

## CHAPTER XII - CAPTURED

"Welcome to Hades!" cried a stout little man in a red blouse, sticking his leering countenance through the door of the limousine.

"Shut up, Stubby," commanded a hoarse voice from the group. "Haven't you any manners? You haven't been introduced yet."

"I've engaged the dark eyed one for the first dance," persisted Stubby, as a dozen hands dragged him away from the door.

The Major sprang out and confronted the band.

"What are we to understand by this outrage?" he demanded fiercely.

"It means you are all invited to a party, and we won't accept any regrets," replied a laughing voice.

Patsy put her head out of the window and looked at the speaker. It was Mr. Algernon Tobey. He had two strips of sticking plaster over his nose. One of his eyes was swollen shut and the other was almost closed. Yet he spoke in a voice more cheerful than it was when they first met him.

"Don't be afraid," he added. "No one has the slightest intention of injuring any of you in any way, I assure you."

"We have not the same intention in regard to you, sir," replied Major Doyle, fuming with rage, for his "Irish was up," as he afterward admitted. "Unless you at once remove that barricade and allow us to proceed we will not be responsible for what happens. You are warned, sir!"

Uncle John, by this time standing beside the Major upon the ground, had been quietly "sizing up the situation," as he would have expressed it. He found they had been captured by a party of fourteen men, most of whom were young, although three or four, including Tobey, were of middle age. The atmosphere of the place, with its disorderly surroundings and ill kept buildings, indicated that Hades Ranch was bachelor quarters exclusively. Half a dozen Mexicans and one or two Chinamen were in the background, curious onlookers.

Mr. Merrick noted the fact that the remittance men were an unkempt, dissipated looking crew, but that their faces betokened reckless good

humor rather than desperate evil. There was no doubt but most of them were considering this episode in the light of a joke, and were determined to enjoy the experience at the expense of their enforced guests.

Uncle John had lived many years in the West and knew something of these peculiar English exiles. Therefore he was neither frightened nor unduly angry, but rather annoyed by the provoking audacity of the fellows. He had three young girls to protect and knew these men could not be fit acquaintances for them. But he adopted a tone different from the Major's and addressed himself to Tobey as the apparent leader of the band.

"Sir," he said calmly but with pointed emphasis, "I believe you were born a gentleman, as were your comrades here."

"You are right," answered Tobey. "And each and every one you see before you has fallen from his former high estate--through no fault of his own." This may have been a sarcasm, for the others laughed in boisterous approval. "In some respects we are still gentlemen," Tobey went on, "but in others we are not to be trusted. Be reasonable, sir--I haven't the faintest idea who you are or what your name is--and consider calmly our proposition. Here we are, a number of young fellows who have seen better and happier days, living alone in the midst of an alkali desert. Most of us haven't seen a female for months, nor a lady for years. Why, last fall Stubby there rode eighty miles to Buxton, just to stand on a corner and see a lot of greasy Mexican women go by. We tire of exclusive male society, you see. We get to bore one another terribly. So here, like a visitation from heaven, three attractive young ladies descend upon us, traveling through our domain, and having discovered their presence we instantly decided to take advantage of the opportunity and invite them to an impromptu ball. There's no use refusing us, for we insist on carrying out our plan. If you men, perhaps the fathers of the young ladies, behave reasonably, we will entertain you royally and send you on your way rejoicing. Won't we, boys?"

They shouted approval.

"But if you oppose us and act ugly about this fête, gentlemen, we shall be obliged to put a few bullets into you, and decide afterward what disposition to make of the girls. About the best stunt we do is shooting. We can't work; we're too poor to gamble much; but we hunt a good bit

and we can shoot straight. I assure you we wouldn't mind losing and taking a few lives if a scrimmage is necessary. Eh, boys?"

"That's right, Algy," said one, answering for the others; "we'll have that dance if we die for it--ev'ry man Jack of us."

Myrtle was trembling in her corner of the limousine. Beth sat still with a curl on her lips. But Patsy was much interested in the proceedings and had listened attentively to the above conversation. Now the girl suddenly swung open the door and sprang out beside her father, facing the group of cowboys.

"I am Patricia Doyle," she said in a clear voice, "and these gentlemen," indicating the Major and Mr. Merrick, "are my father and my uncle. You understand perfectly why they object to the arrangement you suggest, as any one of you would object, had you a daughter in a like position. But you are arbitrary and not inclined to respect womanhood. Therefore but one course is open to us--to submit under protest to the unwelcome attentions you desire to thrust upon us."

