DUNRAVEN RANCH

A Story of American Frontier Life.

By Capt. CHARLES KING, U. S. A.,

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"Well, no, I fancy not," replied Belknap. "About the only thing we really do know is that, in a somewhat angry interview last fall, Col. Stratton forbade Dr. Quin's leaving the post or going to Dunraven without his express permission. I happened to be in the office at the time."

"Was it before or after that he was said to go there so often?" asked Farnham.

"Well, both," answered Belknap, reluctantly. "But understand me, Mr. Farnham, I know nothing whatever of the matter."

"I should not suppose that Col. Stratton would care to restrict his post surgeon from going thither if they needed his professional services," said Col. Brainard, pleasantly.

"That was the point at issue, apparently," answered Belknap. "Col. Stratton said that it was not on professional grounds that he went, and thereby seemed to widen the breach between them. Dr. Quin would not speak to the colonel after that, except when duty required it."

The conversation changed here, and little more was said; but Col. Brainard could not help thinking of a matter that he carefully kept to himself. It was not his custom to require his officers to ask permission to leave the garrison for a ride or hunt when they were to be absent from no duty, and only by day. Here it was midnight, as he thought it over, and the doctor had not returned, neither had he mentioned his desire to ride away, although he had been with the colonel well nigh an hour before parade. True, he had sent the doctor word to go and join Lieut. Perry at the gate of Dunraven, and that would account for his detention; but he knew that the surgeon was several miles away from his post and his patients at the moment that message was sent.

Meantime, Perry, too, was having a communion with himself, and finding it all vexation of spirit. All the way home the memory of that sweet English face was uppermost in his thoughts. He had been startled at the sight of a young and fair woman at Dunraven; he had felt a sense of inexplicable rejoicing when she said to him, "I am Miss Maitland;" it would have jarred him to know that she was wife; he was happy kneeling by the side of the beautiful girl he had never seen before that evening, and delighted that he could be of service to her. All this was retrospect worth indulging; but then arose the black shadow on his vision. How came Dr. Quin striding in there as though "native and to the manner born?"—how came he to call her "Gladys?" Perry had been pondering over this matter for full half an hour on the homeward ride before he bethought him of Mrs. Lawrence's remarks about the signal lights. One thing led to another in his recollection of her talk. The doctor answered the signals, no one else; the doctor and no one else was received at Dunraven; the doctor had declined to answer any questions about the people at the ranch, had been silent and mysterious, yet frequent in his visits. And then, more than all, what was that Mrs. Lawrence said or intimated that Mrs. Quin, "such a lovely woman, too," had taken her children and left him early that spring, and all on account of somebody or something connected with Dunraven Ranch? Good heavens! It could not be "Gladys." And yet——

Instead of taking a bath and going to bed, Mr Perry poked his head into Parke's bachelor chamber as he reached the little cottage they shared in common. No Gladys disturbed the junior's dreams, apparently, for he was breathing regularly, sleeping the sleep of the just; and so, finding no one to talk to and being in no mood to go to bed at an hour so comparatively early when he had so much to think about, Perry filled a pipe and perched himself in a big chair by the window seat, intending to think it all over again. He was beginning to hate that doctor; he would have chafed at the idea of any bachelor's being before him in an acquaintance with Gladys Maitland, but a married man knowing her so well as to make his wife jealous and himself indifferent to that fact—knowing her so well as to drive "such a lovely woman, too," into taking her children and quitting the marital roof—that was too much of a bad thing, and Perry was sore discomfited. He got up, impatient and restless, passed out to the little piazza in front of his quarters, and began pacing up and down, the glow from his corncob pipe making a fiery trail in the darkness. He would have been glad to go back to the colonel and keep watch with him; but there was one thing connected with his visit to Dunraven that he could not bear to speak of, especially as those words of Mrs. Lawrence recurred again and again to his memory. He had not said one word—he did not want to tell—of Gladys Maitland.

