

THE SECRET OF SADDLE GAP

A WESTERN TALE

BY EDITH G. BAYNE

IN a shoulder of rock lying athwart the Rampart Range and overlooking a deep and swift stretch of the Chinook River a man lay face downward, his head and shoulders just over the edge of the sheer drop. He held a long cord at the end of which a small stone was attached and he appeared to be probing either the depth of the water at the bank's edge or the distance from his own position to the pebbles below, where a thin line of foam curled along the sand. Out in mid-stream the water rushed at a headlong, dizzying speed toward a series of clamorous rapids fifty yards away.

Presently the man drew his cord up hand-over-hand and drawing a small red note book from a pocket of his rough grey shirt made a quick brief calculation with a short bit of pencil and entered an estimate of some kind in the little book. It was the last of half a dozen similar entries. The man gave a sigh of satisfaction, began to whistle softly and getting to his feet looked speculatively across the river at Saddle Gap. His whistling died away and a frown took the place of his smile of satisfaction.

"Saddle Gap, eh? Almost forgot about that," he muttered, with a wry grin. "It's the only blooming obstacle in the whole plan, hang it?"

He glanced quickly up and down and began to roll up the cord, still frowning. There was nothing stealthy about his look or action yet an observer might have gathered an impression of secrecy in his manner. It was almost as though his main desire was to escape observation. Nearly all afternoon he had been taking measurements and on both sides of the river, using an old, leaky punt and crossing three times at peril of his life each trip. Now he called to a long lean calico pinto that was cropping nearby and when the animal trotted up he mounted it and set off up the precarious trail. He, too, was long and lean. He had a keen, close-lipped look, a pair of dark, quick-moving eyes and the air of one who commands. His hands lightly but firmly grasping the reins were long and thin and whiter than those of the average hillsman, but they, like the eyes, looked as though quick motions was their outstanding characteristic. As a matter of fact alertness was the keynote of the man's whole being and he carried a revolver in a handy but inconspicuous place. Once he turned and looked back at Saddle Gap, not fearfully but in a thoughtful way. He was unaware that he had been under close observation, not having seen a human form since leaving Crowder's Crossing at noon.

Saddle Gap was a commanding point on the east side of the river. It was a high, narrow gorge crowned with a rounded rock-formation like a giant saddle—a sort of natural bridge. The gap itself ran inland and lost itself somewhere in the fastnesses of the dense forest but it was known to be honeycombed with caves, either Nature's own or those resulting from the work of prospectors when the country had had a gold rush.

The rider was seeking a cabin that he knew must be along the trail, having noticed it at intervals all afternoon, but because he was a stranger to these mountains he lost the trail twice and was nearly an hour going two miles. The cayuse he had hired in the village ten miles away seemed to be equally strange to the locality. Thus it was that the watcher from a certain hilltop who belonged to the cabin that the man sought was there to greet him when at length he arrived, though having twice the distance to cover and afoot.

The rider pulled up at the top of a little rise and looked in amazement at the neat, cultivated appearance of the lone dwelling and its yard. Flowers rioted everywhere and a little lane led between rows of hollyhocks to the door on either side of which was a window with muslin curtains. This in the heart of the wilds! But even as he laughed, six children rose as though out of the very earth itself and strung themselves across his path in a bare-foot, staring line. They ranged in age from five to thirteen or thereabouts. The stranger was about to hail them when the cabin door opened and a young woman appeared. At sight of whom the gaping youngsters scattered.

"Is this Mark Menary's?" inquired the rider, politely.

"Yes," said the young woman, looking at him with the same frank curiosity of the children.

The rider dismounted and started up the path. A closer view of a very pretty girl, too ridiculously young to be the mother of all those children, almost deprived him of breath for a moment.

"I'd like to see Mr. Menary," he said, managing to find his voice, at length.

"He's not at home," the girl replied. He went up on the Buffalo Fork for fish on Tuesday. Maybe he'll be back to-night—maybe not till to-morrow night. Depends on his catch."

"I see. He fishes mostly, then?"

