

CHAPTER V.

It was still early morning at the Mea-quite valley ranch. A calm tranquil-lity rested upon the limitless prairie. The scattered files of trees that everywhere straggled across the undulating plain and gave the locality its distinguishing title were mute and motionless, as if yet in awe of the recent sunrise. A few plover piped mournfully from the uplands. The quarrelsome cawing of ravens, holding a stormy conclave in some remote treetop, at times rose an-grily upon the morning air, and grazing occasionally, at intervals raising his head to regard with attent ears and quivering nostrils the prairie before him, but pursuing a direct course for the distant ranchhouse over the summit level, a

large sorrel horse, saddled and bridled.

but riderless, came shrilly neighing.

The house which the horse was thus approaching was large and substantial and built in the fashion of ranches of the better class. Square in shape, it yet looked from the open prairie a mere box, rising above the vast monotony of the boundless plain. But the curious visitor, who remarked it from a nearer viewpoint, found it commodious in its appointment, surrounded with a strong. barb wire fence and flanked by outbuildings and corrals more ambitious in structure than the dwellings of most ranchmen. A broad, sunny veranda ran the entire length of the house, commanding the vast expanse of the outlying val-

Over the floor of the porch, where the sunlight lay in broad squares and patches, a half dozen Mexican saddles were strewed, their bridles slung upon the circular pommels, their broad stirrup leathers picturesque and embossed. Whips and lariats were lying about. Several colossal rocking chairs occupied the foreground, with a general air of proprietorship enhanced by their un-wieldy bulk. A magnificent buffalo robe, thrown carelessly over a long reclining chair and warm with the rays of the sun, invited luxurious repose.

The wide entrance of the rancho stood invitingly open to the balmy morning air. Within the broad, bare hallway, with its adjacent doors upon either hand opening into various rooms, was dimly n. The walls were picturesque with rifles, revolvers and tennis racquets tastefully arranged and grouped. A guitar lying carelessly among a heap of cushions on a comfortable lounge betrayed by its blue and yellow ribbons the adornment of feminine fingers. A large stuffed eagle with extended wings, at the end of the hall, typified the far-reaching destinies of the American re-

public. A young girl came suddenly to the individual was busy doctoring some all-door and looked out over the broad valley, shading her brown eyes against the and groom him a little. Take his saddle glare of the sunlight with the fingers of off and turn him loose in the dooryard a jeweled hand. She was tall and state- till tomorrow. Don't hopple him!" he ly, and the simple folds of her cloth directed as the man approached in anmorning gown swept to her feet with a graciousness and ease that betokened position. The dainty white collar at her throat was fastened by a single diamond stud that flashed as if in rivalry of the clear eyes above it. Her brown hair was gathered in the simplicity of the Grecian knot-the soft tresses waving about her temples were like spun silk. From the long, dark lashes that swept her beautiful eyes to the heavily bowed slippers that peeped beneath her robe she was all refinement and grace. And the small handkerchief she raised to her parted lips breathed that faint atmosphere of odor which seems to identify the presnce of beauty.

She stood quietly a few moments in the corner of the doorway, gazing out dreamily over the limitless prospect at the vast billows of prairie stretching before her like an emerald sea. Her eyes wore an expression of wistful tenderness, and there was in them a shade of disappointment, as one has seen the water of a liquid pool darker in the shadow of some overhanging rock. Then she came listlessly forward and sank down upon the reclining chair, nestling in the soft folds of the warm robe with a little comfortable shudder. Her dark lashes swept her cheek half hidden in the long fur. Her hands held a vellum copy of verses she had taken from the chair. But she was not reading, and the eyes she lifted absently from the book strayed wearily away to the valley. Surely it was very early in the day for reverie and medita-

The sudden neighing of a horse startled her. She sprang to her feet abruptly. the color mounting to her cheeks and suffusing her neck with blushes, an eloquent delight flashing in her dark eyes. The sorrel horse stood expectantly at the gateway of the rancho, his long lariat trailing from the saddle bow, his mane and forelock tossed and disheveled with his long wandering.

