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Her husband smiled. He was not quite certain which would be the greater miracle, that anyone should not like Mary Rolt, or that an Indian should be grateful. He had known Indians for a lifetime.

After his wife had left the room on her mission of charity, taking Kitty with her to "rummage" in the old clothes box, the Boss sat for some time, smoking and thinking, and his thoughts were not cheerful ones.

A good many of his castles in the air had fallen since Anstruther's arrival, and without Jim's help he did not feel as sanguine of ultimate success on the Binky as he had done.

A sharp cry called him back from the future to the present.

"What is it," he called, opening his door.

"I don't know, dear, answered his wife from the lumber room. 'It must have been Mr. Anstruther who called. 'Where is Kitty?'"

"Here with me, looking out something for old Mary."

"She ought not to—"

But at this point he and his wife reached the sick room together, where Kitty was already bending over Anstruther.

"He has fainted again," she said, chafing his hands helplessly, but even as she spoke consciousness returned to him.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured, very faintly. "I give you all so much trouble, but when I tried to call you, I got another nasty one, and went off, I suppose, as usual. It seems to me I can't do anything without fainting, almost as if he were going to illustrate his last words."

"What did you want, old fellow?" asked Rolt, kindly, but not caring you again. It was very careless of us to do so."

Anstruther lifted his hand in deprecating fashion.

"Nonsense. I don't want so much looking after, when Kitty is here. I was away I thought that I saw someone in that little room."

"In my bath room?"

"Yes, Kitty sits there sometimes when she wants me to stop talking and sleep, and I thought that she had come back."

"There is no one there now," said Rolt, coming back from the room.

"Who did you think it was?"

"I don't know. I saw someone peering round the door at me. I thought that it was an Indian when I sat up and looked at her. I happened to see 'Did you hear the man move?'"

"No; I only saw the face, or thought that I did, but perhaps it was only a sick man's fancy."

"He is a fraud, Kitty," decided Rolt, with good-humored laugh. "He wanted you back, and invented this bogus excuse to bring you back. Better not leave your post again, and so saying he dismissed the subject, but nevertheless he went into the little bathroom and looked round it very carefully. On the table beneath his looking-glass lay a handful of small silver, with his studs and some old gold seals in a china tray, and his watch was hung on a nail in the window frame. These were the only small movables of any value in the room, and neither he nor anything else in the room appeared to have been touched. As he went out of the room he noticed a damp patch upon the polished wood of the stairs, which a vivid imagination might have made into the outline of a wet moccasin, but the Boss disregarded it."

Five minutes later when he met his wife downstairs, he asked whether she had found anything for the old woman.

"Yes, I made up quite a bundle for her; a warm petticoat and all sorts of thick things. Kitty's and mine; but the silly old thing has gone without them."

Rolt looked grave.

"Oh, you need not frown, Dick. We were rather long, I know, but it is so hard to decide what one really has done with, and if the old woman didn't get her clothes to-day, she will get them next week when she comes to give the house its monthly scrubbing."

Rolt looked out over the darkening landscape. The November day was drawing rapidly to a close, and he knew that old Mary had seven miles to trudge back to her ranchette, but it was curious that she had not waited. He could see the trail which led to the gulch through which ran Mary's road home, but there was no sign of Mary. Old as she was she must have moved quickly to have gained the shelter of the gulch already, or she could not have waited long for those clothes.

A question which Rolt wanted to ask was suppressed before it left his lips. Instead he asked his wife how long it was since old Mary had given the house one of her "thorough scrubbing."

"More than a month, I'm afraid, but you know they have all been away from the ranchette. Why? Do any of the rooms want scrubbing very badly, old man?"

"Oh, no, not a bit. I make a good deal of mess with my boots in the bath room, but you and Kitty look after the top floor, don't you, little woman. It is always as clean as a new pin in spite of my efforts to the contrary."

"What a delightful old humpbug you are, Dick, where I am concerned," she said fondly. "I did not know that you would miss old Mary's ministrations. She cleans the whole house once a month, upstairs and down, but we ought to have kept up appearances at any rate in her absence. I will go and see to it, at once."

This was more than Rolt had bargained for. He had obtained the information he wanted without alarming her, but by suggesting a fault where he knew none existed.

However, he followed his wife to the room, and was relieved to be shown all sorts of dirt and disorder, which he himself would never have

noticed, but no trace could he find of that for which he was looking.

