

**CAVANAUGH,
FOREST
RANGER**
A Grab Conversion
Novel
By HAMLING GARLAND
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fection. I'm not afraid for myself, but if you're able perhaps we'd better pull out tomorrow."

Later in the day Wetherford expressed deeper dejection. "I don't see anything ahead of me anyhow," he confessed. "If I go back to the pen I'll die of lung trouble, and I don't know how I'm going to earn a living in the city. Maybe the best thing I could do would be to take the pox and go under. I'm afraid of big towns," he continued. "I always was, even when I had money. Now that I am old and broke I aren't go. No city for me."

Cavanagh's patience gave way. "But, man, you can't stay here! I'm packing up to leave. Your only chance of getting out of the country is to go where I go and in my company." His voice was harsh and keen, and the old man felt its edge, but he made no reply, and this silence moved Cavanagh to repentance. His irritability warned him of something deeply changing in his own nature.

Approaching the brooding feline, he spoke quietly and sadly. "I'm sorry for you, Wetherford, I sure am, but it's up to you to get clear away so that I'll never by any possible chance find out that you are alive. She has a romantic notion of you as a representative of the old time west, and it could be a dreadful shock to her if she knew you as you are. It's hard to leave her, but that's the main thing to do. Be really tight to do."

"You're right—of course you're right. I wish I could be of some use to you. I could kind of keep her company. I'll be glad enough to help her. I'll take her. But if you don't want to take her, I'll go."

"You're right—of course you're right," Wetherford looked at him with steady eyes, into which a keen light shined. "Don't you intend to marry her?"

Ross turned away. "No; I don't. I mean it is impossible."

"Why not? Don't tell me you're already married?" He said this with a menacing tone.

"No; I'm not married, but—"

Wetherford stopped without making his meaning plain. "I'm going to leave the country and—"

Wetherford caught him up. "I reckon I understand what you mean. You consider Lize and me undesirable parents—not just the kind you'd cut out of the herd of your own free will. Well, that's all right. I don't blame you or her as I'm concerned. But you can't go—me—consider me a dead one. I'll never bother her nor you."

Cavanagh threw out an impatient hand. "It's impossible," he protested. "It's better for her and better for me that I should do so. I'm going back to my own people."

Wetherford was thoroughly aroused now. Some part of his old time fire seemed to return to him. He rose from his chair and approached the ranger firmly. "I've seen you act like a man, Boss Cavanagh. You're been a good partner these last few days—a son couldn't have treated me better—and I hate to think ill of you. But my girl loves you—I could see that. I could see her lean to you."

Ross said slowly: "It will be hard for you to understand when I tell you that I care a great deal for your daughter, but a man like me—an Englishman—cannot marry, or he ought not to marry—for himself alone. There are so many others to consider—his friends, his sisters—"

Wetherford dropped his hand. "I see!" His tone was despairing. "When I was young we married the girls we loved in defiance of everything. But you are not that kind. You may be right. I'm nothing but a dejected old copperhead brandied by the state—a man who threw away his chance—but I can tell you straight I've learned that nothing but the love of a woman counts."

In the meantime Lee Virginia waited with increasing impatience for Ross Cavanagh's return, expecting each noon to see him appear at the door. But when three days passed without word or sign from him her uneasiness deepened into alarm. The whole town was profoundly excited over the murder, that she knew, and she began to fear that some of the ranger's enemies had worked their evil will upon him.

With this vague fear in her heart, she went forth into the street to inquire. One of the first men she met was Sifton, who was sitting, as usual, outside the livery barn door, smiling, indifferent, content. Of him she asked: "Have you seen Mr. Cavanagh?"

She buried her face in her overcoat.

"Yes," he answered; "I saw him yesterday, just after dinner, down at the postoffice. He was writing a letter at the desk. Almost immediately afterward he was pounced and rode away. He was much cut up over his chief's dismissal."

"Why has he not written to me?" she asked herself, and why should he have gone away without a word of greeting, explanation or goodbye? It would have taken but a moment's time to call at the door.

The more she dwelt upon this neglect the more significant it became. After the tender look in his eyes, after the ardent clasp of his hand, the thought that he could be so indifferent was at once a source of pain and self reproach.

With childish frankness she went to Lize and told her what she had learned, her eyes dim with hot tears.

"Ross came to town and went away back to his cabin without coming to see me."

"Are you sure he's been here?"

"Yes. He came in, got some letters at the postoffice and then rode away." Her voice broke as her disappointment and grief overcame her.

Lize struggled to a sitting position. "There's some mistake about this, Ross Cavanagh never was the whiffling kind of man. You've got to remember he's on duty. Probably the letter was some order that carried him right back to his work."

"But if he had really cared he could have ridden by to say just a word. But he didn't. He went away without a sign after promising to come." She buried her face in the corner of her mother's bed and wept in childlike grief and despair.

