

CHAPTER XIV - THE ESCAPE

As the prisoners quietly took their places at the table Tobey, who had been drinking hard, decided to make a speech. His face was badly swollen and he could only see through a slit in one eye, so severe had been the beating administered by Wampus earlier in the day; but the fellow had grit, in spite of his other unmanly qualities, and his imperturbable good humor had scarcely been disturbed by the punishment the Canadian had inflicted upon him.

"Ladies," said he, "and gentlemen--which of course includes our respected male guests--I am happy to inform you that the programme for the First Annual Hades Ranch Ball has finally been arranged, and the dances apportioned in a fair and impartial manner. The Grand March will take place promptly at seven o'clock, led by Miss Doyle and Knuckles, who has won the privilege by throwing four sixes. I am to follow with Miss De Graf, and the rest will troop on behind with the privilege of looking at the ladies. If anyone dares to create disorder his dances with the young ladies will be forfeited. Dan'l will play the latest dance music on his fiddle, and if it isn't spirited and up-to-date we'll shoot his toes off. We insist upon plenty of two-steps and waltzes and will wind up with a monney-musk in the gray light of dawn. This being fully understood, I beg you, my good friends, to fall to and eat and be merry; but don't linger unduly over the dainties, for we are all anxious, like good soldiers, to get into action."

The remittance men applauded this oratory, and incidentally attacked the eatables with evident determination to obey their leader's injunction.

"We can eat any time," remarked Stubby, with his mouth full; "but his Satanic majesty only knows when Hades Ranch will see another dance--with real ladies for partners."

The Chinese cooks and the Mexican servants had a lively time during this meal, for the demands made upon them were incessant. Uncle John, whose even disposition was seldom ruffled, ate with a good appetite, while even the Major, glum and scowling, did not disdain the numerous well-prepared dishes. As for Dan'l, he took full advantage of the occasion and was the last one to leave the table. Our girls, however, were too excited to eat much and little Myrtle, especially, was pallid and uneasy

and had a startled look in her eyes whenever anyone made a sudden motion.

As soon as the repast was concluded the servants cleared the long table in a twinkling and pushed it back against the wall at one end of the long room. A chair was placed for Dan'l on top of this expansive board, which thus became a stage from whence he could overlook the room and the dancers, and then two of the remittance men tossed the old fiddler to his elevated place and commanded him to make ready.

Dan'l said nothing and offered no resistance. He sat plaintively sawing upon his ancient but rich-toned violin while the floor was brushed, the chairs and benches pushed against the wall and the room prepared for action. Behind the violinist was a low, broad window facing a grass plot that was free from the terrifying cactus, and the old man noted with satisfaction that it stood wide open.

Uncle John's party had pressed close to the table and stood watching the proceedings.

"Ready now!" called Tobey; "the Grand March is about to begin. Take your partners, boys. Look sharp, there, Dan'l, and give us a martial tune that will lift our feet."

Dan'l meekly set the violin underneath his chin and raised the bow as if in readiness. "Knuckles," a brawny fellow with a florid face and a peculiar squint, approached Patsy and bowed.

"You're to lead with me, Miss," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Not quite," she returned with dignified composure; "for I perceive you are not quite ready yourself."

"Eh? Why not?" he inquired, surprised.

"You are still wearing your firearms," she replied. "I cannot and will not dance with a man who carries a revolver."

"That's nothing," he retorted. "We always do."

"Always?"

"Of course. And if I shed my gun what's to prevent some one else getting the drop on me?"

"That's it," said Patsy, firmly. "The weapons must all be surrendered before we begin. We positively refuse to dance if rioting and shooting are likely to occur."

A murmur of protest arose at this speech, for all the remittance men had gathered around to listen to the argument.

"That's all tommy-rot," observed Handsome Tim, in a sulky tone. "We're not spoiling for a row; it's the dance we're after."

"Then give up the revolvers," said Beth, coming to her cousin's assistance. "If this is to be a peaceful entertainment you will not need to be armed, and it is absurd to suppose a lady will dance with a gentleman who is a walking arsenal."

They looked into one another's faces uncertainly. Dan'l sat softly tuning his violin, as if uninterested in the controversy. Uncle John and the Major looked on with seeming indifference.

"You must decide which you prefer--the revolvers or the dance," remarked Patsy, staring coolly into the ring of faces.

"Would your English ladies at home consent to dance with armed men?" asked Beth.

"They're quite right, boys," said Stubby, nodding his bullethead. "Let's agree to deposit all the shooting irons 'til the dance is over."

"I won't!" cried Knuckles, his scowl deepening.

"By Jove, you will!" shouted Tobey, with unexpected vehemence. "You're delaying the programme, old man, and it's a nuisance to dance in this armor, anyway. Here--pile all your guns in this corner; every one of you, mind. Then we shall all stand on an equal footing."

"Put them on the table there, by the old fiddler," said Patsy; "then we will know we are perfectly safe."

Rather unwillingly they complied, each man walking up to the table and placing his revolver at Dan'l's feet. The girls watched them intently.

"That man over there is still armed," called Beth, pointing to a swarthy Mexican who squatted near the door.

