

THE BARRIER

By Rex Beach

COPYRIGHT, 1908, BY HARPER & BROTHERS



(Continued from last week)

She pondered long and hesitated modestly when she saw its low cut, which exposed her neck and shoulders in a totally unaccustomed manner, for it struck her as amazingly indecent until she scurried through her magazines again and saw that its construction, as compared with others, was most conservative. Even so she shrank at sight of herself below the line of sunburn, for she was ringed about like a blue winged teal, the demarcation being more pronounced because of the natural whiteness of her skin. She sat down, dress and all, in the thick softness of a great brown bearskin and thought it over.

How odd it was, now that she considered it, that she needed no aid with these alien garments; that she knew instinctively their every feature; that there was no intricacy to cause her more than an instant's trouble.

She was interrupted in her reverie by the passing of a shadow across her window and the stamp of a man's feet on the planks at the door. Of course it was Poleon, who had come back to see her. So she rose hastily, gave one quick glance at the mirror above her washstand, choosing the side that distorted her image the least, and, hearing him still stamping, perfunctorily called:

"Come in! I'll be right out."

She kicked the train into place behind her, looping the shawl carelessly about her in a way to veil her modestly effectively. She crossed proudly to the reading table to give him a fair view of her splendor and was in the middle of the room before she looked up. Taken aback, she uttered a little strangled cry and made a quick movement of retreat, only to check herself and stand with her chin high in the air, while wave after wave of color swept over her face.

"Great lovely dove!" ejaculated Burrell fervently, staring at her.

"Oh, I—I thought you were Poleon. He— In spite of herself she glanced toward her room as if to flee. She writhed at the utter absurdity of her appearance and knew the lieutenant must be laughing at her. But fight would only make it worse. Burrell, however, was not laughing.

"I was looking for your father," he said, wondering if this glorious thing could be the quaint half breed girl of yesterday. There was nothing of the native about her now, for her lithe young figure was drawn up to its height, and her head, upon which the long black braids were coiled, was tipped back in a haughty poise. She had flung her hands out to grasp the table edge behind her, forgetful of her shawl, which drooped traitorously and showed such rounded lines as her ordinary dress scarce hinted at. This was no Indian maid, the soldier vowed. No blood but the purest could pulse in such veins; no spirit save the highest could flash in such eyes as these. A jealous rancor irked him at the thought of this beauty intended for the Frenchman's eyes.

"Can't you show yourself to me as well as to Poleon?" he said.

"Certainly not!" she declared. "He bought this dress for me, and I put it on to please him. After he sees it I will take it off, and—"

"Don't—don't take it off—ever," said Burrell. "I thought you were beautiful before because of your quaintness and simplicity, but now—his chest swelled—"why, this is a breath from home. You're like my sister and the girls back in Kentucky, only more wonderful."

"Am I?" she cried eagerly. "Am I like other girls? Do I really look as if I'd always worn clothes like these?"

"Born to them," said he.

buttons and the hooks and the eyes are all where they belong. It's instinct, I suppose, from father's side."

"Probably. I dare say I should understand the mechanism of a dress suit, even if I'd never seen one," said the man, amused, yet impressed by her argument.

"I've always had visions of women dressed in this kind of clothing, white women, never natives, not dressed like this exactly, but in dainty, soft things, not at all like the ones I wear. I seem to have a memory, although it's hardly that either; it's more like a dream, as if I were somebody else. Father says it is from reading too much."

"A memory of what?"

"It's too vague and tantalizing to tell what it is, except that I should be called Merridy."

"Merridy? Why that?"

"I'll show you. See." She slipped her hand inside the shawl and drew from her breast a thin gold chain on which was strung a band ring. "It was grandmother's. That's where I got the fancy for the name of Merridy, I suppose."

"I wish you would send Poleon here. It's time he saw his present."

As Burrell walked out into the air he shut his jaws grimly and muttered: "Hold tight, young man. She's not your kind—she's not your kind."