The girl gazed at him breathlessly a brief moment; the next, the rosy flush faded from her cheeks and she stood white as the neighboring wall, her hands clasped before her. She reeled a little and sat down again in the nearest chair as if to recover herself.

A few moments she sat thus, trempling violently, her bosom heaving, rewith blanched face and agonized eyes. Then there was the sound of footsteps, and a tall, handsome man, with bronzed face and flashing eyes, came striding along the hall and out upon the sunlit

"Why, what's the matter, Edith? You are not ill. I hope," he said, coming rapidly toward the young lady with an ankions face as he observed the apparent weakness of her attitude.

"Oh, nothing, Phil!—a sudden faint-ness, that's all," the young girl answered, striving to rise, a faint color like the flush of dawn struggling to her cheek: She put her hand to her head with a deft, woman' _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

She laughed an anxious, nervous nittle

The man regarded her with grave solic-

"You don't seem as well lately," he said. "I fear you find this wild life of ours less beneficial than we anticipated, or perhaps, Edith, you neglect your exercise. We must go today for another long prairie canter. Let me call my wife to your assistance."

He turned back to the door of the rancho and called "Kate!" twice in a loud, imperative voice. There was a musical reply, the sound of a closing door, the hurrying of slippered feet across the bare hallway, and then, with the sudden revelation of a pale blue morning wrapper, fluttering skirts and flying golden braids, the advent of

"Just see the state that Edith is in!" said Phil Kernochan pityingly, directing the gaze of this blond and radiant apparition to the figure in the chair.

What had we better do with her?"
He turned as he spoke,
"Hello!" he shouted, his eyes falling for the first time on the sorrel pony standing by the rancho gate. "There's Hal's pony! When in the world did he arrive?" He glanced again at the re-

in upon him. "Why, it can't be," he said in amaze-ment, "that his horse has walked off and left him, and he's been obliged to lay out a night or two on the bald prairie! Well,

that's rich, I declare!" He ran hurriedly down the steps of the veranda and strode away to the ranch gate. He threw it wide open, and the pony, with a whinny of welcome, trotted

gladly within. Kernochan regarded him critically. taking his meerschaum pipe from his lips, an amused smile accenting the curves of his mouth beneath his light mustache. There was no sign of violence or acci-dent. A few cockle burs clung to the mustang's mane, an acquisition of his recent travels. The rolled blanket still hung from the crupper of the saddle.

Kernochan gathered up the lariat and slung it on the pommel.



"Rube!" he shouted, turning his head in the direction of the neighboring corrals, where a thick set and sun tanned

swer to the summons He turned back to the veranda, laughing quietly to himself, as if some pleasant revelation had dawned upon him. The fragrant wreaths of smoke from his pipe rose above his head and brooded in the still air.

"Well, ladies," he said, coming tranquilly up the steps, his recent amuse-ment still lingering in his eyes, "it seems our careless friend, Bruce, has seen fit to let his horse come home without him. 1 suppose the only thing we can do is to ride out and look him up."
"There, Edith Stafford, I told you that

was all it amounted to!" exclaimed Kate Kernochan, smiling reassuringly at the the young lady over whom she had been sympathetically engaged ever since his departure. "Give me back my cameo vinaigrette this instant! The idea of your being so foolish, dear!"
Miss Edith Stafford languidly extend-

ed the article in question—an exquisite blue trifle carved to represent a crested grebe, and a rel'e of Phil Kernochan's generosity dur.. , his extravagant court-

"Do you think, then, he isn't dead?" she inquired, sitting up with sudden animation. "I was certain of it! Oh, dear! I shall never get used to the dreadful uncertainties of this primitive country. 1 been perpetrated." Then, springing ea-gerly to her feet: "Let us ride for him at once. Poor fellow, he may be starving to death! I'll put on my riding habit right off."

She dashed away to the door with a haste that contrasted with her recent feebleness.

"One moment," said Kenochan, catching up a leather quirt from the veranda and flecking his boot with it. "I thought we'd make a hunting trip of this search and kill two birds with one stone. Ha! ha! starving to death-that's good! You catch Henry Bruce starving to death with a breechloading shotgun and maches enough to stock a ranch! Not much! Well, what do you say? There are lots of wild turkey be ween here and the Colora lo river. We might take the saw ng and course any trat came our

"Oh, that would be charming!" cried Miss Stafford, turning back to flash her gratification upon Kernochan, with a revelation of radiant teeth and eloquent smiles. "Come, Kate, let's hurry and get ready! We won't be a moment!"

