

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

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 confronting 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 gleamed close behind him; he falters, wavers; a sharp nose is thrust underneath him as he runs, a quick toss sends him kicking, struggling into air, and in another instant, with pit-eous but ineffectual squeak and pleading, he is the centre 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.

XI.

Riding eastward just before noon, somewhat comforted in conscience because of his self-denial of the morning, Ned Perry scanned the distant prairie in search of the hunt. It was nearly luncheon-time, and he expected to find the party making its way to the little stream whither the baskets, boxes, and hampers had been despatched by wagon some hours before; but when he sighted the quartermaster driving homeward in his buggy he learned from that bulky veteran that rabbit after rabbit had been run, and that the whole party had finally decided to give dogs and horses a cool drink down in the Monee valley before starting northward across the prairie. "They must be getting down into the valley two or three miles east of the ranch just about now, and will go due north from there, unless they stir up more game along the Monee. If I were you," said the quartermaster, "I'd ride over to the lunch-stand. You won't get there much before the crowd."

Perry thanked him for the information, but, so far from accepting his advice, the younger officer turned his horse's head in the direction of Dunraven, and was speedily riding thither with an alacrity that he himself could hardly explain.

In his brief talk with the colonel after parade on the previous evening Perry had told him what he could of the characteristics of Messrs. Maitland and Ewen. The odd letter which had been sent by them had given the commanding officer cause for much thought, and he was desirous, evidently, of gathering from Perry's observations as complete an idea as was possible of their life and surroundings. And still Perry had found it impossible to volunteer any description of Miss Maitland; he could not bear to speak of her until—until he knew more of the doctor's purpose in his visits to the ranch. He had been detained by his commander just long enough to make it necessary for him to go direct to the Spragues' without leaving his helmet and sabre at home. They were waiting dinner for him as it was, but Mrs. Belknap took no note of that circumstance: what she saw was that he had avoided even passing within hail of her piazza ooth before and after parade.

Now, though conscious of no intention of avoidance, Perry rode forth to the meeting of this day with some little misgiving. In the first place, he knew that he must strive to make his peace with this slighted lady; and yet, in view of all he had seen and heard in the past forty-eight hours, how utterly dwarfed had that affair—his laughing flirtation with Mrs. Belknap—become! Had any one told him his attentions to her and her marked preference for his society were matters that people were beginning to talk of,—some with sly enjoyment, others with genuine regret,—he would have been grateful for the information, instead of resentful, as, with most men, would be the case ninety-nine times out of a hundred. But he knew nothing of this, and had too little experience to suspect the comments in circulation. She was most interesting—up to the day before yesterday; he loved to ride or dance with her; he enjoyed a chat with her more than he could tell. A most sympathetic and attentive listener was Mrs. Belknap, and her voice was low and sweet and full of subtly caressing tones. She had made him talk to her by the hour of his home, his hopes and ambitions, his profession and his prospects, and had held him in a silken bondage that he had no desire to escape.

And yet, as he rode out on the breezy plain this brilliant day, he found all thought of her distasteful, and his eyes, far from searching for the flutter of her trim habit in the distant riding-party, *could* go a-roaming over the intervening shades and shallows down in the Monee valley and seek the bare, brown walls of Dunraven far across the stream. It was odd indeed that he should have sought this, the longer way round, on his ride in quest of his companions from the fort.

Once again he looked at the isolated clump of buildings from his post of observation on the bluff; once again he saw across the stream and through the trees the barbed barrier that had caused both him and his men such laceration of flesh and temper; once again he saw the shallow valley winding away to the southeast, decked with its scrubby fringe-work of cottonwood and willow; but this time, three miles away its accustomed solitude was broken by groups of riders and darting black specks of dogs, all moving northward once more and already breasting the slopes. He should have turned away eastward and ridden across country to join them, but down here in the valley, only a short distance away busied in watching the hunting party, sat Mr. Ewen on a lowing and excited bay. Whatever cool-

ness his rider might feel at his discovery, it was not shared by Nolan: he pricked up his ears and hailed his fellow quadruped with cordial and unaffected pleasure, a neigh that the English-bred horse was so utterly unisular as to whirl about and answer with corresponding warmth. Ewen caught at his heavy Derby and jerked it off his bullet head with an air of mingled embarrassment and civility, replacing it with similarly spasmodic haste. Perry coolly, but with a certain easy grace, raised his forage-cap in response to the salutation, and then, seeing the manager still looking at him as though he wanted to say something and did not know how to begin, gave Nolan his head and rode down to short hailing-distance.