Lize was forced to acknowledge that the ranger's action was inexplicable, but she did her best to make light of it. "He may have hurried to town on some errand and hadn't a moment to spare. These are exciting days for him, remember. He'll be in tomorrow sure."

With a faint hope of this the girl rose and went about her daily tasks, but the day passed and another without word or sign of the recreant lover, and each day brought a deeper sense of loss, but her pride would not permit her to show her grief.

Young Gregg, without knowing in the least the cause of her troubled face, took this occasion to offer comfort. His manner toward her had changed since she no longer had a part in the management of the eating house, and for that reason she did not repulse him as sharply as she had been wont to do. He really bore Cavanagh no ill will and was, indeed, ashamed enough to understand that Lee admired the ranger and that his own courtship was hopeless. Nevertheless he persisted, his respect for her growing as he found her steadfast in her refusal to permit any familiarity.

"See here, Miss Virginia," he cried as she was passing him in the hall, "I can see you're worried about Lize—I mean your mother—and if I can be of any use I hope you'll call on me." As she thanked him without enthusiasm he added, "How is she tonight?"

"I think she's better."

"Can I see her?"

His tone was so earnest that the girl was moved to say, "I'll ask her."

"I wish you would. I want to say something to her."

Lize's voice reached where they stood. "Come in, Joe; the door's open."

He accepted her invitation rather awkwardly, but his face was impassive as he looked down upon her.

"Well, how about it?" she asked. "What's doing in the town?"

"Not much of anything except talk. The whole country is buzzing over this dismissal of the chief forester."

"They'd better be doing something about that murder."

"They are. They're going up there in streams to see where the work was done. The coroner's inquest was held yesterday." He grinned. "Parties came to their death by persons unknown."

Lize scowled. "It's a wonder they don't charge it up to Ross Cavanagh or some other ranger."

"That would be a little too raw, even for this country. They're all feeling gay over this change in the forestry head. But, see here, don't you want to get out for a ride? I've got my new machine out here. It rides like silk."

"I reckon a horse is about my kind," she replied dully. "If you could take me up to Cavanagh's cabin I'd go," she added. "I want to see him."

"I can take you part way," he instantly declared. "But you'd have to ride a horse the last ten miles."

"Couldn't do it, Joe," she sighed. "These last few days I've been about as boneless as an eel. Funny the way a fellow keeps going when he's got something to do that has to be done. I'll tell you what, if you want to take me and Lee up to Sulphur I'll go you."

"Sure thing. What day?"

"Not for a day or two. I'm not quite up to it just now, but by Saturday I'll be saddlewise again."

Joe turned joyously to Lee. "That will be great! Won't you come out for a spin this minute?"

For a moment Lee was tempted. Anything to get away from this horrible little den and the people who distrusted Greg was her feeling, but she distrustful Greg, and she knew that every eye in the town would be upon her if she went, and, besides, Ross might return while she was away. "No; not today," she replied snally, but her voice was gentler than it had ever been to him.

The young fellow was moved to explain his position to Lize. "You don't think much of me, and I don't blame you. I haven't been much use so far, but I'm going to reform. If I had a girl like Lee Virginia to live up to I'd make a great citizen. I don't lay my arrest up against Cavanagh. I'm ready to pass that by. And as for this other business—this free range war in which the old man is mixed up—I want you to know that I'm against it. Dad knows his day is short; that's what makes him so hot. But he's a bluff—just a fussy old bluff. He knows he has no more right to the government grass than anybody else, but he's going to get ahead of the cattlemen if he can."

"Does he know who burned them sheep herders?"

"Of course he knows, but ain't going to say so. You see, that old Basque who was killed was a monopolist too. He went after that grass without asking anybody's leave. Moreover, he belonged to that Mexican dog-outfit that everybody hates. The old man isn't crying over that job; it's money in his pocket. All the same, it's too good a chance to put the hooks into the cattlemen; hence his offering a reward, and it looks as if something would really be done this time. They say Neill Ballard was mixed up in it and that old guy that showed me the sheep. But I don't take much stock in that. Whoever did it was paid by the cattlemen, sure thing." The young fellow's tone and bearing made a favorable impression upon Lize. She had never seen this side of him, for the reason that he had hitherto treated her as a berdasher.

She was acute

enough to understand that the social status had changed along with his release from the chain register, and she was slightly more reconciled, although she could not see her way to providing a living for herself and Lee. For all these reasons she was unwontedly civil to Joe and sent him away highly elated with the success of his interview.

"I'm going to let him take us up to Sulphur," she said to Lee. "I want to go to town."

Lee was silent, but a keen pang ran through her heart, for she perceived in this remark by her mother a tacit acknowledgment of Ross Cavanagh's desertion of them both. His invitation to them to come and camp with him was only a polite momentary impulse. "I'm ready to go," she announced at last. "I'm tired of this place. Let us go tomorrow."