And with this feminine estimate of that indefinite period allotted to matters of the toilet the ladies rushed from the

CHAPTER VI.

The vertical rays of noontide were beating down upon Cynthia's bower. The leafy ceiling above was bright with a thousand luminous points from the steady glare without. Now and then a cone fell or a feathery seed vessel slipped softly to the earth in the gloom of the columned sisles. The rattling

notes of a banjo struck at intervals, the low murmur of voices in conversation, and above all the odor of burning tobacco, overmastering the aromatic incense of the wilds, announced the presence of visitors. The were Bruce and Cynthia.

The young girl was seated at the base of a scarred and denuded bemlock, the light sifting through the branches above and falling full upon her head and shoulders. A small banjo, showing signs of abuse and exposure to the elements, lay in her lap. Occasionally she struck the strings. Half reclining at her feet and completely enveloped in the wreaths of smoke that brooded like a blue vapor in the quiet air, Lruce lay smoking. The antelope fawn, its feet curled up, its velvet eyes blinking crowsily, solemn and meditative as usual, and Auius completed this rural quartet.

A sudden breath of air dispersed the smoke, favoring the dog with a passing whiff. He sneezed violently and looked annoyed, as if the last test had been put upon his patience.

"You smoke too much, Mr. Bruce," said Cynthia, waving the passing cloud from the dog's head with a compassionate hand. "Lf you keep it up, I woulan't wonder of one day you got jest as homeclining girl. A light seemed breaking ly and coffee colored as thet skull. Why don't ye quit before it gets you?"

Bruce laughed and removed the long amber mouthpiece of his pipe from his lips. It was of meerschaum and carved to represent a hand holding a human

"I don't know," he said, blowing a huge ring that shot forward with curling folds until it broke upon the nose of the nodding antelope. "I suppose I like to smoke, and then I seem to stand it very well. Possibly, too, there is some-

thing in my associations with the pipe."
"Who gave it to you, Mr. Bruce?"
said Cynthia, quickly raising her eyes to his. They were solemn and deep, and beneath their dark lashes reminded Eruce of some calm, blue pool he had seen in the shadow of a wood.

"A friend of mine," he answered indefinitely, noting her earnestness.
"Yes," she said, "but I meant was it

a man or wasn't ic?" Her eyes dropped suddenly from his face, and she struck the banjo roughly in her embarrassment.

"It was a lady," Bruce replied gravely. "Light or dark complecteur" asked Cynthia breathlessly, not raising her

"Dar's," said Bruce in the same tone-"a rich, c camy brown. I don't think that even that beautiful tint there," he continued, indicating where the soft white of the stem was faintly dyed, "could hope to vie with her. Her eyes were dark, too-more like that,"-touching the live of the bowl-"and her hair -there is nothing here to show you that Cynthia sighed.

"Lawful sakes!" she exclaimed. "An is thet the reason you're smokin thet thing all the while, 'cause ye jest naturally expect one day to make it look like

the chocolate colored woman?" Bruce hurriedly disclaimed any such

"Well, I wouldn't try," she rejoined, schaum that he was colorin once, but he said before he got through it colored him instead. I reckon so." After this alarming instance of the effect of nicotine, she became silent. Bruce continued

"How old is she?" Cynthia inquired, suddenly, turning from him and glancing across the river.

"That's an uncertain question," the gentleman replied. "In fact, I know nothing so difficult to ascertain precisely as the age of a young woman."

Cynthia looked puzzled. Then she

apparently received an inspiration. "Didn't ye get to see her teeth?" she inquired demurely, but revealing an irresistible circle of pearl by the question.

