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CHAPTER VII.

The Storm

Kitty sailed out of the ranch drawing-room with her head in the air. Only to Frank Anstruther she unbent in the sweetest of smiles. She came down next morning white-faced, the sparkle of her dimmed, and all the self-confidence gone; her spirit only returning when Anstruther made an effort to cheer her. Then the little vixen turned upon him and made him wish himself a thousand times one of Dick Rolt's avenging posse.

There had been tears in the night; tears, confession and penitence, and between the two women there was peace again, but there was no peace for Anstruther. With Jim before her, Kitty had been a small angel to his rival, but Jim had gone at early dawn; there were no longer and loud men's voices about the corrals. The quiet of the place invited meditation, and the more Kitty meditated the less she could find to justify her attitude to Jim Combe, and the less she saw to admire in the man she had induced to stay behind. Indeed all her own small sins took a bodily form, and called themselves Frank Anstruther. As he smoked his last cigarette before turning in, that gentleman had come to a decision. He was quite sure then that the only woman fit to succeed his mother at Bilbury Park was the girl he had been singing to, and he had decided that he would put his fortunes to the test before he was a day older. Kitty would not say "no" to him, of that he felt sure. She was not one of those women who would willingly spend all their lives in an humdrum Canadian ranch.

But though he suffered without protest, as a man must, by midday Frank found himself wondering whether after all a world without women would be so utterly unendurable.

As for Mrs. Rolt, she had privately vowed that her favorite should have a fair chance, and that to prevent poaching in his absence, she would haunt the two young people like their shadow until Jim's return.

No self-constituted duenna ever found her duties less exacting than did Mrs. Rolt; no pair of reputed lovers less anxious to be alone than Kitty and Frank.

Indeed, to such a pitch of misery was that unfortunate young man reduced before evening, that Mrs. Rolt found herself trying to make some amends to him for the girl's perverse temper.

In her heart she began to hate "young people." Without them there had been peace at the ranch, whereas now it was almost as bad as being in love again herself.

But this thought brought a smile to her sweet face. There had never been any rival in her case to big Dick Rolt. She scarcely thought the man existed who could have been.

The night after Jim's departure there was no music at the ranch, and the music next morning was neither of man's making nor to his liking. For days past the great red "Herefords" had been crowding in closer and closer round the corrals, and for five days the clouds had grown more and more murky overhead, whilst a bitter wind kept whining uneasily amongst the sage brush and the willows. Perhaps the absence of the men really accounted for the gloom which seemed closing round the ranch, and yet there seemed more than mere loneliness in the depression which took hold on those who had been left behind.

The last golden leaf had fallen from the cottonwoods along the creek bottoms, and now and again dry balls of sage brush would race and bound along upon the uplands, driven by unseen wind devils, or the trees in the recently burnt patch of pine timber just beyond the corrals would for minutes break out with a great groaning and grinding of limbs. But these things only occurred by fits and starts. The strangeness of them was due only to the fact that there seemed to be no storm to account for them. Such winds as there were, were purely local and short lived until the Wednesday morning.

Then the dawn broke in weird fashion, with such devilish storm lights, such unearthly and terrifying shadows as are only seen on the sea or the prairies, and the first act of winter began.

In half an hour every loose thing about the ranch had been blown from its position. A wagon which the Indians had left out was lifted right over and lay bottom upwards in the yard.

Fences which the biggest of the bulls had respected, were laid flat as if they had been but card houses.

The little creek which a week before had threatened to run dry, became a swollen torrent. Pieces of board and tin cans whirled along in the wind, battered and rattled against the walls, whilst the old house itself throbbed and hummed like an organ, and from time to time an earth-shaking report announced the downfall fo some great Douglas pine in the slashing. Whilst the storm lasted there was no sun. The racing clouds bloted him out, so that a vague dull light prevailed, such as might have existed when the Spirit moved on the face of the waters.

The three in the house cowered at the windows, and watched the desolate scene with that feeling half of pleasure, half of awe, which is natural to human beings safely entrenched in a cosy, storm-proof house when storms rage without, until a miserable looking object with lowered head and streaming hide came trembling past the windows towards the barn.

"Oh, my poor little Mawitch. Mary, look. There is my fawn. Those idiotic Indians must have let it out."

"Well, she can go into the barn if she wants to. I think she is going."

But the fawn, like other only half-civilized things, had lost its wild wits, before it had acquired the sense of the domestic beast, and now stood shivering in the very eye of the wind, looking for some human being to take care of it, instead of taking care of itself.