CHAPTER XVIII
A CALL FOR HELP

On the following morning, while they were busy packing for the journey to Sulphur, Redfield rolled up to the door in company with a young man in the uniform of a forester.

"Go ask Reddy to come in," commanded Lize. "I want to see him."

Redfield met the girl at the door and presented his companion as "Mr. Dalton, district forester." Dalton was a tall young fellow with a marked southern accent. "He Cavanagh, the ranger, in town?" he asked.

"No," Lee replied, with effort; "he was here a few days ago, but he's gone back to the forest."

Redfield studied the girl with keen gaze, perceiving a passionate restraint in her face.

"How is your mother?" he asked politely.

Lee smiled faintly. "She's able to sit up. Won't you come in and see her?"

"With pleasure," assented Redfield, "but I want to see you alone. I have something to say to you." He turned to his superior. "Just go into the cafe, Dalton. I'll see you in a moment."

Lee Virginia, hitherto ashamed of the house, the furniture, the bed-everything—led the way without a word of apology. It was all detached now—something about to be left behind, like a bad garment borrowed in a time of stress. Nothing mattered since Ross did not return.

Lize, looking unwontedly refined and gentle, was sitting in a big rocking chair with her feet on a stool, her eyes fixed on the mountains, which showed through the open window. All the morning a sense of profound change, of something passing, had oppressed her. Now that she was about to leave the valley its charm appeared to her. She was tearing up a multitude of tiny roots of whose existence she had hitherto remained unaware. "I belong here," she acknowledged silently. "I'd be homesick anywhere else on God's earth. It's rough and dry bit and all that, but so am I. I'd fit it all in anywhere that Lee belonged."

She acknowledged an especial liking for Redfield, and she had penetrated enough, worldly wisdom enough, to know that Lee belonged more to his world than to her own and that his guidance and friendship were worth more, much more, than that of all the rest of the country, her own included. Therefore she said: "I'm mighty glad to see you, Reddy. Sit down. You've got to hear my little spite this time."

Redfield, perched on the edge of a tawdry chair, looked about like the charity visitor in a slum kitchen without intending to express disgust, but it was a dismal room in which to be sick, and he pitied the woman the more profoundly as he remembered her in the days when "all outdoors" was none too wide for her.

Lize began abruptly. "I'm down, but not out. In fact, I was coming up to see you this afternoon. Lee and I are just about pulling out for good."

"Indeed! Why not go back with me?"

"You can take the girl back if you want to, but now that I'm getting my chance at you I may not go."

Redfield's tone was entirely cordial as he turned to Lee. "I came hoping to carry you away. Will you come?"

"I'm afraid I can't, unless mother goes," she replied sadly.

Lize waved an imperative hand. "Fare away, child. I want to talk with Mr. Redfield alone. Go—see!"

Thus dismissed, Lee went back to the restaurant, where she found the forester just sitting down to his luncheon. "Mr. Redfield will be out in a few minutes," she explained.

"Won't you join me?" he asked in the frank accent of one to whom women are comrades. "The supervisor has been telling me about you."

She took a seat facing him, feeling something refined in his long, smoothly shaven, boyish face. He seemed very young to be district forester, and his eyes were a soft brown, with small wrinkles of laughter playing round their corners.

He began at once on the subject of his visit. "Redfield tells me you are a friend of Mr. Cavanagh's. Did you know that he had resigned?"

She faced him with startled eyes. "No, indeed. Has he done so?"

"Yes. The supervisor got a letter yesterday inclosing his resignation and asking to be relieved at once. And when I heard of it I asked the supervisor to bring me down to see him. He's too good a man to lose."

"Why did he resign?"

"He seemed very bitter over the chief's dismissal. But I hope to persuade him to stay in the service. He's too valuable a man to lose just now, when the war is so hot. I realize that his salary is too small. But there are other places for him. Perhaps when he knows that I have a special note to him from the chief he will reconsider. He's quite capable of the supervisor's position, and Mr. Redfield is willing to resign in his favor. I'm telling you all this because Mr. Redfield has told me of your interest in Mr. Cavanagh, or, rather, his interest in you."

Sam Gregg, entering the door at this moment, came directly to the forester's table. He was followed by the sheriff, a bearded old man with a soiled collar and a dim eye.

Gregg growled out, "You'd better keep your man Cavanagh in the hills,

Mr. Forester, or somebody will take a pot shot at him."

"Why, what's new?"

"His assistant is down with smallpox."

"Smallpox?" exclaimed Dalton. Every jaw was fixed and every eye turned upon the speaker.

"Smallpox!" gasped Lee.