And so it happened that Perry, too, was awake and astir when the footsteps of the cavalry sergeant were heard on their way to Capt. Stryker's quarters. Listening, he noted that the soldier had halted at the colonel's, held a brief conversation with that officer, and then turned back across the parade. Instantly divining that news had come of Sergt. Gwynne, Perry seized his forage cap and hurried in pursuit. He overtook the trooper just beyond the guard house and went with him eagerly to the stables. A moment more, and he was bending over a soldier's bedside in a little room adjoining the forage shed and by the light of a dim stable lantern looking down into the bruised and battered features of the non-commissioned officer, whom he had pronounced of all others at Rossiter the most respected and highly thought of by the cavalry garrison.

"Sergeant, I'm very sorry to see you so badly mauled," said Perry. "How on earth did it happen?"

Gwynne turned his head painfully until the one unbandaged eye could look about and see that none of the stable guard were within hearing, then back again and up into the sympathetic face of his young superior.

"Lieutenant, I must tell you and the captain; and yet it is a matter I profoundly wish to keep as secret as possible—the story of my day's adventure, I mean."

"You need not tell me at all if you do not wish to," said Perry; "though I think it is due to yourself that the captain should know how it was you were gone all day and that your horse and you both came back in such condition."

"I understand, sir, fully," answered Gwynne, respectfully. "I shall tell the captain the whole story, if he so desire. Meantime, I can only ask that no one else be told. If the men in the troop had an inkling of the true story there would be endless trouble; and so I have tried to account for it by saying my horse and I had an ugly fall while running a coyote through the timber. We did see a coyote down by the ranch on the Monday, and I did have an ugly fall; I was set upon by three of those ranchmen and badly handled."

"Yes, damn them!" said Perry, excitedly and wrathfully. "I've had an experience with them myself to-night, while we were searching for you."

"So much the more reason, sir, why my mishap should not be told among the men. The two affairs combined would be more than they would stand. There are enough Irishmen here in our troop alone to go down and wipe that ranch out of existence; and I fear trouble as it stands."

"Whether there will be trouble or not will depend very much on the future conduct of the proprietor and manager down there. Of course we cannot tolerate for an instant the idea of their maintaining a gang of ruffians there who are allowed to assault officers or men who happen to ride around that neighborhood. You were not inside their limits, were you?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, painfully. "I was. I had tied my horse outside and ventured in to get a nearer look at the buildings."

"What time did it happen?"

"This morning, sir; not more than an hour and a half after you spoke to me in the valley."

"Indeed! Then you must have lain there all day! Why, Gwynne, this will never do. I'll go and get the surgeon and have him look you all over. You must have been brutally mauled, and must be utterly exhausted."

"Don't go, sir," said the sergeant, eagerly stretching forth a hand. "It—it isn't as you think, sir. I have been kindly cared for. They're not all ruffians down there, and the men who assaulted me will be fully punished. I've been quite as well nursed and fed and brandied and bandaged as though I'd been carried right to hospital. Indeed, I don't need anything but rest. I'll be all right in a day."

"But I think Dr. Quin ought to see you and satisfy us you are not injured."

"Be satisfied, sir. The doctor has seen me."

"Why, but how?—where? He was here all day, and only went away at sunset. He joined me at Dunraven about 9 o'clock, and hadn't returned when I came in. Did he find you and bring you back?"

Gwynne hesitated painfully again:

"The doctor saw me this evening—down near where I was hurt; but I got back here without his help, sir. Lieutenant," said the soldier, suddenly, "there are one or two things connected with this day's work that I cannot tell. Come what may, I must not speak of them, even to the captain."

Perry was silent a moment. Then he kindly answered:

"I do not think any one here will press you to tell what you consider it might be ungrateful or dishonorable in you to reveal. I will do what I can to see that your wishes are respected. And now, if you are sure I can do nothing for you, good night, sergeant." And the young officer held out his hand.

"Good night, sir," answered Gwynne. He hesitated one moment. It was the first time since he entered the service, nearly five years before, that an officer offered him his hand. It was a new and strange sensation. It might not be "good discipline" to take advantage of it, but there were other reasons. Gwynne looked up in the frank blue eyes of his lieutenant and read something there that told a new story. Out came a hand as slender and shapely as that of the young officer, and the two were silently and firmly clasped.

"How can I question him?" said Perry to himself as he walked slowly homeward. "Is there not something I am holding back?—something I cannot speak off By Jupiter! can his be the same reason?"

CHAPTER IX.

