

NYMPH OF THE WEST. HOWARD SEELY.

Your eloquence is quite astounding, considering the apathy of your interest, Miss Stafford returned satirically, glancing away in the direction of the low western hills.

"But how came she possessed of that beautiful antelope?" inquired Kate, anxious to divert Edith's jealous annoyance. "I quite envy her such a charming companion."

"Isolated as she is," Bruce replied gravely, "she is not without her admirers. The mother of this fawn, she tells me, was shot by one Buck Jerrold, a cowboy admirer of hers, I fancy. He found the little thing bleating about the body of the dead antelope and brought it in to her after one of his hunting trips. Patient nursing enabled her to rear it."

They had reached the ranch gate and passed within the inclosure. Alcides Dallas, smoking one of Phil Kernochan's long cigars at a precarious angle owing to the scarcity of his teeth, was seated on a nail keg under a live oak, regaling the latter with one of his most dismal fantasies upon the violin.

Mr. Kernochan, discreetly removed to the vantage of the distant doornote, was preserving the attitude of polite attention, but with a contortion of feature that was distressing to witness. The tableau was so ludicrous and expressive that the party burst into laughter as they joined him. Alcides, seeing that his efforts were producing an erroneous impression, ceased playing at once, and setting his instrument down regarded them vacantly, a hand placed idly upon either knee.

"Ye don't seem to ketch on to what I was gettin' at," he said, regarding them with his lack luster eyes. "I reckon ye would have, though, if ye'd waited till I got to the 'windup.' But of ye'd know Marier ez I did and hed to live with her ez I hed inter the bargain I allow there'd been no question."

He paused as if for confirmation. That being not forthcoming, but his visitors preserving a grave silence—an apology, it seemed, for their previous rudeness—he essayed to present his reflections in a more forcible way.

"It was nigh onto 10 years," he said deliberately, crossing his legs luxuriously as he sat upon the nail keg, removing his cigar carefully from its socket between his teeth and blowing a volume of smoke forcibly upon the weed—"it was nigh onto 10 years that I lived with Marier, and a more hair raisin existence, I'll allow, was never lived by any critter within the circle of God's providence." "Father," said Cynthia, coming forward with a look of annoyance in her blue eyes, "aren't it almost time to have dinner? Don't you think you better put off what you're goin' to say about mamma until we've all had somethin' to eat and'll be better able to stand it?"

An amused smile went round the circle. "I reckon so, Cynthy," said her father, rising to his feet, not without visible regret at her interruption of his narrative.

"What's gone with Ameyler natch'ally? Tell her to hurry up her cakes and not keep everybody waitin'. S'posin we fetch the table out an eat dinner in the open air, where we'll hev plenty of room, bein ez we happen to be so durned crowded!" With this hospitable climax he rolled an inquiring eye around the assembled company, resting finally upon Bruce.

"Oh, that would be charming!" exclaimed the impulsive Mrs. Kernochan, with a little gesture of ecstasy. "So like a picnic! And to think of our being able to do it with perfect comfort in the month of February! There is something astonishing, Edith, to write about to your northern friends."

Forthwith the edict of Alcides was carried to the ebony Amelia by the delighted Cynthia.

"Pears like de domestic contrapans ob dis yere ranch am all abnquatulated," grumbled that important personage as she busied herself in carrying out the crockery and arranging the table. "De boss am jes' ez crazy ez de rest ob 'em," she added darkly as she noted old Dallas still violently attacking his cigar and watching her preparations with evident satisfaction. "De fac' is, fo' God, I spec' de ole man's brain hab been soft'nin' fo' de las' yeh. Ef he keeps up like he hab been goin on lately, de reckonin day am not far away."

And with a gesture of utter bewilderment and disgust she disappeared in the kitchen.

That picturesque banquet under the good live oaks was long remembered by guests and host. The details of the memorable repast are not strictly a part of this veracious chronicle. We are not called upon to record how Cynthia arayed herself in her most gossamer robes with a view to paralyzing the faultless Edith and presided at the upper end of the festive board, flanked on either side by the patient Aulus and the mischievous fawn; how the great turkey was served in a tremendous dish pan, it happening that there was no other utensil at the ranch sufficiently large to afford him accommodation; how the last drops of the extra-precious whiskey which Sheriff Mosely had donated were lavishly poured to crown the cups of cheering eggnog that passed from guest to guest, and how, above the heads of the merry revellers, the hardy Texan oak bent ever with a sturdy sympathy and showered their bounty on that rural feast, dispensing a perennial benison of affairs and withered leaves that lent the spray, in the words of Mrs. Phil Kernochan, "a true picnic flavor"—all these are phases of the festivities less to be dwelt upon than imagined.