"Mary, I must let it in, poor, miserable beastie. I'm coming, dear!"

"No, of course not; though I don't suppose that it will come in. Try if you can tempt it, Mr. Anstruther."

With a piece of bread in his hand to entice the fawn Anstruther went to the main door, glad to do anything to win a smile from his offended lady, but the very elements warrel against the unfortunate lover that day. As soon as the latch gave under his hand the great door burst inwards with such a noise that the fawn fled, whilst Anstruther himself was sent reeling before the blast, and pictures, stick racks, and bear hides clattered and careered along the floor.

As usual in this confounded country he had made a mess of it. No one but a fool, he reflected, would have tried to open a door on the weather side of the house, when it would have been much easier to have brought the deer round to the lea side, but it was too late to think of that now. He had to bring that beast in. He simply dared not face those two women without it, so, with a glance at the damage he had done, he plunged recklessly into the storm bareheaded, dragging the great door to behind him.

It required all Anstruther's strength to shut the door, and for a moment he had to cling to the handle of it for support before he could make good his footing against the wind. Like most newly-arrived Englishmen he was still particular about his attire, but in less time than it takes to write it, the glory of his boiled shirt and smart collar had gone, his riding breeches, built wide in the latest fashion, were clinging to him like the skin of a fish, his long coat-tails were performing like a giddy wind-mill, and his whole appearance was such as to justify his belief that the ladies at the window were convulsed with laughter. As he crossed the paddock it occurred to him that Mrs. Rolt was signalling to him to come back, but he was uncertain, and in any case he did not mean to go back without that infernal little beast which tempted him yard by yard across the corrals, and towards the patch of shrieking and groaning timber.

Surely, he thought, the ladies were signalling to him, but he could not understand what they meant. They were calling, but the window was closed, which in itself would have been enough to drown their voices, without the deafening din all around him.

He was within arm's length now, and he made a spring at the fawn's collar, touched it, but could not secure his hold, so that he only frightened the beast, which in a few bounds reached the timber. But here it paused, as if it was as much afraid to go forward as to come back. Of course, Anstruther followed it. As he reached the edge of the brule a dry bough no thicker than his little finger, whirled out of one of the tops and struck him across the hand. The force of that blow from so small a thing should have warned him, but at that moment victory seemed within his grasp. The fawn, frightened by something the man neither saw nor understood, hesitated, until with a quick leap Anstruther sprang in and gripped the leather collar round its neck.

It would be a curious thing, the man thought, which would loosen his grip now until the provoking pet was safely in its mistress's keeping, and as the thought formed itself in his mind something happened.

To him it seemed that a terrific crash was followed by instant and complete darkness, accompanied by a curious sensation of numbness and a letting go of all things, all things except that leather collar. To that he clung instinctively, even when everything rose and went away from him, feeling and thought, wind and rain, and even the crashing of the brule, and the anger at Kitty Clifford's laughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

Jim to the Rescue

"Put it out of its misery; it's back is broken."

Anstruther recognized Mrs. Rolt's voice, and wondered in an idle dreamy fashion whose back was broken, and whether if its back was broken it would wish to be put out of its misery. His back was not broken nor was he in any misery. He wondered who was, and turning to see was struck by a hideous shock of pain, after which it was night again.

When he came to himself he knew that he was dead. He knew more than that. He was lying in his coffin; he could smell the new boards of it, and they were nailing down the lid, but this strangely enough did not worry him a bit. Death was a silly painless thing after all, very much like sleep. How even their strokes were. There were two of them at work, one on each side of him, beat, beat, beat! The ring of their hammers was rhythmical; rather good dream music he thought, but how hard they worked, and what a lot of nailing up that coffin required. He wished that they had not thrown the earth in before they nailed him down, the weight of it above him was so great that he could not move his limbs. And then quite suddenly the weight was lifted, and he drew a great breath, and again the fierce pain came and took him away into the cool dark where there was no trouble.

Reckless of falling limbs and risking, with eyes open to their danger, a fate similar to that of the man below them, two of the half-breed boys of the ranch had been swinging their axes as they had never swung them before, and as the blades bit and the white chips flew, two pale faced women, drenched with rain, and wild with grief and terror of the storm, pleaded with them to work "faster, faster, for God's sake, faster," clenching their feeble hands, and, yearning for something to do where there was nothing they could do.