"That's all right," said Tobey, easily. "He's our guard, Pedro. I've stationed him there so you won't attempt to escape till we get ready to let you go."

Patsy laughed.

"There's little danger of that," she said.

"All ready, now!" exclaimed Knuckles, impatiently. "We're all as harmless as doves. Let 'er go, Dan'!"

The old man was just then assisting Uncle John to lift Myrtle to the top of the table, where the Major had placed a chair for her. Knuckles growled, but waited until the girl was seated near the window. Then Dan'l drew his bow and struck up a spirited march. Patsy took the arm of Knuckles and paraded down the long room. Beth followed with Tobey, and behind them tramped the remittance men in files of two. At the far end were grouped the servants, looking curiously upon the scene, which was lighted by lamps swung from the ceiling and a row of candles upon the edge of the mantelshelf.

To carry out the idea of a grand march Patsy drew her escort here and there by sharp turns and half circles, the others trailing behind like a huge snake until she had passed down the length of the room and started to return up the other side to the starting point. So engrossed had been the cowboys that they did not observe the Major and Uncle John clamber upon the table and stand beside Myrtle.

The procession was half way up the hall on its return when Patsy said abruptly: "Now, Beth!" and darted away from her partner's side and toward the table. Beth followed like a streak, being an excellent runner, and for a moment Knuckles and Tobey, thus deserted by their partners, stopped to watch them in amazement. Then their comrades bumped into them and recalled them to their senses.

By that time the two girls had reached the table and leaped upon it. Uncle John was waving his handkerchief from the window as a signal to Wampus; Dan'l had laid aside his fiddle and seized a revolver in either hand, and the Major had caught up two more of the discarded weapons.

As Beth and Patsy turned, panting, and from their elevation looked up the room, the cowboys gave a bellow of rage and rushed forward.

"Keep back!" shouted the Major, in stentorian tones, "I'll shoot the first man that interferes."

Noting the grim determination in the old soldier's eye, they hesitated and came to a halt.

"What do you mean by this infernal nonsense?" cried Tobey, in disgust.

"Why, it's just checkmate, and the game is up," replied Uncle John amiably. "We've decided not to hold the proposed dance, but to take our departure at once."

He turned and passed Myrtle out of the window where Wampus took her in his arms, crutches and all, and carried her to the automobile. The remittance men, unarmed and confronted by their own revolvers, stood gaping open-mouthed and seemingly dazed.

"Let's rush 'em, boys!" shouted Handsome Tim, defiantly.

"Rush 'em alone, if you like," growled Knuckles. "I'm not ready for the graveyard yet."

"You are vot iss called cowardices," said Dan'l, flourishing the revolvers he held. "Come on mit der courage, somebotty, so I can shoot holes in you."

"You're building your own coffin just now, Dan'l," retorted Tobey, in baffled rage. "We know where to get you, old boy, and we'll have revenge for this night's work."

"I vill take some popguns home mit me," was the composed reply. "Den, ven you come, I vill make a receptioning for you. Eh?"

Uncle John, Patsy and Beth had followed Myrtle through the window and disappeared.

"Now, sir," said the Major to the old fiddler, "make your escape while I hold them at bay."

"Nod yet," replied Dan'l. "Ve must gif ourselves de most protectionment ve can."

With this he gathered up the firearms, one by one, and tossed them through the window. Then he straightened up and a shot flashed down the hall and tumbled the big Mexican guard to the floor just as he was about to glide through the doorway.

"Dit ve say shtand still, or dit ve nod say shtand still?" asked Dan'l, sternly. "If somebody gets hurt, it iss because he don'd obey de orderations."

"Go, sir!" commanded the Major.

"I vill; bud I go last," declared the old man. "I follow you--see? Bud you take my violin, please--unt be very tender of id, like id vas your sveetheardt."

The Major took the violin and climbed through the window, proceeding to join the others, who were by now seated in the car. When he had gone Dan'l prepared to follow, first backing toward the window and then turning to make an agile leap to the ground below. And now with a shout the cowboys made their rush, only to halt as Dan'l reappeared at the window, covering them again with his revolvers.

"So, you defils--make a listen to me," he called. "I am experiencing a goot-bye to you, who are jackals unt imitation men unt haf no goot right to be alive. Also if I see any of you de next time, I vill shoot first unt apologise at der funeral. I haf no more monkey business mit you voteffer; so keep vere you are until I am gone, unt you vill be safeness."

He slowly backed away from the window, and so thoroughly cowed was the group of ruffians that the old fiddler had been lifted hastily into the automobile before the cowboys mustered courage to leap through the window and search in the darkness for their revolvers, which lay scattered widely upon the ground.

Wampus, chuckling gleefully, jerked the hoods off his glaring searchlights, sprang to his seat and started the machine down the road before the crack of a single revolver was heard in protest. The shots came thicker after that, but now the automobile was bowling merrily along the road and soon was out of range.

"De road iss exceptionalment goot," remarked Dan'l. "Dere iss no dangerousness from here to der rifer."

"Danger?" said the chauffeur, scornfully. "Who cares for danger? I am Wampus, an' I am here!"

"We are all here," said Patsy, contentedly nestling against the cushions; "and I'm free to confess that I'm mighty glad of it!"