The gentleman overlooked in silence this query, prompted no doubt by her knowledge of sheep. "Where does she live?" inquired Miss

Dallas, nothing daunted. "About 20 miles from here." Bruce

"Oh!" said Cynthia. She was sudden y silent. The soft sunlight played amid he tresses of her golden hair as with downcast lashes she caressed the antelope, burying her fingers in his rough coat. A few needles shaken from the pines drifted down upon her. It was as if the fond fathers of the wood were was quite positive some awful crime had | wafting a benediction upon the one who cheered their solitude.

> Suddenly Cynthia raised her head. "Do you expect to see her soon?"

-whom?" "Thet girl you're so gone on?" she in-

mired with matter of fact gravity. Bruce was about to enter an emphatic protest. In his carnestness he leaned toward Cynthia and took her hand. The girl trembled a little, and the color dyed her cheek, but she did not withdraw her hand. She lifted her eyes to his and smiled upon him so sweetly, that whatever of mischief there had been in her question fled before it. Such a radiant beauty had sad lenly come to dwell within her

The quick snapping of a twig caused Bruce to look up. He dropped the girl's hand abruptly with an embarrassed air. I'wo ladies were standing in a sunlit opening without and gazing into the

bower. They were in riging habits, their ong skirts gathered in their left hands, heir whips in their right. The younger of the two-a dashing brunette-was modishly attired. A glossy black beaver, perched saucily on her head, accented the flash of the dark eyes beneath. The cit of black lace at her throat was fastened with a diamond. Her hands were instidiously gloved. She laughed a merry, ringing laugh as she advanced into

the bower. a certain familiar air of proprietorship. 'we have found you out at last! And as usual, surprised you in the attitude of a gallant. Do not let as interrupt you. beg, but at least favor us with an in troduction.



"We have found you out at last!" She glanced coldly down at Cynthia. who, intuitively recognizing a rival, returned the glance with the customary

feminine cordiality. Why, Edith-you here? exclaimed Bruce, springing to his feet and clasping the gloved hand in both his own. "And Kate?" advancing to meet the lady who had lingered without. "How is this?"

"It means," said Kate, laughing, "that you are a careless, wicked fellow and that Edith has been half dead with anxiety, fancying you killed or starved to

"No such thing!" replied Edith, with spirit, lashing a small cedar with her riding whip in her embarrassment. "I knew all the while we should find him at some farmhouse. But I certainly think, Hal, she added, glancing down at Cynthia, who, with lowered crest, had been care as ing her fawn and lavishing tender sol. situde upon the solemn Aulus ever sir co the ladies' arrival-"I certainly think you are very exclusive in regard to your new dulcinea.

Eruce glanced at her with a look in his hazel eyes that was almost reproach Their eyes met. Edith's expression was one of defiance, but in spite of herself there stole into her dark orbs such a wist ful tenderness-such a caressing fondness for the man before her—that she let their curtained fringes drop before his stead-fast gaze and turned her attention to Miss Dallas. An embarrassing pause en-

"Cynthia." she heard the cordial voice of Bruce say a minute later, ... his is Miss Stafford-the lady of whom I spoke as having given me the pipe. Let me make you acquainted; also with Mrs. Kerno-

chan—my partner's wife."

The ladies exchanged salutations, Mrs. Kernochan bestowing a kindly glance upon Cynthia as her admiring eyes dwelt upon the piquant face in its picturesque setting of red gold tresses. Cynthia's greeting was frank, but accompanied by a shy restraint that was unusual with her; Miss Stafford's disdainful and reserved. Probably her feminine appreciation of the fact that Diana's namesake was both fascinating and pretty prece, tibly lowered the temperature of her recognition.

A few moments later they were al. wending their way back to the ranch. Cynthia preceding them, escorted by the gracefully tripping fawn and the digni-fied Aulus. Bruce accompanied the la-

"This picturesque gypsy acquaintremarked Miss Stafford, glancing at Bruce from under her eyelids as they fared on. "I can readily see how easily you forget your former friends."

"Nonsense, Edith!" Bruce returned, with some impatience, breaking a small twig of dry brush as they passed and hurling it from him violently as if to give vent to his irritation. "This banter and child's play have gone far enough. The little Lone Star maiden is quite a character-a charming little idyl of her native river. I want you to cultivate her and appreciate her originality. She is like a spicy breath from her native woods; she interests me by her very novelty.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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