

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

"To what circumstance do I owe the honor of this intrusion?"

"I regret you so consider it, Mr. Maitland,—as I believe you to be——" The old gentleman bowed with stately dignity. "One of our men, a sergeant, rode down this way quite early this morning and failed to return. His horse came back, bleeding, at sunset, and we feared some accident or trouble. Searching-parties are out all over the prairies, and the colonel ordered me to inquire here."

"Does your colonel take us for banditti here, and ascribe your desertions and accidents to our machinations?"

"Far from it, sir, but rather as a hospitable refuge to which the injured man had been conveyed," answered Perry, with a quiet smile, determined to thaw the *hauteur* of Dunraven's lord if courtesy of manner could effect it.

"He is utterly mistaken, then," answered the Englishman, "and I resent—I resent, sir, this forcing of my gates after the explicit understanding we had last year. As a soldier I presume you had to obey your orders; but I beg you to tell your colonel that this order was an affront to me personally, in view of what has passed between us."

"Nothing has passed between you, Mr. Maitland," answered Perry, "a little tardily now. We have reached Fort Rossiter only within the last fortnight, and know nothing whatever of your understanding with previous commanders. Permit me to ask you one question, and I will retire. Have you heard anything of our sergeant?"

"Nothing, sir. I would hardly be apt to hear, for my people here are enjoined to keep strictly to our limits, and all we ask of our neighbors is that they keep to theirs. I presume you have destroyed my fences, sir, in order to effect an entrance."

"Upon my word, Mr. Maitland, you make me rather regret that I did not; but I had the decency to respect what I had happened to hear of your wishes, and so left my horse and my men outside, and footed it a good half mile in the dark——"

"Ah! that sounds very like it!" replied Mr. Maitland, with writhing lips, for at this moment there came the dull thunder of rapidly-advancing hoof-beats, and before either man could speak again three troopers with a led horse—all four steeds panting from the half-mile race—reined up in front of the eastern portico in the full glare of the lights, and the sergeant's voice was heard hailing his lieutenant.

"My luck again!" groaned Perry. "I told them to come in half an hour if they didn't hear from me, and of course they came."

VII.

For a moment there was silence in the brightly-illuminated room. With flushed face and swollen veins and twitching, clutching hands, old Maitland stood there glaring at the young officer. Before Perry could speak again, however, and more fully explain the untoward circumstance, there came a rush of hurrying footsteps without, and the sound of excited voices. The next minute they heard an eager, angry challenge, and Perry recognized the voice of the overseer or manager whom he had met in the morning.

"What do you fellows want here?" was his brusque and loud inquiry as he sprang from the piazza and stood confronting the sergeant, who was quietly seated in the saddle, and the question was promptly echoed by three or four burly men who, in shirt-sleeves and various styles of undress, came tumbling in the wake of their leader and stood now a menacing group looking up at the silent troopers.

If there be one thing on earth that will stir an Irishman's soul to its inmost depths and kindle to instant flame the latent heat of his pugnacity, it is just such an inquiry in the readily recognized accent of the hated "Sasseuach." Perry recognized the danger in a flash, and, springing through the open casement, interposed between the hostile parties.

"Not a word, Sergeant Leary. Here, Mr. Manager, those men simply obeyed orders, and I am responsible for any mistake. No harm was intended——"

"Harm!" broke in one of the ranchmen, with a demonstratively loud laugh. "Harm be blowed! What harm could you do, I'd like to know? If the master'll only say the word, we'd break your heads in a minute."

"Quiet, now, Dick!" interposed the overseer; but the other hands growled approval, and Perry's eyes flashed with anger at the insult. What reply he might have made was checked by the sight of Sergeant Leary throwing himself from the saddle and tossing his reins to one of the men. He knew well enough what that meant, and sprang instantly in front of him.

"Back to your horse, sir! Back, instantly!" for the sergeant's face was fierce with rage. "Mount, I say!" added the lieutenant, as the sergeant still hesitated, and even the sense of discipline could not keep the troopers from a muttered word of encouragement. Slowly, wrathfully, reluctantly, the soldier obeyed, once turning furiously back as jeering taunts were hurled at him from among the ranchers, unrebuked by their manager. "Now move off with your men to the gate. Leave my horse, and wait for me there. Go!" added the young officer, sternly; and, with bitter mortification at heart and a curse stifled on his quivering lips, the Irishman turned his horse's head away and slowly walked him in the indicated direction.

"Now, Mr. Manager," said Perry, turning fiercely upon the younger Englishman, "I have done my best to restrain my men: do you look out for yours. You have allowed them to insult me and mine, and you may thank your lucky stars that discipline prevailed with my people, though you have nothing of the kind here."