JUST what hour the post surgeon returned to Fort Rossiter that night no one seemed to know. He was present at sick call, and imperturbable as ever, on the following morning, and the few officers who were at headquarters after guard mounting were able to affirm that the colonel had been courteous as usual in his greeting to the medical officer, and that nothing whatever had been said about his being away so late the previous evening. Capt. Stryker came home soon after midnight, had a brief talk with his colonel, and went over to the stables to inquire into Gwynne's condition before he went to bed. Parke came into Perry's room after morning stables, and told him, as he was yawning and stretching in bed, that the captain had had quite a long talk with Gwynne that morning, and that "something was up"—he didn't know what. Later in the day Perry was sent for by Col. Brainard and found the commanding officer in consultation with Capt. Stryker and two other troop commanders.

At their request he repeated the story of his adventure at Dunraven, beginning with his instructions to the men he left at the gate, and ending with old Maitland's swooning; and about an hour after he had finished he saw the adjutant with a small escort ride away down the valley, and rightly conjectured that the colonel had sent a letter to Dunraven inquiring into the cause of the assaults on two members of his command. Battalion drill kept him occupied all the morning; a garrison court convened at noon and sat until skirmish drill began at 3 p. m.; and so it happened that not until near parade did he find a moment's time to himself. He longed to see Mrs Lawrence and question her as to the nature of the "Dunraven stories" she had mentioned; for what had been a matter of indifference to him then had suddenly become of vivid interest. There were ladies sitting on the Lawrences' gallery, he could plainly see, as the cavalry officers came tramping in from afternoon stables, but he could not hope to ask or hear anything about a matter so near his heart in the presence of so many sympathetic and interested listeners. He kept away towards his own gate, therefore, until he saw that there, leaning on the gate post, and apparently awaiting him, stood Dr. Quin.

Perry would gladly have avoided the doctor, the antagonism he was beginning to feel for him was of a character that would hardly brook concealment. Cordial and jocous in manner as he was to almost every man, woman and child he met, it was all the more noticeable that to the very few whom he held in dislike or distrust his bearing was cold and repellent in the last degree. Something told him the doctor was there to speak to him about their chance meeting at Dunraven. He did not want to speak to him at all, just now. Yet how could he hope to have these matters explained without a meeting and a talk? While the officers strolled over and stopped, most of them, in front of the group of ladies at Lawrence's, Perry walked straight across the parade and the boundary road, with his blue eyes fixed on the doctor's face.

The latter was studying him as he came, and doubtless read that expression of coldness and distrust; possibly he resented it. At all events, something prompted him to speak in a tone less cordial than he had ever employed towards Perry—"a youngster whom I thoroughly approve of," as he said before he had known him a week. Still leaning on the gate post, and resting his head on his hand, the doctor began:

"Mr. Perry, I have been to see you twice today, but could not find you, and I wanted to speak with you on a matter of some importance."

"You could have found me on drill on the court, if anything immediate was needed. I have been nowhere else, except to stables," said Perry, shortly.

"It was a personal matter—a somewhat embarrassing one—and I thought best to see you alone."

"Well, here I am, Dr. Quin; drive ahead and let us have it."

"I wanted to ask you if, while you were at that ranch last night, you saw anything of a large signet ring, with a crest and motto engraved on the stone."

"I did not, unless you mean the one Mr. Maitland wore."

"The very one! You noticed that, did you?"

"I noticed he had something of the kind on his left hand when he came down."

"And it was nowhere to be found after you went away. You may remember you were chafing and slapping that hand and I thought you might have accidentally removed it at that time."

"The reflection is not a pleasant one, Dr. Quin," said Perry, with an angry light in the blue eyes.

"Pardon me, Mr. Perry; I put it awkwardly, but I mean no reflection what ever. Miss Maitland mentioned your efforts to restore the old gentleman to consciousness, and together we searched the sofa and the floor after we had put him safely to bed and discovered the loss of the ring. It is one to which he attaches peculiar value, and its loss has preyed upon him. While I know very well you could not have the ring, I was asked to ascertain if you remembered seeing it, and so establish the truth of Mr. Maitland's belief that it was on his finger when he went to that room."

"It was; but I do not recollect its being on his hand after he was carried to the sofa. It would surely have attracted my attention while chafing it."