Nothing had been touched; nothing that he could think of was missing. Even that damp outline on the boards had dried off now. He wished that he had examined it more carefully, but after all, it could not have been old Mary in his room, though she apparently did know the way to it.

He paused for a long minute, and went over everything carefully with his eye. By George! his Winchester had gone. No, it hadn't. There it was behind his oilskin, and there was absolutely nothing else which she could have wanted.

That face peering around the doorway must have been a sick man's fancy.

CHAPTER XVII.

In order to keep Anstruther amused and quiet, Mary Rolt had dined served that night for the four of them in the bedroom, busying herself in making the pretty place as vivid a contrast as possible to the grim-world outside.

A wood fire glowed merrily on the wide hearth, and the light of it was reflected by the silver and glass that nestled cozily in the folds of the rose-colored cretonne hangings.

Frank? she asked with her hand on the last of them.

"Not unless you wish it."

"Well, then, I'll leave this one undrawn. I always snuggle into bed more cozily when I can peer out into a bitter light like that. Can you see down the valley from where you lie without moving? A peep at it will make the fire feel warmer and the room more homelike."

"It always feels homelike where you are, Mrs. Rolt."

She curtsied to him with a laugh, and then, turning to Kitty, who had just entered the room, bade her be quick with the dinner.

"And see, my girl," she added, "and then with a few touches rearranged some of the silver."

Kitty for the nonce had donned cap and apron, and Anstruther was not the first to discover more charm and coquetry in a maid's cap than in her mistress's toilette.

"Does the family expect to be waited on or does it stretch?" she asked, saucily.

"What do you mean, Katherine?"

"What do you mean, the family had to be waited on when it had a party, but when it was by itself it stretched like this," and reaching across the table she possessed herself of a salt cellar.

"You went as a lady-help, I suppose," retorted Mrs. Rolt, severely, "all lady and no help, like Miss Moran."

"What was her story?" asked Anstruther.

"Oh, she came out to help the poor dear, her brothers. They could not afford to hire any help, and just pigged until she came. At the end of a fortnight their sister had discovered exactly ninety-nine different things, each of which was 'the only thing she never could do,' and actually, guessing who it was who cleaned the boots, she put hers outside her bedroom door every night."

"And?"

"And? Oh, and she married, of course, and her brothers do just as they did while she was with them, except that her husband cleans her boots now."

But Anstruther was not listening to Mrs. Rolt's lullaby. He was gazing intently through the uncurtained window at the foot of his bed, to which the others had their backs turned.

"Who would be camping down the valley to-night, Mrs. Rolt?" he asked.

"In the hay meadows?" No one.

"Is not that a fire? Surely, my eyes are not playing me false again."

The Boss turned lazily in his chair.

"Yes, that is a fire sure enough. There are two of them. Do you see that little one just beyond the first?"

Suddenly his face changed. He sprang to the window, took one searching glance down the valley, and then turned sharply to his wife, his face working with some feeling which he strove to control.

"Mary, dear, I want to speak to you for a moment. Will you excuse me, Frank?" and laying his hand on Kitty's shoulder as he passed, he whispered, "Keep him quiet whatever happens. I rely on you, and then he followed his wife from the room."

Once outside the door, his manner changed. "His stacks, little woman. Those devils are firing our winter feed. Keep cool and run now and tell the men in the dining-room. I'm off to the mess house to get the half-breed. Keep your heart up; we'll stop them before they can do much damage."

He was running downstairs as he spoke, and snatched a Winchester from its rack as he passed out of the hall.

Mary Rolt's heart sank as she saw him snatch the rifle, but she did his bidding as he would have had her do it, with the utmost coolness, and when the men had rushed out after their master, she went back to the sick-room. There was no need for any explanation there.

Through the uncurtained window a glare of red light proclaimed the work that was on hand, even if the noise of saddling up and the hurrying of boots beneath the window and the short sharp sentences of the mounting men had not told the tale.

"If it shot, Al?" they heard someone ask.

"Shoot? Are, shoot to kill, curse them. Git, you devil," and a clatter of hoofs told that the horse had "got."

"Never mind the near stacks, boys; you can't save them. Ride for all you are worth to the first that is not light and—" the Boss's voice died out as he galloped away with his men.

At the back of the ranch and on both sides of it lay a great enclosed meadow of about a thousand acres in a long parallelogram, and down the middle of it ran a chain of hay stacks, each fenced in, the feed upon which depended the safety of Rolt's stock if a hard winter should come.

