mrs. Cowan's excitement had increased to the verge of hysteria: she was laughing and crying now by turns, blessing her soldier patient for his faith in the accused sergeant, and then breaking forth anew in indignant expletive, "Who are his accusers? Who dare say thief to him? . . . Not one is fit to look him in the face! 'Twas the very ring his mother gave him, . . . his own! his own!"

And then the doctor seized her and turned her so that she must see Gladys,—Gladys, wild-eyed, putting, staring, tottering forward from the door-way. One sharp cry from the woman's lips, one spring towards the reeling form, and she had caught the girl in her arms:

"Gladys, Gladys, my little pet! my own baby girl! Look up and thank God! I've tried to keep my promise and his secret until he released me. I've tried hard, but it's all useless: I can't, I can't. Oh, Gladys, sweet-heart, your mother's smiling down on us this day. Who do you think has come back to us, and strong and well and brave? Who but your own brother, your own Archie, Gladys?"

XVII.

"Yes, certainly very pretty,—now. It's such a pity that English-women grow coarse and stout and red faced so very soon after they are married." The speaker was Mrs. Belknap, and her soft voice was turned to a pitch of almost pathetic regret. They were talking of Miss Maitland, who had just been assisted to her saddle by the colonel, and now, followed by the faithful Griggs and escorted by Captain Stryker, was riding away homeward after a brief call at the post. Fort Rossiter, once so humdrum and placid and "stupid," as the ladies termed it, had been the vortex of sensations for a whole fortnight, and one excitement had trodden on the heels of another with such rapidity that people were growing weary.

Perhaps the happiest man in garrison was Captain Stryker: he had refused to believe in the guilt of Sergeant Gwynne when Captain Wayne

came to him to say that there were men in his troop who openly accused the sergeant of having that cherished seal-ring secreted in his chest. So confident was he that he had gone with the captain and Mr. Farnham to the stables and there told Gwynne of the charge against him. Gwynne flushed hotly, denied the truth of the story, but hesitated when asked if he would allow his chest to be searched. This was quickly noted by Wayne and Farnham, and the search was insisted upon. Gwynne then said there were a few items in that chest which he allowed no one to see; he pledged his soldier word that they were nothing but a paper or two, some little photographs, and a book. These he asked permission to remove first; then they might search. But Wayne sternly refused. The sergeant turned very white, set his lips, and hesitated still, until his own captain spoke; then he surrendered his key. Wayne and Farnham bent over the chest while the troop sergeant rapidly turned over the clothing, books, etc., with trembling hands. There was a little compartment at one side, in which were lying some small items,—a pocket-compass, a pencil-case, some keys, a lockot and a neck-chain, and, among these, something wrapped in tissue-paper. This was handed to Captain Wayne, who unrolled the paper, and—there was a massive seal-ring. A crest was cut in the stone, and, taking it to the light, Wayne was able to make out the motto,—"*Quod sursum volo videre.*" It was the ring Maitland had lost.

Stryker looked wonderingly at his sergeant, who stood there as though petrified with amaze and consternation, pale as death, and unable to say a word. Asked to explain the matter, he could only shake his head, and, after a while, hoarsely mutter, "I know nothing about it. I never placed it there."

"Do you mean to tell me you never saw it before?" asked Wayne, sternly. And Gwynne was silent.

"Is this the first time you ever saw it, I say?" repeated the captain angrily.

"No, sir: I have seen it before," was the answer.

"Then you must have known 'twas stolen, and you have connived at its concealment," was Wayne's triumphant conclusion; and on the report of his officers Colonel Brainard had no alternative but to order Gwynne's close arrest. Only Stryker's appeal and guarantee saved the sergeant from confinement in the guard-house.

The next sensation was the sight of Dr. Quin galloping back to the post like mad and bolting unceremoniously into the colonel's gate. Then Stryker was sent for, and the three officers held an excited conversation. Then the orderly went at a run over to the quarters, and in five minutes Sergeant Gwynne, erect as ever and dressed with scrupulous care, looking anything but like a guilty man, was seen crossing the parade towards his colonel's house. The men swarmed out on the porches as the tidings went from lip to lip, and some of the Irish troopers in Wayne's company were remarked as being oddly excited. Just what took place during that interview none could tell, but in ten minutes the news was flying around the garrison that Sergeant Gwynne was released from arrest, and in less than half an hour, to the wonderment of everybody, he was seen riding away towards Dr. Quin, and for two days more did not reappear at Rossiter.

But when the story flashed from house to house about the garrison that Sergeant Gwynne was not Sergeant Gwynne at all, but Mr. Archibald Wyndham Quin Maitland, late of Her Majesty's—th Lancers, and only surviving son of the invalid owner of Dunraven Ranch and other valuable properties, the amaze amounted to almost stupefaction. It was known that old Mr. Maitland was lying desperately weak and ill the day that Quin the doctor came riding back. All manner of stories were told regarding the affecting nature of the interview in which the long-lost son was restored to his overjoyed father, but, like most stories, they were purely the offspring of imagination, for at that interview only three were present: Gladys led her brother to the room and closed the door, while good Mrs. Cowan stood weeping for joy down the long corridor, and Dr. Quin blinked his eyes and fussed and fidgeted and strode around Perry's room with his hands in his pockets, exploding every now and then into sudden comment on the romantic nature of the situation and the idiocy of some people there at Rossiter. "Joy does not kill," he said: "Maitland would have been a dead man by the end of the week: it will give him a new lease of life."

And it did. Though the flame was feeble and flickering, it was fanned by a joy utterable. The boy whom the stricken father believed his stubborn pride and condemnation had driven to despair and suicide was restored to him in the prime of manly strength, all enderness, all forgiveness, and Maitland's whole heart went up in thanksgiving. He begged that Brainard and Stryker would come to him, that he might thank them for their faith in his son; he bade the doctor say to Perry that the moment he could be lifted from his bed he would come to clasp his hand and bless him for being a far better friend to his son than he had been a father.

The sergeant's return to the post was the signal for a general turnout on the part of the men, all of whom were curious to see how he would appear now that his identity was established. Of course his late assailants could not join in the crowd that thronged about him, but they listened with eagerness to everything that was told. "He was just the same as ever," said all accounts. He had never been intimate with any of them, but always friendly and kind. One thing went the rounds like lightning.

"You'll be getting your discharge now, sergeant," said Mrs. Reed, the noble wife of the leader of the band, "and taking up your residence at the ranch, I suppose. Of course the British minister can get it for you in a minute."

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. Reed," was the laughing answer. "I enlisted to serve Uncle Sam for five years, and he's been too good a friend to me to turn from. I shall serve out my time with the—th."

And the sergeant was true to his word. If old Maitland could have prevailed, an application for his son's discharge would have gone to Washing-