"The parlor, hall and piazza have been swept and searched, I am told by this note," and the doctor indicated a little missive he held in his hand, whereat Perry's face did not brighten, "and with no success. I was asked to inquire of you, and if it has annoyed you, as I infer by your manner, pray let that be my apology. Then I am to say you saw it when Mr. Maitland entered the room, but not again?"

"Precisely; unless you choose to add to your correspondent that the next time I am associated with missing property at Dunraven I would prefer to be questioned direct, and not through a third party."

A quiet smile shone for an instant on the doctor's grave face:

"I fear that I have not accomplished my mission very diplomatically, Mr. Perry, and am sorry to have vexed you. The colonel tells me, by the way, that I ought to say to you that the reason I was so long in reaching your party last night was that I was detained attending to another case—one of our own men. Good evening, sir." And, raising his forage cap, the doctor walked slowly and with dignity away, leaving Perry too surprised to speak.

"The colonel told him to tell me!" was Perry's wondering soliloquy at last. "Then I suppose he must have told the chief some story to account for his being away." It was pretty evident from the young fellow's manner as he entered the house that the story was not one which struck him as being entitled to confidence or consideration.

On the table in his little sitting room lay a dainty note. It was not the first he had received under that superscription, and he had not been slow to open and read them. If anything, the cloud upon his forehead seemed to deepen at sight of it. He picked it up, looked impatiently at the address, hesitated a moment, tossed it back on his desk and went into the inner room. He would not read it now; it was almost parade time; he had to bathe and change his dress, for after parade he was to dine at the quarters of an infantry friend, and Capt. and Mrs. Lawrence were to be of the party. Already it was noted that when any of the few infantry people at the post gave a little tea or dinner at which only eight or ten were gathered together, the Belknaps were not invited on the same evening with Mr. Perry, and vice versa. When Parke came in, whistling and singing and banging doors and making all manner of uncouth noise in the exuberance of his spirits, he bolted into Perry's domain, as was his wont, and begin a rattling comment on the events of the day

"Be the way," he broke in, suddenly, "we can't both go to-morrow; and I suppose you want to."

"Go where?"

"Why, out with the hounds; to-morrow's the day, you know."

Perry gave a whistle of perplexity. The colonel had promised the ladies that there should be a run this very week. All the fleet hounds of the cavalry battalion were to be out, and all the officers who could be spared from the day's duties; a detachment was to go over into the valley of a stream some ten miles away, pitch tents in the shade, and there set luncheon for the entire party; horses were to be provided for all the ladies who cared to go mounted, buggies and "buckboards" were to convey the others, and it was to be a gala occasion. Antelope, coyote or jack rabbit—any four footed game the prairie afforded—was to be "coursed" in due state and ceremony; the ladies "in at the death" were to be crowned and subsequently presented with trophies of the chase more sightly than the mask or brush au naturel. The affair had been gayly talked over that very evening of the colonel's dinner, but the events of the previous day and the perplexities of the one just closing had completely driven it all out of his head.

And yet he was engaged to ride with Mrs. Belknap, the amazon of Fort Rossiter! And for the first time in his life Ned Perry would have been glad of an excuse to get away from a gallop with an accomplished equestrienne.

"You don't mean to say you had forgotten it?" asked Parke, in amaze.

"Don't blow on me, there's a good fellow; but, after all my 'breaks' of yesterday—getting an absent from drill and into a row at the ranch—I declare it had slipped my memory. No, you go, Parke; I don't deserve to be let off anything, after yesterday. You've been sticking to duty like a brick ever since you joined, and Stryker ought to give you the preference."

"But you're engaged to ride with Mrs. Belknap," said Parke.

"Who told you so?"

"I heard her say so. Dana asked if he might have the pleasure, just a while ago, and she smilingly replied that it would have been delightful, but that you had asked her four days ago, when it was first planned."

"So I had; but I've been getting into scrapes ever since, and I oughn't to go. By Jove! I'll write her a note now and say I can't get off. It's true enough. I wouldn't let such a fellow go if I commanded the troop. I'd make him stay in and attend roll call a week."