Inside the store he found Doret and the trader in conversation with a man he had not met before, a ragged nondescript whose overalls were blue and faded and patched, particularly on the front of the legs above the knees, where a shovel handle wears hardest; whose coat was of yellow mackinaw, the sleeves worn thin below the elbows, where they had rubbed against his legs in his work. As the soldier entered the man turned on him a small, shrewd, weather-beaten face with one eye while he went on talking to Gale.

"It ain't nothin' to git excited over, but it's wuth follerin'. If I wasn't so cussed unlucky I'd know there was a pay streak som'ere close by."

"Your luck is bound to change, Lee," said the trader, who helped him to roll up a pack of provisions.

"Mebbe so. Who's the dressmaker?" He jerked his bushy head toward Burrell, who had stopped at the front door with Poleon to examine some yellow grains in a folded paper.

"He's the boss soldier."

"Purty, ain't he?"

you, and I want to be friends with you."

"I'm willing," said Gale. "Nobody dislikes playing policeman more than I do, but it's a part of my duty, and I'll have to do it," continued the young man.

"I reckon you simply aim to keep peace, eh? You ain't looking for nobody in particular?"

"Of course not—outside of certain notorious criminals who have escaped justice and worked north."

"Then there are a few that you want, eh?"

"Yes, certain old timers. The officers at every post have descriptions of a few such, and if they show up we will take them in and hold them till courts are established."

"If you've got their names and descriptions mebbe I could help you," said the trader carelessly.

"Thank you. I'll bring up the list, and we'll go over it together. You must have been here a good while."

"About ten years."

"Then Miss Necla was born out in the States?"

Gale shot a startled glance at the soldier before he answered in the affirmative, but Burrell was studying a pattern of sunlight on the floor and did not observe him. A moment later he inquired hesitatingly:

"Is this your first marriage, Mr. Gale?" When the other did not answer he looked up and quickly added: "I beg your pardon, sir. What led me to ask was Miss Necla. She is so well, she is such a remarkable girl."

Gale's face had undergone a change, but he answered quietly: "I ain't never been married."

"What?"

"When I took Alluna it wasn't the style, and neither one of us has thought much about it since."

With him was a stranger. When the boat was at rest Rannion sauntered down the gangplank and up to the lieutenant, who stood above the landing place and who noted that the scar, close up against his hatband, was scarce healed. He accosted the officer with an insolent assurance.

"Well, I'm back again, you see, and I'm back to stay."

"Very well, Rannion. Did you bring an outfit with you?"

"Yes, and I'm pretty fat besides." He shook a well laden gold sack at the officer.

"What do you want in this place anyhow?" demanded Burrell curiously.

"None of your d—d business," the man answered, grinning.

"Be sure it isn't," retorted the lieutenant, "because it would please me right down to the ground if it were. I'd like to get you."

"I'm glad we understand each other," Rannion said, falling into conversation with the stranger, who had been surveying the town without leaving the boat. Evidently this man had a voice in Rannion's affairs, for he not only gave him instructions, but bossed the crew who handled his merchandise, and Meade Burrell concluded that he must be some incoming tenderfoot who had grub staked the desperado to prospect in the hills back of Flumbeau. As the two came up past him he saw that he was mistaken.

This man was no more of a tenderfoot than Rannion. On the contrary, he had a bearing of one to whom new countries are old, who had trod the edge of things all his life. There was a hint of the meat eating animal about him. His nose was keen and hawk-like, his walk and movements those of the predatory beast, and as he passed by Burrell observed that his eyes were of a peculiar cruelty that went well with his thin lips. He was older by far than Rannion; but, while the latter was mean visaged and swaggering, the stranger's manner was noticeable for its repression.

Impelled by an irresistible desire to learn something about the man, the lieutenant loitered after Rannion and his companion and entered the store in time to see the latter greet "No Creek" Lee, the prospector, who had come into town for more food. Both men spoke with quiet restraint.

"Nine years since I saw you, Stark," said the miner. "Where you bound?"