They listened silently to this frank speech, and some of their faces wore crestfallen expressions by the time she had finished. Indeed, one of the older men turned on his heel and walked away, disappearing among the buildings. After a brief hesitation a delicate young fellow--almost a boy--followed this man, his face flaming red with shame. But the others stood their ground.

"Very good, Miss Doyle," remarked Tobey, with forced cheerfulness. "You are quite sensible to submit to the inevitable. Bring out your friends and introduce them, and then we'll all go in to luncheon and prepare for the dance."

"I won't submit to this!" cried the Major, stamping his foot angrily.

"Yes, you will," said Uncle John, with a motion preventing his irate brother-in-law from drawing a revolver, "Patsy is quite right, and we will submit with as much dignity as we can muster, being overpowered by numbers."

He beckoned to Beth, who stepped out of the car and assisted Myrtle to follow her. A little cheer of bravado had arisen from the group, inspired by their apparent victory; but when Myrtle's crutches appeared and they

saw the fair, innocent face of the young girl who rested upon them, the shout died away in a hush of surprise.

"This is my cousin, Elizabeth De Graf," announced Patsy, with cold deliberation, determined that the proprieties should be observed in all intercourse with these people. "And I present our friend, Myrtle Dean. Under ordinary circumstances I believe Myrtle would be excused from dancing, but I suppose no brute in the form of a man would have consideration for her infirmity."

This time even Tobey flushed.

"You've a sharp tongue, Miss Doyle, and it's liable to lead you into trouble," he retorted, losing for the moment his suave demeanor. "We may be brutes--and I imagine we are--but we're not dangerous unless provoked."

It was savagely said, and Uncle John took warning and motioned Patsy to be silent.

"Lead the way, sir," he said. "Our chauffeur will of course remain with the car."

Wampus had kept his seat, motionless and silent. He only nodded in answer to Mr. Merrick's instructions and was entirely disregarded by the remittance men.

The man called "Stubby," who had a round, good-humored face, stepped eagerly to Myrtle's side and exclaimed: "Let me assist you, please."

"No," she said, shaking her head with a wan smile; "I am quite able to walk alone."

He followed her, though, full of interest and with an air of deep respect that belied his former actions. Tobey, content with his present success, walked beside Mr. Merrick and led the procession toward the ranch house. The Major followed, his tall form upright, his manner bellicose and resentful, with Beth and Patsy on either side of him. The remittance men followed in a straggling crowd, laughing and boisterously talking among themselves. Just as they reached the house a horseman came clattering down the road and all paused involuntarily to mark the new arrival. The rider was a handsome, slim young fellow, dressed as were

the other cowboys present, and he came on at a breakneck speed that seemed only warranted by an errand of life and death.

In front of him, tied to the saddle, appeared a huge bundle, and as the horse dashed up to the group standing by the ranch house the rider gracefully threw himself off and removed his hat with a sweeping gesture as he observed the young ladies.

"I've got him, Algy!" he cried merrily.

"Dan'l?" asked Tobey.

"Dan'l himself." He pointed to the bundle, which heaved and wriggled to show it was alive. "He refused to come willingly, of course; so I brought him anyhow. Never yet was there a fiddler willing to be accommodating."

"Good for you, Tim!" shouted a dozen voices. And Stubby added in his earnest way; "Dan'l was never more needed in his life."

Tobey was busy unwinding a long lariat that bent the captive nearly double and secured him firmly to the panting horse. When the bonds were removed Dan'l would have tumbled prone to the ground had not willing hands caught him and supported him upon his feet. Our friends then observed that he was an aged man with a face thickly furrowed with wrinkles. He had but one eye, small and gray and very shrewd in expression, which he turned contemptuously upon the crowd surrounding him. Numb and trembling from his cramped position upon the horse and the terrible jouncing he had endured, the fiddler could scarcely stand at first and shook as with a palsy; but he made a brave effort to control his weakness and turned smilingly at the murmur of pity and indignation that came from the lips of the girls.

"Where's the fiddle?" demanded Tobey, and Tim unhooked a calico bag from the saddlebow and held it out. A laugh greeted the gesture.

"Dan'l said he be hanged if he'd come," announced Tim, with a grim appreciation of the humorous side of the situation; "so I hung him and brought him along--and his fiddle to boot. But don't boot it until after the dance."

"What do you mean, sir, by this rebellious attitude?" questioned Tobey, sticking his damaged face close to that of the fiddler.

Dan'l blinked with his one eye but refused to answer.

"I've a good mind to skin you alive," continued the leader, in a savage tone. "You'll either obey my orders or I'll throw you into the snake pit."

