

Cavanagh,

The Great Conservation Novel

CHAPTER II THE FOREST RANGER.

LEE VIRGINIA was awakened next morning by the passing of some one down the hall calling at each door, "Six o'clock!" She had not slept at all till after 1. She was lame, heart weary and dismayed, but she rose and dressed herself as neatly as before. She had decided to return to Sulphur. "I cannot endure this," she had repeated to herself a hundred times. "I will not!"

Hearing the clatter of dishes, she ventured with desperate courage into the dining room, which was again filled with cowboys, coal miners, ranchers and their tumbled families and certain nondescript town loafers of tramp-like appearance.

Slipping into a seat at the end of the table which offered the cleanest cloth, Lee Virginia glanced round upon her neighbors with shrinking eyes. All were shoveling their food with knife blades and guzzling their coffee with bent heads. Their faces scared her, and she dropped her eyes.

At her left, however, sat two men whose greetings were frank and manly and whose table manners betrayed a higher form of life. One of them was a tall man with a lean red face, against which his blond mustache lay like a chalk mark. He wore a corduroy jacket cut in Norfolk style, and in the collar of his yellow shirt a green tie was loosely knotted. His hands were long and freckled, but were manifestly trained to polite usages.

The other man was younger and browner and of a compact, athletic figure. On the breast of his olive green coat hung a silver badge which bore a pine tree in the center. His shirt was tan colored and rough, but his head was handsome. He looked like a young officer in the dress uniform of the regular army. His hands were strong, but rather small, and the lines of his shoulders graceful. Most attractive of all were his eyes, so brown, so quietly humorous and so keen.

In the rumble of cheap and vulgar talk the voices of these men appealed to the troubled girl with great charm. She felt more akin to them than to any one else in the room, and from time to time she raised her eyes to their faces.

They were aware of her also, and their gaze was frankly admiring as well as wondering, and in passing the ban and eggs or the sugar they contrived to show her that they considered her a lady in a rough place and that they would like to know more about her.

She accepted their civilities with gratitude and listened to their talk with growing interest. It seemed that the young man had come down from the hills to meet his friend and take him back to his cabin.

"I can't do it today, Ross," said the older man. "I wish I could, but one meal of this kind is all I can stand these days."

Mrs. Wetherford, seizing the moment, came down to do the honors. "You fellows ought to know my girl, Virginia, this is Forest Supervisor Redfield, and this is Ross Cavanagh, his forest ranger in this district. You ought to know each other. My girl's just back from school, and she don't think much of the Fork. It's a little too coarse for her."

Lee flushed under this introduction, and her distress was so evident that both men came to her rescue.

The older man bowed and said, "I didn't know you had a daughter, Mrs. Wetherford." And Cavanagh, with a glance of admiration, added, "We've been wondering who you might be."

Lize went on: "I thought I'd got rid of her. She's been away now for about ten years. I don't know but it was a mistake. Look like she's grown a little too fine haired for us doughies out here."

"So much the worse for us," replied Redfield.

This little dialogue gave the girl time to recover herself, but as Cavanagh watched the blush fade from her face, leaving it cold and white, he sympathized with her—pitied her from the bottom of his heart. He perceived that he was a chance spectator of the first scene in a painful domestic drama—one that might easily become a tragedy. He wondered what the forces might be which had brought such a daughter to this squalid, this virago. To see a maid of this delicate bloom thrust into such a place as Lize Wetherford's "hotel" had the reputation of being roused indignation.

"When did you reach town?" he asked, and into his voice his admiration crept.

"Only last night."

"You find great changes here?"

"Not so great as in my mother. It's all"—She stopped abruptly, and he understood.

Lize being drawn back to her cash register, Redfield turned to say: "My dear young lady, I don't suppose you remember me, but I knew you when you were a tot of five or six. I knew your father very well."

"Did you?" Her face lighted up.

"Yes, poor fellow; he went away from here rather under a cloud, you know."

"I remember a little of it. I was here when the shooting took place."

"So you were. Well, since then much

Forest Ranger

By HAMLIN GARLAND

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has happened to us all," he explained to the ranger. "There wasn't room for a dashing young blood such as Ed Wetherford was in those days." He turned to Lee. "He was no worse than the men on the other side—it was dog eat dog—but some way the people nether settled on him as a scapegoat. He was forced out, and your mother has borne the brunt of it since. Those were lawless days."

More and more Lee Virginia's heart went out in trust toward these two men. Opposed to the malodorous, unshaven throng which filled the room, they seemed wondrously softened and sympathetic, and in the ranger's gaze was something else—something which made her troubles somehow less intolerable. She felt that he understood the difficult situation in which she found herself.

Redfield went on. "You find us horribly uncivilized after ten years' absence?"

"I find this uncivilized," she replied with fierce intensity, looking around the room. Then, on the impulse, she added: "I can't stand it! I came here to live with my mother, but this is too—too horrible!"

"I understand your repulsion," replied Redfield. "A thousand times I repeat, apropos of this country. Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile."