I must not omit to mention, however, a musical feature of this frontier dinner. It was at that convivial period usually indicated as "across the walnuts and the wine." The afternoon was declining. The short, bright wintry day was losing itself in pensive shadows and gray mono-

tone. Something of the sadness of the approach of night began to fall upon the company when Mrs. Kernochan proposed singing, probably from a sense of this. After various ineffectual efforts to arouse the table to the attempting of a chorus she abandoned these in a personal appeal to Miss Stafford and Henry Bruce.

"Come, Edith," said she, "you and Hal must really do something for us. Sing that lovely thing you have been learning lately that is so like a hope of heaven in a field of graves."

Thus bidden, after the usual protestations of being in bad voice, etc.—afflictions which I observe affect the amateur vocalist quite as unremittingly as the most capricious prima donna—Miss Edith uplifted a contralto so singularly rich and thrilling that the very mocking birds among the live oaks were stricken mute with admiration. Doubtless they were charmed, too, with the tenor of Henry Bruce, who sang with an appreciative sympathy which is often lacking in the work of more accomplished vocalists. About his performance also there was a subtle suggestion of being quite in harmony with the beautiful brunette whose voice thrilled so passionately with his.

This was very convincing to one of the audience. She sat apart, quite dejected and alone. Her sweet eyes were downcast, and as she raised them at the close there was a strange dew upon them, "like woodland violets newly wet." Yet lest you, my dear sir or madam, fail to appreciate the pathos of this affecting duet I subjoin the words. Read them, since they are eloquent with a faith more cheering than creed or sermon:

Some day, we say, and turn our eyes Toward the fair hills of paradise:

Some day, some time, a sweet, new rest Shall blossom, flowerlike, in each breast:

Some time, some day, our eyes shall see The faces kept in memory;

Some day their hands shall clasp our hands Just over in the morning land;

Some day our ears shall hear the song Of triumph over sin and wrong;

Some day, some time, but, oh, not yet, But we will wait and not forget

That, some day, all these things shall be, And rest be given to you and me.

So wait, my heart, though years move slow, The happy time will come, we know.

I am afraid, however, that what most appealed to our little Cynthia and caused the singular dew above alluded to was a certain energy of conviction about the singing of the musical couple and an apparent belief in an earthly "rest" and a "happy time" that would attend both, albeit their impatient hearts found the years "moving slow." I am not positive, of course, but it would seem that the circumstantial evidence pointed to that conclusion. I can only say that when the sweet ballad ceased and the little concert was at an end she was oppressed by a sudden sense of loneliness and left the banquet quite abruptly. She hurried away to her bower, there to confide her disquietude to the circumambient pines. What view was taken of her agitation by these ascetic mourners of the wood I cannot say. I only know that after Cynthia had relieved her overburdened feelings in a shower of passionate tears they were as ignorant of the cause of this sudden melancholy as their protegee.

Why was she weeping, pray? She was not in love with this fascinating Mr. Bruce—she, Cynthia Dallas, who knew nothing in nature altogether admirable save her antelope fawn, no loyal heart except the dignified and magnanimous Aulus. Wherefore this gratuitous thunderstorm?

Nevertheless it was with a feminine conviction that the faultless Miss Edith Stafford had taken her at a very unfair disadvantage and wounded her in a very sensitive spot by singing so bewitchingly with Henry Bruce that this Lone Star logician dried her eyes. Had she sung badly or been guilty of the slightest discord she could have overlooked it. But under the circumstances it was altogether unparliamentary. She had been tricked and cajoled.

To be sure, she entirely overlooked in her sophistry the fact that Miss Stafford had known Henry Bruce long before she had been favored with his acquaintance, but she would have dismissed this reflection as irrelevant had it occurred to her. And I think that through it all a vivid recollection of the air of ownership with which that lady had laid her gloved hand upon the gentleman's shoulder when she had surprised them together a few hours since still rankled in her memory. What right indeed had she to treat him as if he were some fine woolled sheep marked with her "road brand" and to be claimed as an estray?

