

THE NYMPH OF THE WEST. BY HOWARD SEELY.

A blow from the outside was the only response.

"That's right!" shouted Ike as a second blow caused the door to spring on its hinges.

He emphasized the remark by drawing the slide and discharging his revolver through the aperture.

"It's just as I reckoned," he said quietly. "They're comin' back agin, and this time they've got a timber with 'em, and that door is goin' in. I reckon we'll make a division of forces."

"Call him," he whispered. Humly Jim complied. A second later Bruce stepped through the opening.

"Fardner," he said, placing his hands upon his shoulders and gazing into his eyes, "yo don't need me to tell ye that this'll be a close call for you and me, and mebbe one or both of us is goin' home. But, by the living God, I'm here to tell ye that there's no man I'd rather fight for or die alongside!"

He pressed a pair of 8-shooters into his companion's hands as he spoke. "Now, then," he said, setting his square shoulder against the shoulder of Bruce, and cocking his pistols, "let 'em come on, d— 'em! They'll find they've got more than they bargained for, or else I've forgotten how to shoot!"

A rush from without drowned his words as a blow delivered with the force of a battering ram caused the door to leap inward. A shower of dust and plaster fell to the floor.

A moment's pause ensued. The soldiers, thinking that the weapons were those of the sheriff and his deputy and that Bruce was in the interior of the jail, were averse to unnecessary bloodshed.

"I reckon you hear that, Ike Mosely," he said, with an oath. "The boys are rakin' your lockup from the windows. You might as well hand that feller over quiet and peaceable before they take him out a corpse. We've sworn to string him up, and as we're ten to your one ye might as well be sensible and give in."

"You think so, do you?" retorted the sheriff through his set teeth. "I'll let you know I think different! I'll allow that me and Jim kin hold only one end of this jail, but that's about what we calculate to do. Of course of you kill him in th' meantime I ain't responsible, but the first man of you that steps across that door'll be gone in—I give you that flat!"

The sheriff had hardly spoken when the door of the inner room swung quickly back and Humly Jim appeared. He was not visible to the throng without. Closing the door behind him, he leaned against it. His voice came distinctly to the ears of Mosely and Bruce.

"That ain't no use for me to be put in any more time in thar," he said slowly. "That ain't no prisoner to guard. Leastwise none that's likely to get away. That last volley settled Lem's account for good and all, I reckon. The darned lights killed the wrong man. P'raps that bein the case you've got more use for me here in front."

Mosely was about to whisper some hurried command to his deputy when a second volley crashed through the inner room, splintering the woodwork and beams. The sounds of this terrific fusillade had not entirely ceased before a sudden noise borne on the night wind came to their ears from without.

"Fall back!" shouted the imperative voice of Colonel Hunt. "Fall back, now, all of you, and dispersal! This business has gone far enough."

At the sharp command Foraker's men, realizing they were now between two fires, scattered in all directions. The sudden freak o' yours for a moonlight pasear sorter took the sand out o' them sojers, natch'ally, didn't it? What angel sent you down our way at this hour o' the night?"

Colonel William Hunt removed his hat, and the moonlight shone full upon his serious face.



Cynthia Dallas staggered trembling to the doorway.

"You've struck it, Mosely," he said solemnly. "An out and out angel and no mistake. I ain't no call to take t' myself any credit for this yer night's bizness. It all belongs to a woman—a little gal es galloped 10 miles to bring me word, and notwithstanding her rid with us every step of the way and put the blush to every man in my troop—a gal es I'd bank on ag'in half the men I ever see and who's too good a darned sight for the best man in the state."

And even at this moment pale, breathless and disheveled Cynthia Dallas staggered trembling to the doorway and sank fainting on the threshold.

CHAPTER XIII.

With the arrival of the rangers and their armed investment of the jail at Bradford post the open animosity against Henry Bruce vanished.

How far the judicial mind may have been influenced by the sullen presence of the more disaffected of Foraker's men in the courtroom and by the armed demonstration of the night before it is impossible to determine.

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new anyman else to carry conviction in that thrivin settlement—unless it was a 6-shooter, and even then I reckon whiskey'd stand the best show. Ye see," he said, pulling at the straps of his heavy boots and glancing at them as if for inspiration, "the poppation is that rigid and narrer minded that it needs suthin of that nature to get the milk o' human kindness to flow. They want suthin to start 'em!"

"Ef I could go down thar now in the interests of justice and just float the town, jest play the millionaire and do the generous thing—it might cost you suthin—but I reckon—I reckon," said Mr. Jerrold cautiously, "we might get an honorable and squar deal, even in that benighted settlement."

"It's ag'in the natur o' things," continued Mr. Jerrold, "to look for favorable results on any other ground. Them fellers down that way, I reckon, are what Parson Centrettt calls 'postimists'—they're malarial in their tastes, and they'd get things crooked on general principles. Accordin to their view, everything is crossgrained from the start. They jest natch'ally look at things on the bias—so to speak."

"They'd allow, for instance, that Henry Bruce laid all night for Foraker out on the San Marcus road; that he rounded him up and started him on the 'long trail' because he was stampedin his plans and prospects. That's what they'd 'a done, and that's the way they'd look at it. You and me knows different—that it was done in self defense. But it'll need judicious manipularin to make them liberal minded and to git 'em at all charitably disposed. They must be elevated to that pint. Then ye'll git justice. Their moral natur sorter leave off where the rest of us begin."