"Your men have cut down our fences, by your order, I presume," said

the manager, coolly, "and it's lucky for them they got out of the way when they did. We have a right to protect our property and eject intruders, and——"

"I came here to inquire for a missing man,—a right even an Englishman cannot deny us on these prairies. We had excellent reason to believe him injured, and thought, not knowing you for the inhospitable gang 'hat you are, that he might have been carried in here for treatment: there *was* no other place. Your proprietor tells me he is not here. After what I've seen of your people, I have reason to be still more anxious about him. Scant mercy a single trooper would have had at their hands. Now I ask you: Do you know or have you heard of a cavalry soldier being seen around here during the day?"

Perry was standing holding his horse by the curb as he spoke, facing the parlor windows and confronting the angry group of ranchmen. Within, though nearer the window than he had left him, was the bent form of the owner of Dunraven, leaning on his cane and apparently impatiently striving to make himself heard as he came forward. Before the manager could answer, he was compelled to turn about and rebuke his men, two of whom were especially truculent and menacing. Finally he spoke:

"I have heard nothing, but I tell you frankly that if any of your men have been prowling around here it's more than probable some one has got hurt. Has there been any trouble to-day, men?" he asked.

"By God, there *will* be if this ranch isn't cleared in five minutes," was the only answer.

"Don't make an ass of yourself, Hoke," growled the manager. "They are going quick enough."

"I am going," said Perry, swinging lightly into saddle; "and mind you this, sir: I go with well-warranted suspicion that some of these bullies of yours have been responsible for the non-appearance of my stable-sergeant. If he is not found this night, you may confidently look for another visit. I say that to you also, Mr. Maitland; and you owe it to our forbearance that there has been no bloodshed here to-night."

Old Maitland's tremulous tones were heard but a second in reply when he was interrupted by a coarse voice from the crowd of ranchmen, by this time increased to nearly a dozen men. Some of them were gathering about Perry as he sat in the saddle, and an applauding echo followed the loud interruption,—

"Give the swell a lift, Tummy: 'twill teach him better manners."

Almost instantly Perry felt his right foot grasped and a powerful form was bending at the stirrup. He had heard of this trick before. Many a time has the London cad unhorsed the English trooper, taken unawares, by hurling him with sudden lift from below. But Perry was quick and active as a cat. Seat and saddle, too, were in his favor. He simply threw his weight on the left foot and his bridle-hand upon the pommel, let the right leg swing over the horse's back until released from the brawny hand, then back it came as he settled again in the saddle, his powerful thighs gripping like a vise; at the same instant, and before his assailant could duck to earth and slip out of the way, he had whirled out the heavy Colt's revolver and brought its butt with stunning crash down on the ranchman's defenceless head.

There was instant rush and commotion. In vain old Maitland feebly piped his protests from the veranda; in vain the overseer seized and held back one or two of the men and furiously called off the rest. Aided by the darkness which veiled them, the others made a simultaneous rush upon the young officer and sought to drag him from his plunging horse. Perry held his pistol high in air, threatening with the butt the nearest assailant, yet loath to use further force. He was still in the broad glare of the parlor lights,—a conspicuous mark; eager hands had grasped his bridle rein at the very bit, and he could not break away; and then missiles began to fly about his devoted head, and unless he opened fire he was helpless. While two men firmly held Nolan by the curb, half a dozen others were hurling from the ambush of darkness a scattering volley of wooden billets and chunks of coal. He could easily have shot down the men who held him. It was sore temptation, for already he had been struck and stung by unseen projectiles; but just as the manager sprang forward and with vigorous cuffs induced the men to loose their hold on the rein, there came three horsemen charging full tilt back into the crowd, scattering the assailants right and left; and, this time unrebuked, Sergeant Leary leaped from the saddle and with a rage of fierce delight pitched headlong into battle with the biggest ranchman in his way. And this was not all; for behind them at rapid trot came other troopers, and in a moment the open space was thronged with eager, wondering comrades,—full half of Stryker's company,—in whose overwhelming presence all thought of promiscuous combat seemed to leave the ranchmen. They slipped away in the darkness, leaving to their employers the embarrassment of accounting for their attack. Leary was still fuming with wrath and raging for further battle and shouting into the darkness fierce invective at the vanished head of his opponent. He turned on the overseer himself, and but for Perry's stern and sudden prohibition would have had a round with him, but was forced to content himself with the information conveyed to all within hearing that he'd "fight any tin min" the ranch contained if they'd only come out where the lieutenant couldn't stop him. The troopers were making eager inquiry as to the cause of all the trouble, and, fearing further difficulty, Perry promptly ordered the entire party to "fall in." Silence and discipline were restored in a moment, and as the platoon formed rank he inquired of a sergeant how they came to be there. The reply was that it had grown so dark on the prairie that further search seemed useless. Captain Stryker and most of the men were drawn off by signals from the Cheyennes up the valley towards the post, and these men, who had been beyond Dunraven on the northern prairie, were coming back along the Monee trail when they saw the lights and heard voices over at the lower shore. There they found Leary, who was excited about some-