"Well, Mrs. Belknap expects you," said Parke, dubiously. "Not but what Dana would be glad to take your place. Belknap can't go; he's too bulky to ride, and she'd leave him miles astern first run we had, sure."

Suddenly Perry bethoughs him of the note, and made a dive into the sitting room, towel in hand and shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows. It read:

MOST AMI—You go the Spragues' to dine this evening, and there will be cards, and you will not be able to get away early enough to ride or come in a little while before parade—without fail! There is something I greatly want to see you about.

Sincerely, F. R. B.

Come early as possible after stables.

"Thunder and turf!" exclaimed Perry; "and there goes first call now! Here, Parke, you're dressed; run over and tell Mrs. Belknap I just this instant read her note and I can't come; I'll get a late as it is."

"How can I, man?" shouted Parke, as he fled. "I've got to get into war paint too. Lucky thing for me," he added, in lower tone. "I don't want to be the one to tell the prettiest woman at Rossiter that her note that she sent here at noon wasn't opened until first call for parade."

Perry's dressing was completed at racing speed, but even then he was buckling his saber belt as the assembly sounded, and he had to go straight across to where his troop was forming—a glittering rank of yellow plumes—and so could only give a hurried sidelong glance toward Belknap's quarters. There was her bonnie ladyship pacing up and down the veranda; and he knew well he would have to account for his sins. All through parade his thoughts were divided between the fair face he had seen at Dunraven the night before and the dark one with the long, curving lashes sweeping those soft, peachy cheeks and half yelling those wonderful, liquid, speaking, side-glancing eyes. He saw Mrs. Belknap stroll forth a moment as though to join the group of ladies on the walk, then return to her slow, graceful languid promenade up and down her piazza. He knew that he must hasten to her the instant the rank of officers dispersed and make his peace if possible, but as they marched to the front and saluted the commanding officer he signaled that he had something to say to them all, and, moving away to the edge of the parade ground, so that the troops might not be detained on the line, he gathered his officers about him, a silent group under the little shade trees that bounded the roadway, and took a letter from the breast of his uniform coat.

"Gentlemen," said he, "this will be of importance to some of you, and of interest to all. It explains something none of us understood, and contains matter that I deem it best you all should hear. It is a letter from the manager of Dunraven Ranch. Mr. Adjutant, you read it."

And, clearing his throat, Mr. Farnham began: "DUNRAVEN, RANCH, Friday

"Col. Brainard, —th Cavalry, Fort Rossiter:

"DEAR SIR—Mr. Maitland is confined to his bed, and too ill to personally reply to your letter of this morning, which was duly received at the hands of your adjutant. He directs me to write as follows: that, while he regrets the boisterous conduct of some of his employes last evening and their assault on Mr. Perry, he considers that, in view of the results—a bro[illegible] head on the part of one of our people and [illegible] apparent damage to Mr. Perry—the matter s[illegible] d not pressed. As to the other assault alluded [illegible] he has no knowledge of it whatever, and can [illegible] no man who has.

"The distinct understanding between Mr. Maitland and the former commanding officer at Fort Rossiter was that none [illegible] the garrison should ever pass within our lines [illegible] and we agreed on the other hand that none of our people should ever trespass on the reservati[illegible] Mr. Maitland holds that is was the duty of [illegible] Brainard's predecessor [illegible] acc to acquaint him with [illegible] terms of this agreement, and the reason [illegible] Dunraven had no means of knowing that [illegible] invaders of last evening were not the very me[illegible] hom the proper authorities had pledged themselves to restrain from such aggression.

"Mr. Maitland begs that Col. Brainard will in future ratify and conform with the agreement formally entered into by his predecessor.

"Respectfully, P. Ewan, Manager."

There was a moment of puzzled silence. The colonel looked quizzically around upon the circle of bronzed and soldierly faces under the black helmets. Capt. Stryker's lips were twitching with amusement behind their black fringe of beard. No one spoke at first; but presently a deep voiced troop commander gave vent to his emotions:

"What a bombastic old crank! Who is he?"

"An Englishman—the owner of the biggest ranch in this part of Texas," answered the colonel. "Capt. Belknap, Capt. Lawrence, have you any knowledge of the agreement of which he speaks?"