He paused and looked seriously at Kernochan to note the effect of his words. Evidently gathering that, from his visitor's previous opinion of the town of Okalo, his logic was beginning to tell on him, he summed up his position in a few words:

"Ef I rec'lect, I was a leetle onsettled myself that night in San Marcus, and I ain't no way sartin that Henry Bruce didn't take a gratifyin contract off my hands. You go to work, Mr. Kernochan, and engage the best lawyers and argifyers the state can produce. Them'll be necessary, as the prosecuting attorney is dead ag'in ye from the fust, but es for the Okalo part of the bizness, me and Ike Mosely'll run that. And I reckon," concluded Mr. Jerrold, rising and permitting a grim smile to relax the corners of his mouth, "I reckon the jury at that trial will be in competent hands."

Phil Kernochan rode back to his ranch under the impression that the difficulty of combating local prejudice at Okalo was materially lessening. But Mr. Buck Jerrold was gloomy and dispirited all the afternoon.

It was not long before the delight with which Miss Stafford greeted the release of Henry Bruce gave place to a very different state of mind. In the enthusiasm of his return to the Mesquite valley ranch, she had detected no change in his manner toward her. Accustomed from infancy to her own way, the idea of a rival in the regard she unquestionably manifested for the young ranchman had probably never seriously crossed her mind.

She had accepted the interest of Bruce complacently, laid claim to his attentions as if by a species of divine right and exhibited toward him a certain air of proprietorship with the presumption of her sex when conscious of its attractions. To quote the words of Judge Natchez, who was for professional reasons some time a guest at the Mesquite valley ranch, the young lady's attitude toward Henry Bruce was that of the "holder of a first mortgage bond wherein the equity was decidedly microscopic."

Miss Stafford very soon awoke to an intelligent distrust of her position, and then to a conviction that her power was on the wane. Her mortification and chagrin to find herself supplanted by one whom her pride in no sense recognized as an equal can well be imagined.

Perhaps the first intimation that Edith received of a change in Bruce was in his manner of receiving her alighting allusions and half contemptuous mention of Miss Dallas. Originally he had passed these over with the good humored cynicism of a man of the world. But now anything of the sort plainly irritated him, and persistence in the matter provoked a retort or possibly a sudden sarcasm. With singular infelicity of epithet Miss Stafford had characterized Cynthia's devotion to Bruce during his imprisonment as "kind"—"really quite what one would have expected a girl of her surroundings to have done."

It will be understood that Bruce cherished a different sentiment. His old interest in Cynthia—the interest that he had felt since that first day when she had peeped down upon him in the gloomy chasm with her fragrant suggestions of hemlock and pine—woke anew in his heart, and with it a sense of gratitude from which, I trust, mankind, in the rarity of feminine constancy, is not entirely exempt. This interest deepened as the spring advanced and the season slipped into summer. He grew quite in the habit of riding over to the Dallas ranch and passing the morning in Cynthia's society. Here, although he persuaded himself that his attitude toward the young lady was merely such as a brother might hold toward an affectionate sister, he was often astounded to discover with what winged feet the hours flew overhead, and that familiar objects took on a sudden association and charm from the witchery of her company.

It was doubtless this brotherly interest in Miss Dallas that prompted Henry Bruce to instruct her upon the guitar—an instrument singularly calculated to overcome shyness and restraint between persons of the opposite sex, and as such to be commended. If while thus employed Cynthia found herself sitting at times very near Bruce and their fingers dangerously involved in compelling melody from the refractory strings, it was unquestionably due to her anxiety to become a proficient performer, and if

while playing some chord or explaining some accompaniment there stole into the gentleman's face an expression so winning and tender that the girl's sweet eyes grew downcast and tremulous it was the seal of the instructor doubtless that prompted this. Certainly for its opportunities and possibilities the light guitar has reason to be appreciated, and there slumbers in its strings a sympathy that proves a powerful ally to sentiment.

Howbeit, whatever may have been the experience of her companion, Cynthia learned little from the instrument of which her heart had not been eloquent before. But she acquired a certain dainty dexterity, and as this musical intercourse gave rise to much conversation and confidential disclosure it was not long before Bruce was well acquainted with all her girlish dreams and fancies—except one, in regard to which Cynthia said nothing, but preserved the evasive silence of womankind.

It shone in her eyes that kindled at his coming, in the quick color that mounted to her cheek at his approach, in the sudden delicious tremor that seized her when he drew near, and the indescribable thrill that set her heart to throbbing whenever his hand touched hers. In place of that dejection that once oppressed her, a glad gayety and light heartedness attended all her movements. Joy laughed in the sunlight, and mirth came to her on the wings of the wind. The breeze that rocked the tree tops of her bower, letting slip bright shafts of light to stray within, set her all unconsciously to singing.

Old man Dallas noted the change and grew reserved and thoughtful. After Cynthia's daring ride to Bradford post he had taken occasion to read his charming daughter a long homily on the "danger of young women showin all to onct how much store they set by any young feller." According to Alcides, it was the duty of the sex to "set back and let things hump themselves according to their natch'ral course." Cynthia had accepted this rebuke meekly. She was now uniformly affectionate to her father.

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