

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

"Seems to me I have, but I've forgotten. You have, doctor, have you not?"

"Heard what, colonel?"

"The name of that ranch down the Monee,—an English ranch, they tell me, about seven miles away."

"Oh, yes!—that one! They call it Dunraven Ranch.—Did the sergeant take any of the hounds with him, captain? It occurs to me he might have been running a coyote or a rabbit, and his horse have stumbled and fallen with him. There is no end of prairie-dog holes down that way."

"No, the dogs are all in. I wouldn't be surprised if he had gone to the ranch. That's an English name, and they are all Englishmen down there, I hear. Very probably that is the solution. They may have tempted him to stay with English hospitality; though it would astonish me if he yielded. I'll tell the men to inquire there first, colonel, and will go and send them now." And, bowing to his commander, Captain Stryker turned and left the porch.

The doctor rose, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, paced slowly to the southern end of the veranda, and gazed down on the distant, peaceful valley, an anxious cloud settling on his brow. The colonel resumed once more the newspaper he had dropped upon the floor. After a moment Dr. Quin came slowly back, stood in front of the entrance a few seconds looking irresolutely at the soldier sprawled at full length in his reclining-chair, stepped towards him with a preparatory clearing of his throat as though about to speak, and then, suddenly and helplessly abandoning the idea, he plunged down the short flight of steps, hurried out of the gate, and disappeared around the fence-corner in the direction of the hospital. Immersed in his paper, the colonel never seemed to note that he had gone; neither did he note the fact that two ladies were coming down the walk. Possibly the vines clustering thickly all over the front of his veranda were responsible for this latter failure on his part, since it took more than a newspaper, ordinarily, to render the gallant dragoon insensible to the approach of the opposite sex. They saw him, of course, despite the shrouding vines, and, with perfectly justifiable appreciation of the homage due them, were mutually resolved that he should come out of that reclining pose and make his bow in due form. No words were necessary between them. The understanding was tacit, but complete.

The soft swish of trailing skirts being insufficient to attract his attention, as they arrived nearly opposite the shaded veranda, a silvery peal of laughter broke the stillness of the early evening. Mrs. Belknap's laugh was delicious,—soft, melodious, rippling as a canary's song, and just as spontaneous. Neither lady had said anything at the moment that was incentive of merriment; but if Mrs. Lawrence had given utterance to the quaintest, oddest, most whimsical conceit imaginable, Mrs. Belknap's laugh could not have been more ready, and her great, dark eyes shot a sidelong glance to note the effect. Down went the paper, and up, with considerable propping from his muscular arms, came the burly form of the post commander. Two sweet, smiling faces beamed upon him through an aperture in the leafy screen, and Mrs. Belknap's silvery voice hailed him in laughing salutation:

"Did we spoil your siesta, colonel? How can I make amends? You see, you were so hidden by the vines that no one would dream of your being there in ambush."

"Oh, indeed, I assure you I wasn't asleep," answered the colonel, hastily. "Won't you come in, ladies, and sit here in the shade awhile? You've been calling, I suppose?"

"Yes,—calling, on the entire social circle of Fort Rossiter. Congratulate us, colonel: we have actually accomplished the feat of visiting every woman in society. We have made the rounds of the garrison. We owe no woman anything,—beyond a grudge or two,—and it has only taken forty-five minutes, despite the fact that everybody was at home."

"Well, come in, Mrs. Belknap; do come in, Mrs. Lawrence. I assure you that, though everybody must have been enchanted to see you, nobody is half as glad as I am. You must be tired after such a round of visits." And the colonel plunged heavily down the steps and hospitably opened the gate.

"We thought we would stroll around until parade," said Mrs. Lawrence, hesitatingly, "and then sit down and watch it somewhere."

"No place better than this," promptly answered the colonel. "You can sit behind the vines on that side and see, or, what we would infinitely prefer, sit here at the entrance and be seen. Meantime, I've been unpacking some photograph-albums this afternoon, and you can amuse yourselves with those while I put on my harness. Come!"

The colonel's collection of photographs was something the ladies had already heard a great deal of. One of the most genial and popular officers in the army, he had gathered together several large albums full of pictures of prominent men and attractive and distinguished women,—not only those with whom he had been associated in his long years of service, but men eminent in national and state affairs, and women leaders in society in many a gay metropolis. Both the ladies had hoped to see this famous collection the evening before, but the colonel had not then unpacked the albums, and they were disappointed. Now, however, the prospect was indeed alluring, and neither could resist. When the first call sounded for parade a few moments after, and the commanding officer was getting himself into his full dress uniform, the two pretty heads were close together, and two pairs of very lovely eyes—one dark and deep and dangerous, the other a clear and honest gray—were dilating over page after page of photographed beauty. There was no need to puzzle over the identity of the originals: under each

picture the thoughtful colonel had carefully written the name and address. Absorbed in this treat, they could barely afford time to look up and smile their thanks as the colonel passed, clanking forth at the sound of adjutant's call, and were too completely engrossed in their delightful occupation to notice what took place at parade.