"We meet on neutral ground out here, Mr. Ewen. I suppose your exclusive employer over yonder can hardly prohibit your answering civil enquiries after his health?" And, though he meant to be distant, Perry found himself smiling at the oddity of the situation.

"Do you know I was just thinking about you," answered Ewen, "and wondering whether you were with that party down yonder?" The old gentleman is better, thanks. He had two pretty bad nights, but is coming around slowly."

"And Miss Maitland,—how is she?"

"Rather seedy. She has had a good deal of care and vexation of late, I fancy, and this is no place for a young girl, anyhow."

"Well, you have some appreciation of the true character of Dunraven as a residence, after all!" answered Perry. "Now, if you can give me any good reason why she should live in this utterly out-of-the-way place, you will lift a weight from my mind."

"Oh, they don't live here, you know," spoke Ewen, hurriedly. "She comes here only when her father does. It is her own doing. She goes with him everywhere, and will not leave him. She's all he has, don't you know?"

"I don't know anything about it. You Dunraven people seem averse to any expression of interest or courtesy from your fellow-men, but I'm free to say I should like to know what on earth there is in American cavalymen to make them such objects of aversion to your master; and I would be glad to know how it is such a girl as that is dragged into such a hole as yonder."

Ewen sat in silence a moment, studying the young fellow's face.

"You deserve a better welcome there," he presently answered, "and I don't know that I can do better than to tell you the truth,—what I know of it. And let me tell you that if the old man knew of my speaking of it to any one, I'd lose the most lucrative but least attractive place I ever had. Do you see?"

"Then perhaps you had better not tell me. I do not care to pry into secrets."

"Oh, this is no secret. It was *that* that drove him here: everybody knew it in England. You were mighty shabbily treated at the ranch, and you requited it by preventing what would have been a bloody row and by lending us a helping hand. Even the old man recognizes that; and I think he'd be glad to say so to you, and see you, if you were not just what you are,—a cavalry officer."

"Why, what on earth can we have done? If any of our cloth wronged Mr. Maitland in any way, it is our right to know it and take it up."

"It wasn't *your* cloth, old fellow," said Ewen, thawing visibly, "but it was the cavalry all the same that broke his heart and his pride, and made his life the wreck it is, and drove him from his home, shunning the sight of his fellow-men, all these years,—exiling *her*, too, in the prime of her young life. Mr. Perry, there are only three or four of us at Dunraven who know the story, but we have only sympathy and pity—no blame—for him, though he is the harshest master I ever served."

"How did it happen?" asked Perry.

"All through his son. There had been more of them, but there was only the one—Archie—when the Lancers were ordered to South Africa. He was a youngster, only seventeen, they tell me, and he had just been gazetted to his cornetcy. The old man was all wrapped up in him, for of the three boys the eldest had died only the month before the regiment was ordered on foreign service and the second had been killed in India. Both these two who were gone had made themselves famous among their comrades by their fearlessness and high character, and the old man, of course, could not ask Archie to quit the service just when orders for dangerous duty came. The boy went to the Cape with his corps, and got into the thick of the Zulu war just at the time of the massacre of the 24th at Isandlwana and the fight at Rorke's Drift. I was at home then, and all England was quivering with grief over such needless sacrifice as was made of that regiment, and all ready to fall down and worship such fellows as Chard and Bromhead, who made the superb fight almost at the same time. They say old Maitland wanted to go himself, as volunteer or something, with Lord Chelmsford, but it couldn't be done. His father had fought at Alma and Inkerman, and his grandfather had led the Guards at Waterloo. The whole tribe were soldiers, you know; and now Archie was with the Lancers in Zululand, and the Lancers were going to wipe out the disasters of the first fights of the campaign, and Archie was to uphold the grand old fighting name and come home covered with glory. He was the heir now, and Miss Gladys was but a little girl. I have heard it all from Mrs. Cowan: she was their housekeeper in those days, and a sort of companion, too, to Mrs. Maitland, who was very delicate. The old man was very fiery and proud, and full of fierce denunciation of everything that had gone wrong in the campaign; and he offended some people by the way he condemned some officer who was a friend of theirs, and there were others who thought he talked too much; but he fairly boiled over when the news came of how the Prince Imperial had been abandoned by his escort and that a British officer and a dozen men had run two miles at top speed from a beggarly little squad of niggers before they dared look round to see what had become of their prince, whom they had left to fight the gang alone. That was old Maitland's text for a month. If any son of his had ever been

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