Heavens! how long the time seemed. Surely between them they could lift the tree off him now, and they strained at a trunk, one limb of which was too heavy for their united strength. They might as well have tried to lift the ranch house. Those only who have handled a Douglas pine know what the weight of it is.

The Indians way was the only way, and there was no help but theirs, though by some miracle Frank Anstruther lived still. The hand that poor Kitty held in hers was limp and cold as a dead man's, but he was not dead yet. Not yet. Surely the men could work more quickly. Ah, if only Jim had been there.

At the very last the half-breeds stopped and consulted. Those two men, as if time was of no value, consulted and argued, and then one of them went to the house for a saw. That was the most insufferable five minutes of all to Kitty, and even when the saw cut through, and the ends of the log were free, the log did not rise an inch. Another cut had to be made, and all the agony of waiting endured again. Even when a six-foot length had been sawn out of the pine those two imbeciles could not lift it, a log which Jim would have carried on his shoulders.

It was well for Anstruther that they could not. But for the broken limb on the underside which had buried itself many feet deep, and held now like a tap root, Anstruther would long since have learned the great secret.

Thanks to that bough he was held as in a vice but not crushed, as a Douglas crushes what it falls upon. With levers and bars and all the ingenuity of practised loggers the men at last pried up the log sufficiently for their purpose, and drew out their man, still uncertain whether he was dead or alive.

With gentle strength they unclenched the long white fingers from the fawn's collar. Poor beast. It at any rate would not come in again from that storm. The tree had broken its back, and a merciful axe stroke had split its graceful head from end to end. And yet Kitty, who at another time would have wept for a day over her pet, had now no thought of it.

On a rude stretcher, improvised by the Chinaman whilst the Indians chopped, Mrs. Rolt and the three men carried Anstruther to the house and laid him in the warm, firelit room on the Boss's bed, and then the greatest terror, the only one of ranch life, faced those women. As long as all goes well to those who are country bred, there is no hardship in the enforced separation from the town and its thousand and one conveniences. Every difficulty is a joke to be laughed at, a puzzle which natural ingenuity will delight in overcoming. You can do without the shops and the theatres, you can hold service if you want to, and the strong man needs no policeman to protect him; but the time comes when even he cannot do without the doctor, when he would give all that the world holds for someone who could tell him what to do to save one dear life.

Anstruther might be dying for some little help which they could have given him if only they knew what was the matter with him, but they did not know.

There was no broken bone that they could find, no bleeding wound for them to staunch, and yet whenever consciousness returned to him, at the first effort to move or speak he fainted, and each faint seemed more and more like death.

The resources of the ordinary ranch in such cases as this are pitifully inadequate. As a rule the wife knows a little about the treatment of ordinary accidents and the simpler ailments, and in the house there is generally some book which professes to be a substitute for the physician. You have only to turn to it in an emergency to discover how little there is to justify its claims.

Mrs. Rolt read such a volume from cover to cover, only to fall back in despair upon such simple remedies as warmth and quiet. She could only give nature a fair chance. Probably she could have done no better, and half the doctor's success at least depends upon the patient's faith in him, but when you good folk at home boast yourselves of your many colonial possessions, in which you take only an occasional pride and a very little serious interest, allow something not only for the courage of the men who hew out fresh dominions for you all over the world, but something too for the martyrdoms of women, who watch through the long nights of lone lands, growing old between a sun's setting and a sun's rising, whilst all that makes life valuable for them is fading away under their eyes, for want of that which to you is but a natural accesory of your every-day life.

Through that long and wild night those two women watched; whilst it seemed to them that the winds clamored round the house for the prey which had escaped them.

Towards morning, Mrs. Rolt, who had been dozing in a chair by the fireside asked:

"Is he sleeping now, Kitty?"

"No, he is pretending to, but I can see how his poor lips are pressed together. I don't believe he has slept once since they carried him in," she whispered.

"Oh, nonsense. He was sleeping nicely through the night while I watched."

(To be Continued.)

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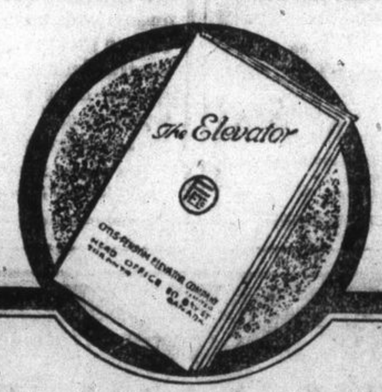

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