"Do you suppose it was as bad ten years ago?" she asked. "Was everything as dirty—as mean? Were the houses then as full of flies and smells?"

"I'm afraid they were. Of course the country isn't all like this, and there are neat homes and gentle people in Sulphur, but most cattlemen are—as they've always been—a shiftless, happy-go-lucky lot at best, and some of them have been worse, as you know."

"I never dreamed of finding my mother in such a place," she went on. "I don't know what to do or say. She isn't well. I ought to stay and help her, and yet—oh, it is disheartening!"

Lize tapped Redfield on the shoulder. "Come over here, Reddy. If you have finished your breakfast, I want to talk with you."

Redfield rose and followed his landlady behind the counter and there sat in earnest conversation while she made change. The tone in which her mother addressed the supervisor, her action of touching him as one man lays hand upon another, was profoundly revealing to Lee Virginia. She revolted from it without realizing exactly what it meant, and, feeling deeply but vaguely the forest ranger's sympathy, she asked:

"How can you endure this kind of life?"

"I can't, and I don't," he answered cautiously, for they were being closely observed. "I am seldom in town. My domain is more than a mile above this level. My cabin is 9,000 feet above the sea. It is clean and quiet up there."

"Are all the other restaurants in the village like this?"

"Worse. I come here because it is the best."

She rose. "I can't stand this air and these flies any longer. They're too disgusting."

He followed her into the other house, conscious of the dismay and bitterness which burst forth the instant they were alone. "What am I to do? She is my mother, but I've lost all sense of relationship to her. And these people, except you and Mr. Redfield, are all disgusting to me. It isn't because my mother is poor, it isn't

because she's keeping boarders; it's something else." At this point her voice faltered.

"Let us go out into the air," suggested

Redfield presently. "The mountain wind will do you good."

She followed him trustfully, and as she stepped from the squalor of the hotel into the splendor of the morning her head lifted. She drank the clear, crisp wind as one takes water in the desert.

"The air is clean, anyway," she said.

Cavanagh to divert her pointed away to the mountains. "There is my domain. Up there I am sole ruler. No one can litter the earth with corruption or poison the streams."

She did not speak, but as she studied the ranger her face cleared. "It is beautiful up there."

He went on. "I hate all this scrap heap quite as heartily as you do, but up there are sweetness and sanity. The streams are germless, and the forest cannot be devastated. That is why I am a ranger. I could not endure life in a town like this."

He turned up the street toward the high hill to the south, and she kept step with him. As she did not speak, he asked, "What did you expect to do out here?"

"I hoped to teach," she replied, her voice still choked with her emotion. "I expected to find the country much improved."

"And so it is, but it is still a long way from an eastern state. Perhaps you will find the people less savage than they appear at first glance."

"It isn't the town or the people; it is my mother!" she burst forth again. "Tell me! A woman in the car yesterday accused my mother of selling whisky unlawfully. Is this so? Tell me!"

She faced him resolutely, and, perceiving that she could not be evaded, he made slow answer. "I don't know what she does, but I've heard it charged against her."

"Who made the charge?"

"One of the clergymen, and then it's common talk among the rough men of the town."

"But she's my mother!" wailed the girl, coming back to the central fact. "She has sent me money—she has been kind to me. What am I to do? She needs me, and yet the thought of staying here and facing her life frightens me."

The rotten board walks, the low rookeries, the unshaven, bear-eyed men sitting on the thresholds of the saloons, the slattern squaws wandering abroad like bedraggled hens, made the girl stare with wonder and dismay. She had remembered the town street as a highway filled with splendid cavaliers, a list wherein heroic deeds were done with horse and pistol.

She perceived in the ranger the man of the new order, and with this in her mind she said: "You don't belong here? You're not a western man?"

"Not in the sense of having been born here," he replied. "I am, in fact, a native of England, though I've lived nearly twenty years of my life in the States."

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She glanced at his badge. "How did you come to be a ranger—what does it mean? It's all new to me."

"It is new to the west," he answered smilingly, glad of a chance to turn her thought from her own personal griefs. "It has all come about since you went east. Uncle Sam has at last become provident and is now 'conserving his resources.' I am one of his representatives, with stewardship over some 90,000 acres of territory, mostly forest."

She looked at him with eyes of changing light. "You don't talk like an Englishman, and yet you are not like the men out here."

"I shouldn't care to be like some of them," he answered. "My being here is quite logical. I went into the cattle business like many another, and I went broke. I served under Colonel Roosevelt in the Cuban war and after my term was out naturally drifted back. I love the wilderness and have some natural taste for forestry, and I can ride and pack a horse as well as most cowboys; hence my uniform. I'm not the best forest ranger in the service, I'll admit, but I fancy I'm a fair average."

"And that is your badge—the pine tree?"

"Yes, and I am proud of it. Some of the fellows are not, but so far as I am concerned I am glad to be known as a defender of the forest. A tree means much to me. I never mark one for felling without a sense of responsibility to the future."

Her questions came slowly, like those of a child. "Where do you live?"

"Directly up the South Fork about twenty miles."