Gregg resumed, enjoying the sensation he was creating. "Yes, that Basque herder of mine, the one up near Black Tooth, sent word he was sick, so I hunted up an old tramp by the name of Edwards to take his place. Edwards found the dago dying of pox and skipped out over the range, leaving him to die alone. Cavanagh went up and found the dago dead and took care of him. Result is he's full of germs and has brought his acquaintance down with it, and both of 'em must be quarantined right where they are."

"Good heavens, man," exclaimed Dalton, "this is serious business! Are you sure it's smallpox?"

"One of my men came from there last night. I was there myself on Monday; so was the deputy. The sheriff missed Tom this morning, but I reached him by phone, and Cavanagh admitted to us that the Basque died of smallpox and that he buried him with his own hands."

The sheriff spoke up. "The criminal part of it is this, Mr. Dalton—Cavanagh didn't report the case when he came down here, just when about leaving a trail of poison. Why didn't he report it? He should be arrested."

"Wait a moment," said Dalton. "Perhaps it wasn't pox; perhaps it was only moutain fever. Cavanagh is not the kind of man to involve others in a pestilence. I reckon he knew it was nothing but a fever, and not wishing to alarm his friends, he just slid into town and out again."

A flash of light, of heat, of joy, went through Lee's heart as she listened to Dalton's defense of Cavanagh. "That was the reason why he rode away," she thought. "He was afraid of bringing harm to us." And this conviction lighted her face with a smile even while the forester continued his supposition by saying: "Of course proper precautions should be taken, and as we are going up there the supervisor and I will see that a quarantine is established if we find it necessary."

Gregg was not satisfied. "Cavanagh admitted to the deputy and to me that he believed the case to be smallpox and said that he had destroyed the camp and everything connected with it except the horse and the dog, and yet he comes down here, infecting everybody he meets." He turned to Lee. "You'd better burn the bed he slept on. He's left a trail of germs wherever he went. I say the man is criminally liable and should be jailed if he lives to get back to town."

Lee's mind was off now on another tangent. "Suppose it is true?" she asked herself. "Suppose he has fallen sick away up there, miles and miles from any nurse or doctor—"

"There's something queer about the whole business," pursued Gregg. "For instance, who is this assistant he's got? Johnson said there was an old man in ranger uniform pottering round. Why didn't he send word to him? Why did he let me come to the door? He might have involved me in the disease. I tell you, if you don't take care of him the people of the county will."

The forester looked grave. "If he knew it was smallpox and failed to

report it he did wrong, but you say he took care of this poor shepherd—nursed him till he died and buried him, taking all precautions. You can't complain of that, can you? That's the act of a good ranger and a brave man. You wouldn't have done it?" he ended, addressing Gregg. "Sickness up there two full miles above sea level is quite a different proposition from sickness in Sulphur City or the Forks. I shall not condemn Mr. Cavanagh till I hear his side of the story."

Lee turned a grateful glance upon him. "You must be right. I don't believe Mr. Cavanagh would deceive any one."

"Well, we'll soon know the truth," said Dalton, "for I'm going up there if the ranger has been exposed he must not be left alone."

"He ain't alone," declared the sheriff. "Tom phoned me that he had an assistant."

"Swenson, I suppose," said Redfield who entered at this moment. "Swenson is his assistant."

"I didn't see him myself," Gregg continued, "but I understood the deputy to say that he was an old man."

"Swenson is a young man," corrected Redfield.

The sheriff insisted. "Tom said it was an old man—a stranger to him—tall, smooth shaven, not very strong; he said—'neared to be a cook. He had helped nurse the dago, so Tom said.'"

"That's very curious," mused Redfield. "There isn't an old man in the service of this forest. There's a mistake somewhere."

"Well," concluded Gregg, "that's what he said. I thought at first it might be that old hobo Edwards, but this fellow being in uniform and smooth shaven—His face changed; his voice deepened. "Say, I believe it was Edwards, and furthermore, Edwards is the convict that Texas marshal was after the other day, and this man Cavanagh—your prize ranger—is harboring him."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Redfield.

The sheriff banged his hand upon the table. "That's the whole mystery I see it all now. He's up there concealing this man. He's given out this smallpox scare just to keep the officers away from him. Now you've got it!"

The thunder in his voice drew toward him all those who remained in the dining room, and Lee found herself rined about by a dozen excited men, but she did not flinch. She was too deeply concerned over Cavanagh's fate to be afraid, and, besides, Redfield and the forester were beside her. The supervisor was staggered by Gregg's accusation and by certain contradictory facts in his own possession, but he defended Cavanagh bravely.

"You're crazy," he replied. "Why should Ross do such a foolish thing? What is his motive? What interest would he have in this man Edwards, whom you call a tramp? He can't be a relative and certainly not a friend of Cavanagh's, for you say he is a convict. Come, now, your hatred of Cavanagh has gone too far."

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