"Nothing beyond the vague talk we heard. Dr. Quin would be more apt to know what Col. Stratton agreed to than we would," answered Belknap.

"I will ask the doctor this evening. Meantime, knowing no reason why such a policy of non-intercourse should be observed, I shall not recognize it. What is more, while you will caution your men to respect Dunraven bounds as they would other private property, let them show no hostility to the ranch people who may have occasion to visit us. The man who brought this note tells me he was threatened and abused by some cavalrymen near the stables. Mr. Maitland professes to have no knowledge of another assault, but we have evidence that Sergt. Gwynne was beaten by three followers on the Dunraven grounds yesterday. That matter is yet to be settled. Now one thing more: Troop and company commanders will closely watch their men the next few nights; keep a sharp lookout on the quarters until midnight, to see that no men slip away; after midnight the guard must attend to it. There is an element in the ranks that would be only too glad to go down to Dunraven some night and have satisfaction on their own account for yesterday's affairs. This must not be permitted. See to it, gentlemen. That is all for the present. Mr. Perry, will you come with me a moment?"

Perry went. Mrs. Belknap saw him go and believed herself slighted.

CHAPTER X.

THE hounds were out, and all Fort Rossiter "society" was with them. The day was faultless—neither too warm nor too cloudy, a brisk westerly breeze sent the cloud shadows sailing steadily across the broad prairie sea and keeping the veils and skirts of the Amazons of the party a-flutter. Three there were of these, the rest of the sisterhood preferring to follow the hunt by buggy or buckboard, though frankly expressing their envy of the fortunate riders. Mounted on her own spirited little bay, admirably fitted as to habit, and sitting squarely and well, Mrs. Belknap would have been the center of observation of all the cavalry officers even had she not been, as she incontestably was, the beauty of the garrison. The colonel had offered Mrs. Lawrence one of his own horses, and therefore was accorded the right of being her escort. Mrs. Sprague was similarly indebted for her "mount" to Capt. Stryker; and a very bright and beaming little body she was as she rode over the springy turf at the side of the dark haired troop leader.

"Hard lines on Perry, isn't it?" said Mr. Graham, as he trotted up beside Mrs. Belknap and took his place for the moment with her bevy of cavaliers. "First time he ever missed a hunt, I reckon."

"He needn't have missed this one," said Parke. "It was my week, and I told him to go; and Capt. Stryker said so, too; but"——

Here Mr. Parke broke off suddenly and looked in mild wonderment in Dana's face, for that young gentleman had managed, unseen by Mrs. Belknap, to swing free his right foot and give the speaker's left a vehement kick. Too late, however. Mrs. Belknap had heard it.

"Are you cavalrymen all so little to be trusted?" she asked, with a brilliant smile upon her flushing face. Exercise and excitement had lent unusual sparkle to her eyes and color to her cheeks—"she is positively beautiful today," as Mrs. Lawrence confessed to the colonel at the moment.

"I had a note from Mr. Perry this morning saying he was grievously disappointed, but that some troop duty had been assigned to him which could not be transferred and he must stay and finish it."

"What he said is true, Mrs. Belknap," promptly asseverated Mr. Dana. "The papers have all to be in readiness for muster on Monday, and the saddle kits put in shape for inspection."

"Only in Capt. Stryker's troop?" softly inquired the lady, with eyelids rising incredulously.

"No, of course not. One officer is back at the post from each troop. It happened to fall on Perry in his."

"I fancy I should prefer serving in some older captain's troop if I were Mr. Perry. It seems that while your other captains stay home and look after their companies, Capt. Stryker has a subaltern attend to his while he comes a-hunting."

"On the other hand, we fellows have a dozen things to do in our troops that Capt. Stryker does himself in his. It's as broad as it's long, Mrs. Belknap," said Dana. He did not fancy her criticising the methods of his cavalry associates, and was possibly a little piqued at the decided annoyance she showed at Perry's failure to attend. Meantime, Stryker, all unconscious of her censure, was chatting laughingly with Mrs. Sprague and exchanging shots with the colonel and Mrs. Lawrence. The four were getting on admirably together, and seemed too much absorbed in their own fun to note the fact that Mrs. Belknap and her knot of four or five satellites had been gradually edging away toward the right, and that the rest of the hunt was becoming widely scattered.

