

"Is it? Have you been there?"

"I've been around one end of it, but nowhere near the buildings. It's all fenced in, sir, and the gates kept locked."

"What an incomprehensible proceeding for Texas! Wait a moment while I speak to Mr. Farnham: he's writing here at my desk.—Gentlemen come in on the porch and sit down, will you not?"

But they excused themselves, and hastened away to remove their full dress. Captain Lawrence had no need to call his wife. She bade her companion good evening, thanked the colonel with a smiling glance for the pleasure the photographs had given her, and added a word of earnest hope that they might find the sergeant uninjured. Then she joined her husband, and together they walked quickly away. Mrs. Belknap and Mr. Perry were left for the moment alone.

"Can you walk home with me?" she asked, in her low, modulated tones, the great, heavily-lashed, swimming dark eyes searching his face. "I have not seen you since they broke in upon our talk last evening, and there is something I want to ask you."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Belknap, but I'm on duty, you see," was the young fellow's answer as he gave a tug to the strap of his cartridge-belt. "Can't you ask me here?"

"How can I?"—and the eyes were full of pathetic disappointment,— "when they may come out any moment? You did not finish telling me about—about the tassel last night. I believe you were glad when they interrupted us. Were you not?"

"Nonsense, Mrs. Belknap! I was having too good a time,—lots of fun."

"Yes," was the reproachful answer, "that is what it was—to you,—mere fun. And now you are going away again, after promising to come in this evening."

"I have to go, Mrs. Belknap. Why, I want to go. Haven't you heard what has happened,—about Sergeant Gwynne?"

"Oh, yes, it is your duty, of course, but how unlucky!" And the pretty face was drooping with its weight of disappointment and sadness. She leaned against the railing near his gauntlet-covered hand, her dark eyes pensively downcast, the dark lashes sweeping her soft, flushing cheek. "And to-morrow you are on guard," she presently continued.

"Yes, unless some one has to go on for me,—in case we are not back in the morning in time."

"Then it's good-bye, I suppose," she said, lifting her eyes once more to his. "After to-morrow there will be little chance of seeing you. Mrs. Page will be here by that time."

Mr. Perry looked at his fair companion with a glance that told of much perturbation of spirit. Mrs. Page was an old and cherished friend of Mrs. Belknap's—so the latter had always said,—and now she was coming to visit her from a station in the Indian Territory. Just why her coming should prevent his seeing Mrs. Belknap or her seeing him was more than the tall subaltern could understand. On the brink of an unpardonable solecism, on the very ragged edge of a blundering inquiry, he was saved—in her estimation—by the sudden return of the orderly and the reappearance of the colonel.

"I've been to the hospital, sir, and to the doctor's quarters. he's not there. They say that's him, sir, riding off yonder." And the orderly pointed to a faint speck just visible in the waning twilight, far away southeastward beyond the Monce.

VI.

Twilight still hovered over the broad expanse of prairie when Lieutenant Perry and his little party, after a brisk canter down the valley, reached the barbed enclosure of Dunraven, and the young commander led unhesitatingly to the gateway on the northern-line. A sergeant of his troop and two private soldiers were his escort at the moment; a third man, by direction of Colonel Brainard, had been sent at the gallop in pursuit of the distant speck which the orderly had pronounced to be Dr. Quin, and the instructions which this messenger bore were to the effect that the post surgeon should ride by the most direct route and join Lieutenant Perry at the north gate of the ranch. In the few minutes which elapsed between the announcement of the doctor's departure on his solitary and unexpected ride and the arrival of the little mounted escort, Perry had time to tell the colonel something of the situation down the Monce and to make a rough sketch of the enclosure and the distant buildings. The direction taken by the doctor, up to the moment when the black speck disappeared from view in the waning light, would be very apt to lead him, if he rode far enough, to some point on the wire fence which spanned the western limit of Dunraven; but that point would be at least five or six miles south of the valley. Possibly there was no gate-way north of that,—certainly no trail was visible on the prairie,—but the more Mr. Perry thought of the matter as he rode away the more was he satisfied that somewhere far down that western line there was an entrance where Dr. Quin, at least, had the "open sesame." All the grazing thus far had been done north of the Monce; all the hunting and coursing, too, had been found best in every way far out to the north and east of the post; and so it happened that no one of the —th seemed to have acquired any knowledge of the English ranch. What the local infantry command was able to tell of it was purely hearsay. None of the officers had ever penetrated the charmed enclosure, and no one of the soldiers was known to have done so. Perry remembered hearing that the Eleventh while stationed there had made some scouts and expeditions out to the south, and that some of these had completely circled the broad lands of the estate, finding well-travelled roads leading from its southern boundaries to the settlements two days' journey farther towards the Gulf; but nowhere was there open or unguarded gap.

(To be Continued.)

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