She had lashed herself into a tempest of indignation over his last thought when she was startled by some one quickly entering the bower. It was Henry Bruce. Cynthia looked up at his strong, athletic figure and his kindly eyes, beaming down upon her with a certain caressing glance quite inseparable from his look when interested—a characteristic, by the way, that was very misleading and had brought misery to many a confiding feminine heart—and it seemed to her he had never appeared so handsome before. Possibly jealousy had supplied her with spectacles.

"Why are you moping here all alone, Cynthia?" he demanded, as if he were reproving some wayward child. "Don't you know we are almost ready to go? The ladies are looking for you everywhere."

"I don't care," the girl replied, turning away and hiding her face in the rough coat of the antelope, which had gone calmly to sleep during his mistress' recent emotion.

"Why, what is the meaning of this?" inquired the young man, throwing himself on the ground beside her and taking one of her hands gently in his. It was snatched rudely away and buried in the fur of the antelope, but soon reappeared again, with an indecision of movement and lack of repose that seemed to say eloquently, "Detain me, if you please!" Bruce was swift in his deductions. He took pity on the fluttering waif. This time it rested confidently in both his

own. But the face buried in a fur of the antelope was very restless, as if endeavoring to bore its way into the fawn's innermost emotions, and after some moments of this distressing conduct Cynthia's loosely gathered tresses took compassion on their owner also. Her hair came down and wept in golden rain upon her shoulders. Her agitation now suffered an effectual eclipse.

After an interval of what might have been termed silent communion, during which Mr. Bruce stroked fondly the little fingers within his own, the gentleman hazarded a remark which his knowledge of the facts hardly justified. "Are you so sorry I am going away, Cynthia?" he asked, apparently addressing the tumbled masses of golden hair.

The disheveled locks were suddenly agitated by a tumultuous movement that was barely intelligible. Evidently their owner was nodding an assent.

"Why?" inquired Bruce, ceasing to caress the hand.

A long pause. Finally the usual reply came apparently from an inaccessible depth and accompanied by a long drawn sigh.

"Because."

Bruce smiled to himself, whether from gratification or in irony of the feminine reason did not transpire. The gentleman not venturing upon any further inquiry nor hazarding any additional enquirements, the young girl suddenly sat up.

"Do you mean it?" she said, regarding him wistfully through the mist of her tangled tresses that streamed in her eyes.

"Mean what?"

"That you are really going?"

"Certainly."

"What for—so as to be with her?"

"So as to get home and attend to my business," Bruce replied, avoiding the issue.

The girl swept her hair out of her eyes with a sudden impatient movement and leveled her brows full upon him.

"Then she hasn't anything to do with it?" she said, with a look of relief.

"She will be in the party, of course, but that is not the reason of my departure," he replied, truthfully enough.

Cynthia was silent, apparently thinking.

"You'll come and see me again?" she said at length.

"Of course I will—if you wish it."

"I do," she replied frankly.

Both were silent.

"Henry Bruce," Cynthia said at last, lifting her eyes to him with a pleading earnestness, "there's going to be a ball over at San Marcus one of these days, and I want you to take me. Will you do it?"

"I guess so," the young man replied indifferently. "That is, if nothing happen to prevent. Have you no other escort?"

Cynthia scowled.

"I never saw the time yet I had to go round begging," she replied tartly.

"Captain Foraker, I reckon, is glad enough to get the chance. He's very obliging."

Bruce overlooked the inference.

"When is this remarkable affair to come off?" he inquired.

"About the close of the spring 'round-ups—some weeks off yet," she replied, looking at him fixedly and twisting the antelope's coat in a way that must have been torture.

"Cynthia," said Bruce, leaning toward her and looking into her eyes, "I want you to promise me that you won't let that man take you anywhere. You must know, from what your father says, that his company is not creditable to any young woman—much less yourself."

The girl looked down at the fawn.

"Say you'll take me, and I will," she stipulated.

"I have already—conditionally," Bruce rejoined.

"I know that," said Cynthia, "but I don't want any hangin' fire. Are you thinkin' of takin' that dark girl?" she suddenly inquired.

"Not at all," Bruce answered, "but business might prevent. I may be at The Post selling my wool. I might be sick—a thousand things might happen. I cannot promise."

"Very well," said Cynthia, rising with decision, but with a disappointed look.

"Neither can I. I reckon I hear your sweetheart a-callin' you. P'raps you better be goin'."

And calling to Aulus and the antelope she whisked suddenly out of the bower.

Bruce returned to the ranch with a feeling of discomfiture. He had the welfare of Miss Dallas sincerely at heart. He had decided to warn her against the attentions of Captain Foraker, of whose indiscriminate and heartless gallantry he had long been aware. But he had met with rebuff and was naturally chagrined.