"The diggings," replied Stark as Lee addressed the stranger.

"Mining now?"

"No; same old thing, but I'm grub staking a few men, as usual. One of them stays here. I may open a house in Dawson if the camp is as good as they say it is."

Stark's saloon, and you know Canucks is stronger than vitriol for law and order. Not bein' his first offense, it went hard with him."

"He looks like a killer," said Burrell. "Yes, but he ain't the common kind. He always lets the other man begin, and therefore he ain't ever done time."

"Come, now," argued the lieutenant, "if it were the other man who invariably shot first, Stark would have been killed long ago."

"I don't care what would have happened, it ain't happened, and he's got notches on his gun till it looks like a cub bear had chewed it. If you was a western man you'd know what they say about him. The bullet ain't been run to kill him. That's the sayin'. You needn't grin. There's many a better man than you believes it."

"Who is it that the bullet hasn't been run to kill?" said the trader's deep voice behind them. He had finished with his duties and now sauntered forward.

"Ben Stark," said Lee, turning. "You know him, John?"

"No; I never saw him, but I know who he is; used to hear of him in the Coeur d'Alenes."

"That's him I was talking to," said the miner. "He's an old friend of mine, and he's going to locate here."

Burrell thought he saw Lee wink at the trader, but he was not sure, for at that moment the man of whom they were speaking re-entered. Lee introduced him, and the three men shook hands. While the soldier fell into easy conversation with the newcomer, Gale gazed at him narrowly, studying him as he studied all men who came as strangers. As he was doing so Alluna entered, followed by Johnny and Molly. She had come for sugar and asked for it in her native tongue. Upon her exit Stark broke off talking to the lieutenant and turned to the trader.

"Your squaw, Mr. Gale?"

The old man nodded.

"Pah-Ute, eh?"

"Yes. Why do you savvy the talk?"

"Some. I lived in California once."

"and his eyes were cross!"

"This man has evil eyes."

"He lacked five years of my age," said the trader.

"This man is forty years old, must be he," said the squaw. Even Necla would have marvelled had she heard this revelation of the trader's age, for his hair and beard were grizzled, and his face had the look of a man of sixty, while those who knew him well, like Lee, were aware of his great strength and the endurance that belied his appearance.

"We will send Necla down to the mission tonight and let Father Ben keep her there till this goes," said the squaw after some deliberation.

"No; she must stay here," Gale replied, with decision. "The man has come here to live, so it won't do good to send her away, and, after what is to be will be. But she never been seen in that dance ground again, at least not till I learn more about this Stark. It makes no difference whether this one is the man or not. He will come, and I shall know him. For a year I have felt that time was growing short, and I must know it."

"No, no!" Alluna cried. "We have no strangers here. No white men except the soldiers and this one who come in a year. This is but a trading post."

"It was yesterday, but it isn't today. Lee has made a strike, like one George Carmack made on Klondike. He came to tell me of Poleon, and we are going back to him tonight, but you must see if it will start a stampede."

"Other men will come—a great many of them?" interrogated Alluna fully, ignoring utterly the miner's news.

"Yes. Flumbeau will be here. Dawson if this find is what Lee says it is. I stayed away from the country because I knew crowds of men would come from the States, and I feared that he might be among them, but it's no use hiding any more. There's no other place for us to go. Lee has got a mine I'll have the first next to it, for we will be the first on the ground. What happens on that won't matter much. You must be provided for. We are to have an hour, one at a time, to avoid a stampede."

"But why did this man stop and insist on the woman. Why did he stay on the steamboat and go to the son?"

"He's a friend of Lee's. He is with us." Then he added, almost in a whisper, "Before we return I'll know."

Alluna seized his arm. "Please come back, John! Promise me you will come back even if this stampede is the man."

"I promise. Don't worry, I'll be here. I'm not ready for a stampede yet."



"Oh, I—I thought you were Poleon. He—duty, and I'll have to do it," continued the young man.