"Let him alone, Algy," said Tim, carelessly. "The old scoundrel has been tortured enough already. But I see we have partners for the dance," looking critically at the girls, "and I claim first choice because I've brought the fiddler."

At this a roar of protest arose and Tobey turned and said sullenly:

"Come in, all of you. We'll settle the order of dancing later on."

The interior of the ranch house was certainly picturesque. A great living room ran all across the front, with an immense fireplace built of irregular adobe bricks. The floor was strewn with skins of animals--mostly coyotes, a few deer and one or two mountain lions--and the walls were thickly hung with weapons and trophies of the chase. A big table in one corner was loaded with bottles and glasses, indicating the intemperate habits of the inmates, while on the chimney shelf were rows of pipes and jars of tobacco. An odor similar to that of a barroom hung over the place which the air from the open windows seemed unable to dissipate.

There were plenty of benches and chairs, with a long mess table occupying the center of the room. In a corner was an old square piano, which a Mexican was trying to dust as the party entered.

"Welcome to Hades!" exclaimed Tobey, with an absurd gesture. "Be good enough to make yourselves at home and I'll see if those devils of Chinamen are getting luncheon ready."

Silently the prisoners sat down. The crowd poured in after them and disposed themselves in various attitudes about the big room, all staring with more or less boldness at the three girls. Dan'l the fiddler was pushed in with the others and given a seat, while two or three of the imitation cowboys kept guard over him to prevent any possible escape. So far the old man had not addressed a word to anyone.

With the absence of the leader the feeling of restraint seemed to relax. The cowboys began whispering among themselves and chuckling with glee, as if they were enjoying some huge joke. Stubby had placed himself

near the three young ladies, whom he eyed with adoring glances, and somehow none of the prisoners regarded this childish young fellow in exactly the same light as they did his comrades. Tim, his attitude full of grace as he lounged against a settle, was also near the group. He seemed a bit thoughtful since his dramatic arrival and had little to say to anyone.

Mr. Merrick engaged Stubby in conversation.

"Does Mr. Tobey own this place?" he asked.

"By proxy, yes," was the reply. "It isn't in his name, you know, although that doesn't matter, for he couldn't sell his desert ranch if he had a title to it. I suppose that is what his folks were afraid of. Algy is the fourth son of old Lord Featherbone, and got into a disgraceful mess in London some years ago. So Featherbone shipped him over here, in charge of a family solicitor who hunted out this sequestered spot, bought a couple of thousand acres and built this hut. Then he went home and left Algy here to keep up the place on a paltry ten pounds--fifty dollars--a month."

"Can he manage to do that?" asked Uncle John.

"Why, he has to, you see. He's got together a few cattle, mostly stolen I imagine; but he doesn't try to work the land. Moreover he's established this community, composed of his suffering fellow exiles, the secret of which lies in the fact that we work the cooperative plan, and all chip in our remittances to boil the common pot. We can keep more servants and buy more food and drink, that way, than if each one of us lived separately."

"Up in Oregon," said Mr. Merrick, "I've known of some very successful and prosperous ranchmen among the remittance men."

"Oh, we're all kinds, I suppose, good and bad," admitted Stubby. "This crew's mostly bad, and they're moderately proud of it. It's a devil of a life, sir, and Hades Ranch is well named. I've only been here a month. Had a little property up North; but the sheriff took it for debt, and that forced me to Algy, whom I detest. I think I'll move on, before long. But you see I'm limited. Can't leave Arizona or I'll get my remittance cut off."

"Why were you sent here into exile?" asked Myrtle artlessly.

He turned red and refused to meet her eyes.

"Went wrong, Miss," he said, "and my folks wouldn't stand for it. We're all in the same boat," sweeping his arm around, "doing punishment for our misdeeds."

"Do none of you ever reform?" inquired Patsy.

"What's the use? We're so far away from home no one there would ever believe in our reformation. Once we become outcasts, that's the end of our careers. We're buried in these Western wilds and allowed just enough to keep alive."

"I would think," said Uncle John musingly, "that the manly way would be to cut yourself off entirely from your people at home and go to some city in the United States where honesty and industry would win a new name for you. Then you could be respected and happy and become of use to the world."

Stubby laughed.

"That has been tried," he replied; "but few ever made a success of it. We're generally the kind that prefers idleness to work. My family is wealthy, and I don't mind taking from them what little they give me willingly and all that I can screw out of them besides. I'm in for life, as the saying is, and I've no especial ambition except to drink myself to death as soon as possible."

Patsy shuddered. It seemed a horrible thing to be so utterly hopeless. Could this young fellow have really merited his fate?