"It is time we stirred up a jack rabbit at least," said the colonel. "Suppose we veer over toward the northwest a little. Whatever we do, we want no chase down there toward Dunraven; those wire fences would spoil it all."

"I wonder if those people never hunt?" said Mr. Farnham, who had joined the quartet; he always kept close to his colonel, as befitted an aspirant for the adjutancy. "Englishmen are generally game for all sorts of sport."

"I can see horsemen out there on the prairie to the east of the ranch," said Stryker, whose eyes were keen, "and I could have sworn a moment ago that I saw a horsewoman."

"Nonsense, Capt. Stryker!" exclaimed Mrs. Lawrence, yet with a quick glance at Mrs. Sprague. "What could you have taken for a lady on horseback? Do you suppose there could be ladies at Dunraven and we not know it?"

"Hardly possible," answered the captain, "and therefore I doubted the evidence of my senses. Yet something very like a lady followed by a groom rode down the slope into the valley about ten minutes ago. She is out of sight in the timber now. If Perry were only with us I'd send him off there to see."

"Yes, we miss Perry on our hunts," said the colonel to his lady friends. "He is one of our best riders and most enthusiastic sportsmen. He will be out, will he not, Stryker?"

"Yes, sir. There is really no necessity for his staying in, and I so told him; but he felt that he ought to, at least until certain work was finished. Then he said he could ride eastward and join us. Hurrah! there they go!"

Far out to the front, straight to the east, "a gray streak with a white tip to it" went shooting into space as though launched from some invisible bow drawn by giant power. A big jack rabbit, all legs and ears, had listened quivering and trembling to the sounds of the approaching hunt, until an enterprising terrier, foremost skirmisher of the line, fairly tumbled over him as he crouched behind a little bunch of weeds; then with one mighty leap and the accompaniment of a wild yelp from his discoverer he sprang forth into a race for his precious life. "Hoy! hoy!" yells the sergeant as he sights the quarry. "Hurrah!" shout the nearest huntsmen, and, with one simultaneous impulse, skirmishing curs, stealthy, springing hounds, eager steeds, and jubilant riders—men and women—away goes the entire field sweeping in pursuit. At first all is one mad rush until it is certain that the rabbit is a veteran who understands well the maxim that "a stern chase is a long chase" all the world over.

Close behind the master of the hounds, all eyes fixed on that bounding tuft of gray and white a few score yards ahead, bending over their horses' necks and keeping just enough pressure on the bit to prevent overriding the huntsman, ride Parke and Graham, two "light weights," who have coursed many a mile of prairie. Just behind them, a little to their right, rides Mrs Belknap, her veil fluttering straight out behind, her glorious eyes flashing, her dark skin flushed with triumph and the exhilaration of the dashing pace, her little hands wound about in the reins she holds so firmly. Splendidly she sits her fleet racer, and Dana has to urge and spur his clumsier troop horse to keep in close attendance. These four are well in advance of all the others. Back of them, gallantly urging on her sturdy sorrel, comes Mrs. Sprague, with Stryker riding warily alongside and watching her "going" before he will satisfy himself that it is safe to trust her to her own guiding. Level as the prairie is here, he knows that a mile or so ahead there are "breaks" leading down into the valley of one of the innumerable tributaries of the Washita. Then the story may be different.

He looks up in surprise at the thunder of hoofs close alongside, and Mrs. Lawrence, with excitement in her eyes, overtakes, then passes them on the way to the front. "See!" he points to his partner, "see that dark shadow across the prairie out there. We cannot ride at this pace when we pass that hollow; the breaks set in still farther." He glances over his shoulder and signals to the nearest officer to follow Mrs. Lawrence and look out for her, and the gallant does his best, but all are at top speed; the colonel and the heavy weights—infantry and cavalry—are beginning to lose ground, and still that gray "puff ball" far to the front seems inch by inch to be slipping away from his pursuers. Will he keep his determined course, up hill and down, straight away to the east, or will his instinct, tack, veer, double and twist? If he swerve he is a lost rabbit!

