

were few farm houses along the road. But with a courage born of despair, Kate Marston lashed the little beast with the reins and swept on down the trail at a canter, not daring to look behind and yet knowing instinctively that the man was following. A little further down, she knew the old south-eastern trail, now seldom used, crossed this wider mountain path and if she could but reach it and hide among its leafy mazes she would be comparatively safe. Bending all her efforts to this end she continued to whip the pony along, the beating of her own heart sounding strangely in her ears and above its muffled throbbing—the dread pad-pad of the runner's feet in the rear.

PART III.

Danforth had ridden all day, passing several dead camp-fires on the trail and it was now past sunset again. The last fire had been yet smoldering. Although the rustlers must have had at least six hours' start in the beginning, Danforth knew that he was now almost upon them. He had travelled rapidly, for plainly all along the unused trail leading due north and then swerving to the west, he had descried the hoofmarks of cattle in the soft clay and along sand-stretches. Now these were lost on the grassy hill slopes but he knew that the rustlers after leaving the foot hills would drive their booty by the shortest possible route to their cache in the Ragged Range. It was his duty to find that cache.

As he looked about him now with eye and ear keenly alert to every sight and sound, he remembered with a curious throb of the heart that it was a full year, almost to the day, since he had last visited this region and as he thought of it his brow clouded. His final interview with Kate Marston, of Red Ridge school-house had been a painful one, and were it not now for his duty he would prefer to take a roundabout route to Cliffedge where he must telegraph his chief.

"You mounties never do anything—nowadays," she had flung at him. "It's all bright uniform and good times—flirting with every girl in the country and caring for none."

"Do you believe that?" he had asked. "Do you mean what you say?"

And with her newly-acquired pedagogue-dignity she had answered:

"Of course I mean it. If you chaps would only show that you could live up to that uniform—well we might consider you seriously!"

Then, at the Cliffedge Ranchers' Dance she had smiled bewitchingly upon a young rancher from the Peace River and he had heard afterward that the fellow made a weekly trip into the little mountain hamlet in all kinds of weather. All these things passed in review before Danforth now and his heart was very bitter.

Suddenly however he was startled by the sound of galloping hoofs. Plainly someone fleeing from sight—undoubtedly one of the band making off to warn the others that a policeman was prowling about in the vicinity. But the sound drew nearer and Danforth, ever wary, reined in behind a clump of scrub poplar and waited for the rider to pass. He had reached the junction of the two trails and could observe the four paths with little difficulty. The rider was coming down the northern slope. Becky neighed and Danforth hastily thrust the oat-bag under her nose. But she refused it and continued to whinny at intervals while the hoof-beats drew nearer. In less than five minutes Danforth saw a foam-flecked shaggy pony careening wildly down the mountain-side, a hatless, red-sweated girl on its back urging it along to greater speed, her hair wind-blown and her face as white as death. Danforth spurred Becky out upon the trail again and reached the girl's side so suddenly that she swayed and almost fell out of her saddle. At the same instant he caught the sound of her pursuer's feet in the distance. "Ride on a bit—I'll attend to them!" he called. Danforth had removed his scarlet coat early in the day, for policy's sake, and now rode in khaki shirt and hat but Kate Marston, in that first wild glance had recognized him and she halted, turned the pony and rode back to his side.

"It's only one man—but he has a gun—he's followed me nearly a mile!" she panted.

Danforth had no time to reply for the girl's pursuer now lunged along, cursing volubly. Glimpsing the tall officer who had dismounted, he whipped out his revolver and fired two shots at him, both of which went wide of their mark.

Danforth sprang forward with lightning-like speed and gripped the man firmly by both arms before he could fire a third shot. Then, working a neat trick known to all policemen, he pressed a knee under that of the other and flung him to the ground with a suddenness that must have astonished him. The pair struggled for five minutes and then Danforth with a knee upon the man's chest, called to the girl: "Throw me the rope out of the saddle-bag. Quick!"

The girl obeyed and Danforth proceeded to bind his adversary's ankles together with one hand, the latter uttering sulphuric language as he writhed about. Danforth in reaching for the steel-cuffs in his pocket had inadvertently released his captive's gun-hand and, seizing his chance, the bandit again pulled the trigger of his Colt. A third shot rang out. This time it pinged into the mounted policeman's right arm. He was scarcely conscious of the pain while he bound his prisoner fast and also gagged him. The latter precaution was most necessary, with this man's confederates lurking in the vicinity, within call probably.

Well, he had captured one of the desperate band at any rate; his long journey had not been in vain. And the girl—thank heaven he had saved her from a dreadful fate! That was the first and greatest cause for exultation.

And as Danforth rose unsteadily to his feet he looked for the first time closely at the prisoner. Down the left cheek ran a long white welt!

Miss Marston saw Danforth stagger and pass his uninjured arm across his eyes. She ran forward.

"You—your hurt!" she cried, tearing the dusty white handkerchief from about his throat and rolling up his right sleeve, which was saturated already with blood.

"Never mind me," answered the officer, "I want to see that you reach home first."

But he winced even as he spoke and sank upon a rock by the side of the trail. The girl formed a tourniquet of the handkerchief and stopped the blood flow, in absolute silence. It was now quite dark. Not a word was spoken by any one while Danforth assisted the girl into her saddle and climbed awkwardly into his own, first ascertaining that the prisoner had no knife upon his person. Then the policeman spoke painfully, between twinges of his wound:

"There is a farm-house near the cross-trail somewhere, is there not?"

"Yes, a half-mile further down," answered the girl.

"Then we'll get a couple of men to fetch that chap into Cliffedge. It won't do to remain away longer than to go the half-mile. He's a slippery eel."

"It isn't Alkali Sam!"

"I think it is," said Danforth, quietly.

"Then hurry. Let us gallop!"

It seemed an interminable length of road to Danforth after the farm-house had been left behind and two men had been despatched to the scene of the arrest. He suffered intensely, the girl showing her sympathy by a few encouraging words now and then, but oftenest remaining silent. Kate Marston was experiencing a hundred conflicting emotions—gratitude, pride, humility, relief, physical weariness and hunger, anxiety and something else, deeper and more overwhelming than all the others beside.

From time to time in the star-lit gloom she glanced at the officer. His face was pale and great drops of perspiration stood upon his brow where his black hair lay matted. His shirt was torn and blood-stained and there was a weary droop to his broad shoulders but with mouth firmly set and teeth gritted he was enduring agony as a soldier only can. At last the few faint lights of the little hamlet sprang out of the forward darkness and Kate Marston breathed:

"Thank God!"



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