There are years, many of them, luckily, in which these stacks need not be touched. In an open winter the cattle are carried without having resort to the store laid up for a hard spell, and in consequence some men trust to luck and keep little or no reserve of hay.

These are the men who fall in the cattle business. Sooner or later a deep snow comes; so deep that the cattle cannot paw it away to get at the grass beneath, and then the men who have not provided against such times lose every head of stock.

It means ruin to the improvident, but Dick Rolt was not such a fool as to take any chances where the safety of his cattle was concerned. Three years' hay was stacked in the thousand acres, and if none of it should be used the next year's crop would be cut and stacked just the same.

The sight which met the eyes of those who watched at the window would have been weirdly beautiful if the meaning of it had not been so hideous. The night was one which not only precluded any possibility of accidental ignition, but made it difficult to understand the rapidity with which stack after stack burst into flames.

The heavy Scotch mist which the valley was filled—a freezing mist, which was almost rain—was crimson now.

Over twenty stacks, beginning with the one nearest to the ranch house, were in flames, one here and there which had failed to ignite standing out black and exaggerated in size, in the fierce light made by its fellows, whilst the roar of the burning could be heard where the watchers stood.

Down in the middle of the valley ran a chain of red fire, whilst the walls of it were still darkness made darker by contrast, and in this, imagination could paint the twelve or fourteen men who rode with their weapons in their hands and murder in their hearts.

Once or twice a figure was seen near the farthest of the stacks, thrown out in bold relief for a moment as the devil's work succeeded and the flames took hold, but though Mary Rolt held her breath to listen, there came no rattle of rifle arms.

"Twenty-three, Mary, but it is ten minutes since the last blazed up."

"Stop where you are, Kitty. Mr. Anstruther, for God's sake, don't try to move. You can't help now," was Mrs. Rolt's only answer, and then she ran through her husband's bathroom and they heard her taking the stairs head down.

"Phon, oh, Phon," they heard her call, "bar the kitchen window, quick! Indians come out your throat," and whilst she spoke they heard her turning the keys in the main doors and putting up the great bars.

"Run to her, Kitty, and help her. I shall be all right."

"Will you swear to keep still, Frank?"

"I swear, Run, dear."

The girl obeyed him and a few moments later Mrs. Rolt, Kitty, and the frightened Chinese cook re-entered the room.

"They can't get in now unless they burst the doors," sobbed Mrs. Rolt, breathless with her exertions. "Watch that back door, Kitty, whilst I call the men," and she ran to her husband's room again for the revolver which hung there.

Tearing away the curtains, and throwing the little window open, she peered out, but the light inside was too bright. She could see nothing.

"Put the lamp out, Kitty," she called, and as the light went out in obedience to her order, she saw dimly something moving in the shadow of a horse where the screen were kept.

At once her revolver rang out shot after shot, until every chamber was empty. It mattered little whether she hit or missed. The main thing was to recall the men, and almost before she had ceased firing a horse's hoofs thundered through the corrals, and a voice hailed her.

"You shooting, Polly? Take care. Don't shoot any more," and then for a moment there was bedlam in the darkness outside, horses galloping among the buildings, and men running, and twice the sharp metallic ring of a rifle.

After that the main body of galloping hoofs seemed to recede towards the hills, but the Boss and old Al rode up to the house.

"Open the door and give me a lantern, my girl. They have all gone, I think, except two, and they won't do any more harm."

There was a hardness in the Boss's voice, which Mary Rolt had never heard before in all the years she had known him, but then she had never seen him before in the light of his blazing stacks.

"Did you see anyone when you fired?" he asked, as soon as she had let him in.

"I think so, but I am not certain. Oh, Dick, I have not killed anyone, have I?" she cried, breaking down suddenly, and clinging to him.

"Steady, there, steady, little woman. Keep your nerve a bit longer. You are doing splendidly. No, you have not hit any one, more's the pity. Where did you think you saw them?"

"Over there by the store-house."

"Ah! But they could not get in in time. Lucky we tumbled to their game. Just go and look at the house, Al, touching his arm and whispering, "say nothing if the missus has shot straight."

The old man nodded and went out. In a couple of minutes he was back again for the lantern. When he returned again he handed the Boss a key.

"I thought as you allus kept that yourself, Boss."

"Where did you find it?"

"In the corner of the store-house."

Rolt looked down at it for a moment. "The old devil," he muttered, "Just so. But how did he come to get it?"

"Old Mary must have stolen it from my room when she came begging this afternoon."

(To be continued)

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