Far to the rear, yelping, panting, distracted by this time, the terriers and mongrels, the original leaders, have fallen. The field, too, is strung out nearly a mile deep at the end of the first six minutes' run, for some of the laggards have given up and are disposed to wait for the coming of the buggies and buckboards. Here at the front all is tense excitement. All eyes are on the rabbit, for now or never will the crisis come. The horses are breathing heavily, but with no thought of slackening speed. "Watch him now as he sights that arroyo!" shouts Graham to Parke, for far out to the right front a ravine bursts off to the southeast, and one of its shallow contributors stretches obliquely across the rabbit's frenzied vision. "Veer that way; he'll take it sure!" shouts the huntsman; and, sure enough, no sooner does he reach it than the gray victim darts down the winding shelter, as though hopeful that his sudden twist would throw his pursuers off the sight; scent the greyhound has none. The move is disastrous; "Hi!" shout the leading riders, waving the pursuit to the right front, and, obedient to signal, the foremost hounds sweep in long curve into the coulee, striking it many a yard farther down than where the harried chase first dived into its treacherous shadows.

And now those hounds who were out on the right flank are up in line with the very leaders, and bounding along the level at the side of the ravine, yet keeping wary eye upon the chase. So, too, the horsemen. Making a deep curve in the ravine five hundred yards ahead, and confident that Bunny will blindly rush along his winding track, they strike out across the prairie, gaining twenty horse lengths by the move; and now, with two or three of the oldest hounds, Parke, Dana and Mrs. Belknap are darting on abreast of the chase. "Keep out there to the left, some of you!" shouts Dana. "He'll spring up the other side quick as he sees us. Drive him back." And, obedient to the signal of his waving hand, two of the leading troopers breast the slopes to the east, calling half a dozen hounds with them. Darting around a bend, Bunny's agonized eyes catch sight of the hounds and horses on the right bank, and like a flash he whirls, scampers up the opposite slope, and shoots out on the prairie again just in time to meet the hounds and troopers who have anticipated the move.

Now he is wild and demoralized. Once more he dives into the ravine and sends the dust flying into the very faces of his pursuers, for now the leading hounds are so close that the foremost jaws are snapping the air at his every bound. A quick turn to the right and up the slope throws these leaders far—too far—beyond; they sweep around in long curve; but, though he has thrown them off, the hunted, senseless, helpless wretch has forgotten the trailers in the rear; they spring across the angle he has made, and are close as the original pursuers, and much the fresher. Wildly, madly now he twists and turns, first up one bank, then the other. Far to the rear the coming riders see the signs of his breaking down, mark the scurrying to and fro of horse and hound. "Come on!" they shout. "He's gone now, and we can be in at the death!" Mrs. Lawrence on one side of the ravine is as far to the front as Mrs. Belknap on the other. One of them must lose the brush; he cannot die on both sides at once. The dark beauty has had more than one rasping disappointment in the last two days; it would be intolerable now that, after all, Mrs. Lawrence, and not she, should prove the victor.

Bunny makes one frantic rush up the slope to the right, and, with half a dozen hounds at his very heels, spins in front of her eyes, catches sight of two fresh antagonists fronting him, whirls suddenly about to the right, and almost dives under her horse's heaving barrel as he once more plunges into the ravine, down the rugged slope, up the gentle ascent to the other side. There half a dozen long, lean muzzles gleam close behind him; he falters, wavers; a sharp nose is thrust underneath him as he runs, a quick toss sends him kicking, struggling into the air, and in another instant, with piteous but ineffectual squeak and pleading, he is the center of a tumbling, snapping, fang gnashing group of hounds, and his little life is torn out almost before Graham can leap from his saddle, beat them back with the visor of his cap, then, seizing the still quivering body by the legs that would have saved could that empty head only have directed, holds poor Bunny aloft in front of Mrs. Lawrence's snorting steed and proclaims her "Queen of the Chase."

And this, too, has Mrs. Belknap to see and strive to smile, while down in her heart she knows that it could not so have happened had Perry come.

(To be Continued.)

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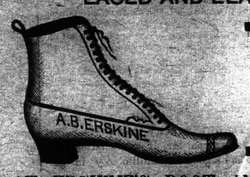

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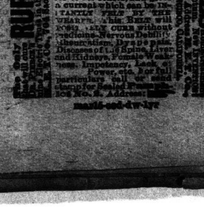

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