"In summer, yes. In winter he traps. He's a guide too, sometimes. Were—were you wanting him to guide a party?"

"No, I—the fact is—never mind, I'll wait round till he comes back.

I've made camp not far away"—and the man laughed in an offhand manner as though his business were of little urgency. "In the meantime perhaps you'd stake me to a hand-out?"

"Come in. Never mind those bees. They aren't in stinging humor,"—as he avoided a small swarm.

She ushered him into a very homelike big room, brown-raftered, deep-windowed and cool. In a kind of delightful daze he took a chair and watched her as she fitted about setting a meal on the table for him.

"Think of a girl like this being buried in the heart of a forest!" he said to himself. "Some men don't know their luck!"

She was slender and yet muscular in a dainty creamy-brown-skinned way. Her simple print dress was clean and her brown hair bright and well cared for. She had very clear and soft blue eyes and a slow smile that was very winning. Her voice matched her appearance.

"Cold chicken—biscuits—honey—tea—and red raspberries!" exclaimed the stranger when she had invited him to sit in. "My soul! Do I dream?"

"The berries I just picked, Mr.—"

"Bestwood," supplied the stranger as she paused significantly.

"I got them up on the Wapiti. That's where I was when I first saw you, Mr. Bestwood."

He turned and sent a sharp, though smiling, glance up at her.

"Oh, so you saw me before I rode up here?"

She nodded and placed a jug of cream nearer to him.

"And—er—what did you think?" he pursued idly.

"I didn't think. I knew"—and she flashed him a long side glance.

"Don't think I'm trying to horn in but you see others have been up here and—done just the things you did and—"

"And failed."

"Yes," she said. "It's an old story."

"You—razor-faced hyenal!" snarled the old man suddenly, whipping out his side-arm and waving it almost under the engineer's nose. "Smell that. Now if you don't pack up an' make tracks you'll get it where it'll do the most good."

"It's becoming a bore, eh? But suppose I tell you, confidentially, that I don't intend to fail?"

She smiled slowly and half shook her head.

"You don't know Old Comox," she said, whisking a lone fly away with a tissue napkin.

"I don't know a lot of things,"

Bestwood admitted. "I don't know how the Sam Hill you keep this place looking—like a cross-section of a little paradise—no flies, no dust, no litter, and all those kids!"

"They do make work but I love every one of them," she said glowingly. "They're quite a help, too. Don and Dave milk the cows and Katie's my right hand."

"You must get lonesome, though, for congenial friends? I suppose your husband's away frequently," and the visitor drained his second cup.

She had turned to bring another plate of biscuits, but she stopped short and looking up he saw a faint smile of amusement on her lips.

"You laugh at the idea of lonesomeness with such a large brood round!" he remarked, thinking he had read her aright.

She sat down suddenly and regarded him gravely.

"You, too!" she observed, cryptically, and when he looked his perplexity, went on: "I wonder why every stranger that hits these diggings takes me for dad's wife!"

"Oh! Now it's all clear. Those kids are—"

"My little step-brothers and sisters, Mr. Bestwood."

"I might have guessed!"

At this point the eldest boy put his head in at the door and announced that his father was coming down the upper rapids.

"Good," said Bestwood, as he rose. "And now, Miss Menary, since you've guessed that I'm another of those pesky engineers who keep coming up here, I may as well tell you that I want to see your father, or you, about board. I'll be sticking round for some time. Which of you has the say and would it be too much bother?"

"It's as easy to cook for nine as for eight."

"Thanks. I'll pay you liberally. I live in a tent two miles below and rustle my own breakfast, so I'll only want two meals here, say at noon and at six."

"Very well. Only—"

"Only?"

"I don't think you'll stick round long after Old Comox begins shooting."

"That old fellow's a kind of nacheral-born terror I gather."

"Oh, he isn't so bad when you know him. He and dad are old pals. It's only on the one subject that he acts—ornery."

"Is he quite all there otherwise?" asked Bestwood, dubiously

"Absolutely."

"And it's only when the subject of the [Continued on page 8