"I reckon you simply aim to keep peace, eh? You ain't looking for nobody in particular?"

"Of course not—outside of certain notorious criminals who have escaped justice and worked north."

"Then there are a few that you want, eh?"

"Yes, certain old timers. The officers at every post have descriptions of a few such, and if they show up we will take them in and hold them till courts are established."

"If you've got their names and descriptions mebbe I could help you," said the trader carelessly.

"Thank you. I'll bring up the list, and we'll go over it together. You must have been here a good while."

"About ten years."

"Then Miss Necla was born out in the States?"

Gale shot a startled glance at the soldier before he answered in the affirmative, but Burrell was studying a pattern of sunlight on the floor and did not observe him. A moment later he inquired hesitatingly:

"Is this your first marriage, Mr. Gale?" When the other did not answer he looked up and quickly added: "I beg your pardon, sir. What led me to ask was Miss Necla. She is so well, she is such a remarkable girl."

Gale's face had undergone a change, but he answered quietly: "I ain't never been married."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SOLDIER FINDS AN UNBROKEN VALLEY.

MEADE BURRELL had experienced a profound sense of pity for Necla upon learning her father's relation to Alluna, but this also largely vanished when he found that the girl was entirely oblivious to its significance. He had tried her in many subtle ways and found that she regarded the matter innocently, as customary, and therefore in the light of an accepted convention, nor did she seem to see anything in her blood or station to render her inferior to other women. She questioned him tirelessly about his sister, and he was glad of this, for it placed no constraint between them.

As for her, each day brought a keener delight. She unfolded before the Kentuckian like some beautiful woodland flower and through innumerable, unnoticed familiarities took him into her innermost confidence.

A month of this went by, and then Rannion returned. He came on an up-going steamer. The manner of his coming was bold, for he stood fairly upon the ship's deck, and his smile was evil now, as it had been before.

"I have told you never to use your native tongue before strangers. That man in the store understands."

"I only asked for sugar to cook the berries with," she replied.

"True, but another time you might say more; therefore the less you speak it the better. He is the kind who sees much and talks little. Address me in Siwash or in English unless we are alone."

Suddenly she dropped her work and came close up to him. "Can he be the one?"

"I don't know. Stark is not the name, but he might have changed it. He had reasons enough."

"The most wonderful thing has happened," she began.

father's age, for his hair and beard were grizzled, and his face had the look of a man of sixty, while those who knew him well, like Lee, were aware of his great strength and the endurance that belied his appearance.

"We will send Necla down to the mission tonight and let Father Ben keep her there till this goes," said the squaw after some deliberation.

"No; she must stay here," Gale replied, with decision. "The man has come here to live, so it won't do good to send her away, and, after what is to be will be. But she never been seen in that dance ground again, at least not till I learn more about this Stark. It makes no difference whether this one is the man or not. He will come, and I shall know him. For a year I have felt that time was growing short, and I must know it."

"No, no!" Alluna cried. "We have no strangers here. No white men except the soldiers and this one who come in a year. This is but a trading post."

"It was yesterday, but it isn't today. Lee has made a strike, like one George Carmack made on Klondike. He came to tell me of Poleon, and we are going back to him tonight, but you must see if it will start a stampede."

"Other men will come—a great many of them?" interrogated Alluna fully, ignoring utterly the miner's news.

"Yes. Flumbeau will be here. Dawson if this find is what Lee says it is. I stayed away from the country because I knew crowds of men would come from the States, and I feared that he might be among them, but it's no use hiding any more. There's no other place for us to go. Lee has got a mine I'll have the first next to it, for we will be the first on the ground. What happens on that won't matter much. You must be provided for. We are to have an hour, one at a time, to avoid a stampede."

"But why did this man stop and insist on the woman. Why did he stay on the steamboat and go to the son?"

"He's a friend of Lee's. He is with us." Then he added, almost in a whisper, "Before we return I'll know."

Alluna seized his arm. "Please come back, John! Promise me you will come back even if this stampede is the man."

Continued on page