



STRENGTH of character is unyielding resistance to whatever would disconcert us from without or unsettle us from within.—Charles Dickens.

Winning the Wilderness

(Continued from last week.)

HORSES are very human creatures, responding not only to the moods of their masters, but to the conditions that give these moods. The West was no kinder to the eastern-bred horse than to the eastern-bred man. All day Juno had plumed about the stable and pawed the hard earth floor in sheer nervousness. She leaped out of doors now at Virginia's call, as eager for comfort as a homesick child.

"We'll chase off and meet Asher, darling."

Even the soft voice the mare had heard all her days did not entirely soothe her. As Virginia mounted the wind flung shut the stable door with a bang. Juno leaped as from a gunshot, and dashed away up the river to the northwest. Her rider tried in vain to change her course and quiet her spirit. The mare only surged madly forward, as if bent on outrunning the tantalizing, grinding wind. With the sense of freedom, and with the boundlessness of the plains, some old instinct of the unbridled days of by-gone generations woke to life and power in her, and with the bit between her teeth, she swept away in unrestrained speed.

Virginia was a skilled horsewoman, and she had no fear for herself, so she held the reins and kept her place. "I can go wherever you can, you foolish Juno," she cried giving herself up to the exhilarating ride. "We'll stay together to the end of the race, and we will get it out of our systems once for all, and come back 'plains-broke.'"

Beyond a westward sweeping curve of the river's course the chase became a climb up a long slope that grew steeper and steeper, cutting off the view of the stream. Here Juno's speed slackened, then dropped into a steady canter, as she listened for a command to turn back.

"We'll go on to the edge of that bluff, lady, now we are here, and see what is across the river," Virginia said. "Then we will hurry home to Asher and prairie hay."

When they came at last over a rough shale outcrop to the highest headland, the river bed lay between its base and a barren waste of sand dunes, with broad grassy regions beyond them spreading southward. The view from the bluff's top was magnificent. Virginia held Juno to the place and looked in wonder at the vast southwest on this strange September afternoon. Across a reach of level land, miles wide, a prairie fire was sweeping in the majesty of mastery. The lurid flames leaped skyward, while roll on surging roll of black smoke-waves, with folds of gray ashes smothering between poured out along the horizon. Beyond the fire was the dark blue storm-cloud, banded across the front by the hail mark of coppery green.

Virginia sat enchanted by the grandeur of the scene. The veil had fallen from her head, and with white face and fascinated eyes, she watched the glowing fire, a graceful rider on a graceful black horse, on the crest of the lone headland outlined against the sky.

Suddenly the terror of it broke upon



The Finishing Touch.

her. She was miles from the cabin with its double fireguard. Asher had said such fires could leap rivers. Between her and safety were many level banks where the sandy stream bed was narrow, and many grassy stretches where there was no water at all.

Distance, storm wind, fire and hail, all seemed ready to close down upon her, making her senses reel. One human being, alone before the wrath of Nature! In all the years that followed, she never forgot that scene. For in that moment a whisper came from somewhere out of the void, "The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms," and she clasped her hands in a wordless prayer.

The wind that had been cruel all

day grew suddenly kind. A dead calm held the air in a hot stillness. Then with a whip and a whirl, it swung its course about and began to pour cool and strong out of the northwest.

"The wind is changing," Virginia cried, as she felt its chill and saw the flame and smoke tower upward and bend back from the way. "It is blowing the fire to the east, to the south-east. But, will it catch Asher? Oh, you good Wind, blow south! blow south!" she pleaded, as she dashed down the long slope for the homeward race.

When Asher reached his claim, he looked in vain for Virginia's face as he passed the cabin window. He hurried the ponies into the corral, and the wazon under the lean-to beside the stable, half-conscious that something was missing inside. Then he hastened to the cabin, but Virginia was not there.

"She may be in the stable." He half-whispered the words in his anxiety.

The ponies in the corral were greedily eating their hay, but the black mare Juno was gone. As Asher turned toward the house, he caught the low roaring of the tempest and felt a rush of cool wind from somewhere. A huge storm-wave of yellow dust was rolling out of the southwest; beyond it the heavens were copper-green, and back of that, midnight

elements can exert. He turned at last from the fire and storm to see Juno and her rider swinging down the northwest prairie, keeping close to the river line before the chill north wind.

"Oh, Virgie, Virgie," he cried, as she slipped from the saddle and he caught her in his arms. "I've lived a hundred years since I left you this afternoon. What made you run away?"

In the joy of her safe return, he forgot the fire.

"Why, don't you see the wind is from the north? And it is blowing everything south now? I saw it begin away up the river. Did that guard really keep off that thing? I saw from the high bluff up yonder?"

"I put it there to do it, and I'd take the chances. Awful as it is, it can't do anything but burn, and there's nothing here to burn. If it hadn't been there, everything would have been gone and you would have come back to a pile of ashes if the wind had left a pile."

"And you put your puny hands to the plow handles and say to that awful fury, 'So far, and no further. This is my home.' You, one little human being? Virginia's eyes were glowing with wonder at the miracle.

"Yes, with my puny hands. Me—a little man." Asher smiled quizzically, as he spread his broad brown hands before his face and drew himself up to his full six feet of height. "Only I say, 'our home.' But I was so scared about you, I forgot to notice the change in the wind. The fire is chasing to the south, and the hail-storm has veered off down that stream this side of those three headlands over there. The wind gives and the wind takes away. You can't blow a guard around it."

They sat down by the cabin door to watch the storm and flame blown far away in whiffs of glaring light and surging cloud, until the rain at last drowned all the fury and washed it over the edge of the south horizon out of the world.

"Sometime we'll plant hedges and forest trees and checker the country with windbreaks until days like this will belong only to an old pioneer's memory," Asher said, as the storm swept wide away.

"Then, I'm glad I came early enough to see this. I'm getting 'plains-broke' along with Juno. Isn't it wonderful to be a real pioneer? Back in Virginia we were two centuries of generations away from the first settlers," Virginia exclaimed.

But Asher did not answer. He was thinking of Jim Shirley's declaration: "She's got endurance as well as grace and beauty."

CHAPTER IV.

Distress Signals.

Also, we will make promise. So long as the Blood endures, I shall know that your will is mine; ye shall feel that my strength is yours.

—A Song of the English.

Virginia Aydelot soon grew brown as a berry in the tanning prairie winds, and it seemed impossible that this strong young woman of the sod cabin, with her simple dress and her cheeks as crimson, could have been the dainty child of the old Southern mansion house.

No other autumn had ever seemed quite so beautiful to the Aydelots as this, their first autumn together. Life was before them with its call to victory. Youth and health, exuberant spirits and love were theirs. Theirs, too, was the great boundless world of mist and mirage, of rainbow tinted grasses and opal heavens, where no two sunsets were ever the same. They could laugh at their poverty, believing in a time when Ease and Plenty

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