"What do you do?"

He smiled. "Not much. I ride the trails, guard the game, put out fires, scale lumber, burn brush, build bridges, herd cattle, count sheep, survey land and a few other odd chores. It's supposed to be a soft snap, but I can't see it that way."

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes, for the larger part of the time. I have an assistant, who is with me during part of the summer months. Mostly I am alone. However, I am supposed to keep open house, and I catch a visitor now and then."

"Do you expect to do this always?"

He smiled again. "There you touch my secret spring. I have the hope of

being chief forester some time—I mean we all have the prospect of promotion to sustain us. The service is so new that any one with even a knowledge of forestry is in demand. By and by real foresters will arise."

She returned abruptly to her own problem. "I dread to go back to my mother, but I must. Oh, how I hate that hotel! I loathe the flies, the smells, the people that eat there, the waiters—everything!" She shuddered.

"Many of the evils you mention could be reformed, except, of course, some of the people who come to eat. I fear several of them have gone beyond reformation."

As they started back down the street she saw the motor stage just leaving the door of the office. "That settles one question," she said. "I can't get away till tomorrow."

"Where would you go if you broke camp—back to the east?"

"No. My mother thinks there is a place for me in Sulphur City."

"Your case interests me deeply. I wish I could advise you to stay, but this is a rough town for a girl like you. Why don't you talk the problem over with the supervisor?" His voice became firmer. "Mrs. Redfield is the very one to help you."

"Where does she live?"

"Their ranch lies just above Sulphur, at the mouth of the canyon. May I tell him what you've told me? He's a good sort, is Redfield—much better able to advise than I am."

Cavanagh found himself enjoying the confidence of this girl so strangely thrown into his care, and the curious comment of the people in the street did not disturb him except as it bore upon his companion's position in the town.

At the door of the hotel some half a dozen men were clustered. As the young couple approached they gave way, but a short, powerful man, whom Lee Virginia recognized as Gregg, the sheepman, called to the ranger:

"I want to see you before you leave town, Mr. Ranger."

"Very well. I shall be here all the forenoon," answered Cavanagh in the tone of a man accepting a challenge. Then, turning to the girl, he said earnestly: "I want to help you. I shall be here for lunch, and meanwhile I wish you would take Redfield into your confidence. He's a wise old boy, and everybody knows him. No one doubts his motives. Besides, he has a family and is rich and unburied. Would you like me to talk with him?"

"If you will. I want to do right, indeed, I do."

"I'm sure of that," he said, with eyes upon her flushed and quivering face. "There's a way out, believe me."

CHAPTER III.

LIZE AND HER DAUGHTER.

THEY parted on the little porch of the hotel, and her eyes followed his upright figure till he entered one of the shops. He had precisely the look and bearing of a young lieutenant in the regular army. She returned to her own room strangely heartened by her talk with the ranger.

She was still pondering when her mother came in.

"How'd you sleep last night?"

Lee Virginia could not bring herself to lie. "Not very well," she admitted.

"Neither did I. Fact of the matter is your coming fairly upset me. I've been kind of used up for three months. I don't know what ails me. I'd ought to go up to Sulphur to see a doctor, but there don't seem to be any free time. I 'pear to have lost my grip. Food don't give me any strength. I saw you talking with Ross Cavanagh. There's a man. And Reddy—Reddy is what you call a fancy rancher; goes in for alfalfa and fruit and all that. He isn't in the forest service for the pay or for graft. He's got a regular palace up there above Sulphur—hot and cold water all through the house, a furnace in the cellar and two bathrooms, so they tell me; I never was in the place. You better keep out of the caddy. It ain't a fit place for you. Fact is, I wasn't expecting anything so fine as you are. I laid awake till 3 o'clock last night figuring on what to do. I reckon you'd better go back and give this outfit up as a bad job. I used to tell Ed you didn't belong to neither of us, and you don't. I can't see where you did come from—anyhow, I don't want the responsibility of having you here. Why, you'll have half the men in the county hitching to my corral. You're too good for any of them. You just plan to pack up and pull out tomorrow."

She went out with a dragging step that softened the girl's heart. Lize's daughter came nearer to loving her at this moment than at any time since her fifth year.

In truth, Lize had risen that morning intending "to whirl in and clean up the house," being suddenly conscious to some degree of the dirt and disorder around her, but she found herself physically unequal to the task. Her brain seemed misted, and her food had been a source of keen pain to her.

She gave sharp answers to all the men who came up to ask after her daughter, and to one who remarked on the girl's good looks and demanded an introduction she said: "Get along! You fellows want to understand I'll kill the man that sets out to fool with my girl, I tell you that!"

While yet Lee Virginia was wondering how to begin the day's work some one knocked on her door, and in answer to her invitation a woman stepped in—a thin blond hag with a weak smile and watery blue eyes. "Is this little Lee Virginia?" she asked.

"The girl, rose?"

"Well, howdy?" She extended her hand, and Lee took it. "My name's Jackson—Mrs. Orlando Jackson. I

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No. 4

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(To Be Continued.)

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