The long, slender line had formed,—the infantry companies on the right and left flanks, their neat and tasteful dress of blue and white contrasting favorably with the gaudy yellow plumage of the four dismounted troops of the cavalry. Company after company had taken the statueque pose of "parade rest" and its captain faced to the front again, the adjutant was just about moving to his post on the prolongation of the front rank, and the colonel settling back into the conventional attitude of the commanding officer, when from outside the rectangular enclosure of the parade ground—from somewhere beyond the men's barracks—there came sudden outcry and commotion. There were shouts, indistinguishable at first, but excited and startling. Some of the men in ranks twitched nervously and partially turned their heads, as though eager to look behind them and see what was wrong; whereat stern voices could be heard in subdued but potent censure: "Keep your eyes to the front, there, Sullivan!" "Stand fast, there, centre of Third Company!" The guard, too, paraded in front of its quarters some distance behind the line, was manifestly disturbed, and the voice of the sergeant could be heard giving hurried orders. Every man in the battalion seemed at the same instant to arrive at one of two conclusions,—prisoners escaping, or fire over at the stables,—and all eyes were fixed on the imperturbable form of the commanding officer, as though waiting the signal from him to break and go to the rescue. But there the colonel stood, placid, calm, and apparently utterly unconscious of the distant yet nearing clamor. The adjutant hesitated a moment before proceeding further, and glanced appealingly at his chief; whereupon there came from the blue and gold and yellow statue out on the parade, in half-reproachful tones, the quiet order, "Go on!" and the adjutant, recalled to his senses and with evident expression of his sentiments to the effect that if others could stand it he could, brusquely turned his head towards the band and growled, "Sound off!" The boom and crash of drum and cymbal and the blare of brazen throats drowned for a moment the sound of the turmoil without. The next thing the battalion heard, or saw, was a riderless horse tearing full tilt out on the parade and sweeping in a big circle from the right of the line down towards the point where the colonel stood. Following him came a pair of Cheyenne scouts, their ponies scampering in pursuit, but veering off the green as their riders realized that they were intruding on the ceremony of the day. Relieved of his pursuers, the fugitive speedily settled down into a lounging trot, and with streaming mane and tail, with head and ears erect, with falling bridle-rein and flapping stirrups, he circled rapidly the open space between the colonel and the line of battle, then came trotting back along the front, as though searching in the stolid rank of bearded faces for the friends he knew. Officer after officer he passed in review until he came to Stryker's troop, posted on the right of the cavalry, and there, with a neigh of recognition, he fearlessly trotted up to the captain's outstretched hand. Another minute, and two men fell out and made a temporary gap in the rank; through this a sergeant file-closer extended his white glove, relieved the captain of his charge, and led the panting steed away. The men retook their places; the captain again resumed his position in front of the centre of his company, dropped the point of his sabre to the ground, and settled back into "parade rest;" the band went on thundering down the line, countermarched, and came back to its post on the right, making the welkin ring with the triumphant strains of the "Northern Route," the trumpets pealed the "retreat," the adjutant stalked his three yards to the front, faced fiercely to the left and shouted out his resonant orders down the line, three hundred martial forms sprang to attention, and the burnished arms came to the "carry" with simultaneous crash, ranks were opened with old-time precision, the parade "presented" to the colonel with all due formality, the manual was executed just as punctiliously as though nothing unusual had happened; first-sergeants reported, orders were published, parade formally dismissed, the line of officers marched solidly to the front, halted, and made its simultaneous salute to the colonel, who slowly raised and lowered his white-gloved hand in recognition; and then, and not till then, was any one allowed to speak of what was uppermost in every mind,—that Sergeant Gwynne's horse had come in without him, and that the animal's right flank was streaming with blood.

Ten minutes later, Lieutenant Perry, in riding-dress, came hurrying down to the colonel's quarters, where two or three officers were now gathered at the gate. The ladies had put aside the albums, and with anxious faces were scanning the little group, as though striving to gauge from their gestures and expression the extent of the calamity or the possible degree of danger. But Mrs. Lawrence looked fairly startled when her husband's voice was heard for the first time above the general hum of consultation:

"Colonel Brainard, Mr. Perry is coming, I see, and I presume there is no time to be lost. You have asked if none of us who were stationed here ever visited the ranch, and the answer was no. May I suggest that Dr. Quin could perhaps tell something of its inhabitants?"

"Where is the doctor?" asked the colonel, turning suddenly. "Orderly, go and give my compliments to the post surgeon and say I wish to see him here a moment.—All ready, Perry? You have made quick work of it."

"All ready, sir. At least I will be the moment my horse gets here. There go the men running to the stables now."

"Captain Stryker will send a sergeant and four men to report to you, and you are to go direct to Dunraven Ranch. The rest of the troop, with the Cheyennes, will scout the prairie to the east and south. 'Twill soon be too dark to trail, but three of the Indians are going back on the horse's track as far as they can. The adjutant is writing a note to the proprietor of the ranch,—I don't know his name—"

"His name is Maitland, sir."