He found his companions mounted and impatiently awaiting him. Phil Kernochan was holding the bridle rein of a small sorrel pony already saddled for the journey.

Bruce delayed only to shake the horny hand of his host and wave a farewell to the ebony Amelia, who was standing in the doorway of her quarters. Cynthia was nowhere to be seen. Springing into the stirrups of the sorrel, he rode away with the rest, absorbed in his gloomy reflections.

But a few hundred yards from the house what seemed to him to be the loud chirrup of a ground squirrel caused him to look up as he rode far in the rear of the cavalcade.

They were just passing a pile of rocks on the crest of a western divide. On the topmost pinnacle of this natural elevation he caught a glimpse of Cynthia seated in her gossamer robes, an arm thrown about each of her inseparable companions. A light breeze stirred the disheveled masses of her golden hair, which she had not yet taken the trouble to rearrange. She smiled down upon him serenely from the inaccessible height. Bruce waved her a parting greeting with his heavy riding quirt. As he did so he saw her bend forward eagerly and with the rosy tips of her little fingers fling him a dainty kiss.

CHAPTER VII.

A trio of mounte, Meg, rode up to the

Mesquite valley ranch. They were dusty and travel worn, and the horses they bestrode were jaded and flecked with the foam of hard riding. At the ranch gate they halted, and the central figure of the group—a small man with a slouching coat in the saddle—removed his distinguishing sombrero and wiped the perspiration from his high forehead.

"By the Lord!" he exclaimed, dashing a hard, small hand across his eyes with a quick, impatient gesture, "how the sun glares today! Whether it's my bein up so much nights or thet Lampasas whiskey, I kin skursely see my hand afore my face. Dick, chuck me over thet flask of 'tarantula juice!'"

Thus commanded, the individual addressed—one Mr. Jake Sharp of choleric memory—extracted from his ducking jacket a large tin pocket companion known on the frontier as a "silent comforter" and tossed it to his comrade. He was a big, muscular man of the herculean type, and he flung the flask from him as if it had been a feather. The other caught it deftly.

"A-ah!" ejaculated the first speaker, clearing his throat after throwing his head back and partaking freely of its contents, "that stuff takes hold whether it's damagin or otherwise. I feel refreshed a'ready. Humly Jim, will you irrigate?"

The third party, addressed by this complimentary title, exhibited the customary frontier alacrity in alcoholic matters and reached out a hand more or less disfigured by scars and "tatters" for the liquid refreshment.

He was not a prepossessing object. His long, lank hair fell down upon his coat collar. His beard was straggling and untrimmed, and his nose was gone—that is to say, the nostrils were there, but only in the shape of two rifts or fissures in his disfigured face, the bridge of that distinguishing feature having been literally plowed away by a 6-shooter bullet in a duel at close quarters.

Despite the disorder of his dress, due to dust and hard riding, the small stature of the first speaker, his heavy mustache, bald forehead and nervous manner revealed Sheriff Mosely of Oskaloos. He blew the few remaining drops of spirit from his huge mustachios and tweaked them fiercely as he dismounted.

"I reckon we better tie up till the sun gets down a little," he said to his companions. "I ain't very well known here, but if thet chap Kernochan is as likely a feller as his pardner, Henry Bruce, we won't get no slouch of a reception. Ye might give Swiththreens a feed of corn afore ye come in."

With this considerate suggestion for the welfare of his mare—a long limbed, gaunt, ill favored roan—he unslung his revolvers from his saddle pommel and strode away to the porch, buckling on his holster belt as he went.

The afternoon sunshine was slumbering on the broad veranda. A pair of Scotch greyhounds raised themselves lazily from the doornote and barked at the stranger. The quick rustling of a woman's dress and a vision of fluttering ribbons and flying braids as she hurried into the house indicated that the fair Kate had also been surprised by the arrival.

"Doggone it, thet's a woman all over!" exclaimed the sheriff, halting in his tracks and patting the heads of the dogs, who fawned upon him. No dumb animal could long resist the approaches of Ike, much less anything of the canine type. He possessed the true sportsman's touch, and they detected it at once.

"Thet's a woman every time," continued Mr. Mosely, confiding a knowing wink to the posts of the front gallery. "She's prob'ly gone in to slick up. It's no use though! I've been tryin to impress it on the female sex fur the best part of a wearin life thet they ain't no power natch'ally over the sheriff of Oskaloos."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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