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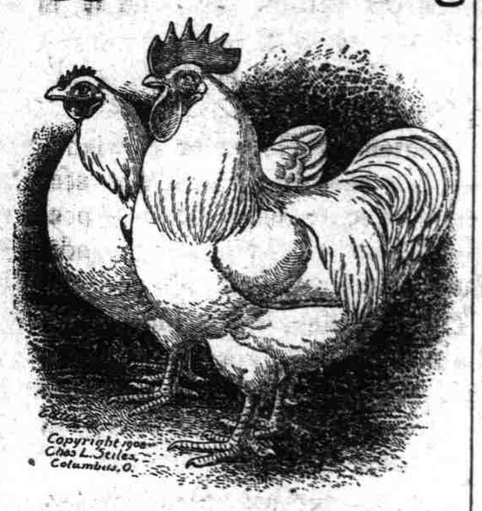

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Edith Maitland, a frank, free and unspoiled young Philadelphia girl, is taken to the Colorado mountains by her uncle, Robert Maitland. James Armstrong, Maitland's protege, falls in love with her.

CHAPTER II.—His persistent wooing thrills the girl, but she hesitates, and Armstrong goes east on business without a definite answer.

CHAPTER III.—Enid hears the story of a mining engineer, Newbold, whose wife fell off a cliff and was so seriously hurt that he was compelled to shoot her to prevent her being eaten by wolves while he went for help.

CHAPTER IV.—Kirkby, the old guide who tells the story, gives Enid a package of letters which he says were found on the dead woman's body. She reads the letters and at Kirkby's request keeps them.

CHAPTER V.—While Enid is bathing in the river in fancied solitude, a big bear appears on the bank and is about to plunge into the water to attack the girl when a shot rings out and the animal is killed by a strange man.

CHAPTER VI.—Enid is caught in a storm which wipes out her party's camp. She is dashed upon the rocks and injured. The strange man who shot the bear finds her unconscious and carries her to shelter.

CHAPTER VII.

A Wild Dash for the Hills.

Old Kirkby, who had been lazily mending a saddle the greater part of the morning, had eaten his dinner, smoked his pipe and was now stretched out on the grass in the warm sun taking a nap. Mrs. Maitland was drowsing over a book in the shadow of one of the big pines, when Pete, the horse wrangler, who had been wandering rather far down the canon rounding up the ever straying stock, suddenly came bursting into the camp.

"Great God Almighty!" he cried, actually kicking the prostrate frontiersman as he almost stumbled over him. "Wake up, old man, an'——"

"What the—" began Kirkby fiercely, thus rudely aroused from slumber and resentful of the daring and most unusual affront to his dignity and station since all men, and especially the younger ones, held him in great honor.

"Look here," yelled Peter in growing excitement and entirely oblivious to his lese-majestie, pointing at a black cloud rolling over the top of the range. "It'll be a cloudburst sure. We'll have to git out o' here an' in a hurry too. Oh, Mrs. Maitland."

By this time Kirkby was on his feet, the storm had stolen upon him sleeping and unaware. The configuration of the canon had completely hid its approach. At best the three in the camp could not have discovered it until it was high in the heavens. Now the clouds were already approaching the noonday sun. Kirkby was alive to the situation at once. He had the rare ability of men of action of awakening with all his faculties at instant command. He did not have to rub his eyes and wonder where he was, and speculate as to what was to be done. The moment that his eyes, following Pete's outstretched arm, discovered the black mass of clouds he ran toward Mrs. Maitland and standing on no ceremony he shook her vigorously by the shoulder.

"We'll have to run for our lives, ma'am," he said briefly. "Pete, drive the stock up on the hills, fur as you kin, the hosses pertikler, they'll be more to us an' them burros must take keer of themselves."

Pete needed no urging. He was off like a shot in the direction of the improvised corral. He loosed the horses from their pickets and started them up the steep trail that led down from the hogback to the camp by the water's edge. He also tried to start the burros he had just rounded up in the same direction. Some of them would go and some of them would not. He had his hands full in an instant. Meanwhile Kirkby did not linger by the side of Mrs. Maitland. With incredible agility for so old a man he ran over to the tent where the stores were kept and began picking out such articles of provision as he could easiest carry.

"Come over here, Mrs. Maitland," he cried. "We'll have to carry up on the hill somethin' to keep us from starvin' till we get back to town. We hadn't orter camped in this yere pocket noways, but who'd ever expected anything like this now?"

"What do you fear?" asked the woman, joining him as she spoke and waiting for his directions.

"Looks to me like a cloudburst," was the answer. "Creek's pretty full now, an' if she does break everything below yere 'll go to hell on a run."

It was evidence of his perturbation and anxiety that he used such language, which, however, in the emergency did not seem unwarranted even to the refined ear of Mrs. Maitland.

"Is it possible?" she exclaimed.

"'Taint only possible, it's sartin. Now, ma'am," he hastily bundled up a lot of miscellaneous provisions in a small piece of canvass, tied it up and handed it to her. "That'll be for you." Immediately after he made up a much larger bundle in another tent fly, adding, "An' this is mine."

"Oh, let us hurry," cried Mrs. Maitland, as a peal of thunder, low, muttered, menacing, burst forth from the flying clouds, now obscuring the sun, and rolled over the camp.

"We've got time enough yit," answered Kirkby, coolly calculating their chances. "Best git yer slicker on, you'll need it in a few minutes."

Mrs. Maitland ran to her own tent and soon came out with sou'wester and yellow oilskins completely covering her. Kirkby meantime had donned his own old battered, soiled rain clothes and had grabbed up Pete's.

"I brought the children's coats along," said Mrs. Maitland, extending three others.

"Good," said Kirkby. "Now we'll take our packs an'——"

"Do you think there is any danger to Robert?"

"He'll git nothin' worse 'n a wettin'," returned the old man confidently. "If we'd pitched the tents up on the hog back, that's all we'd a been in for."

"I have to leave the tents and all the things," said Mrs. Maitland.

"You can stay with them," answered Kirkby, dryly, "but if what I think 's goin' to happen comes off, you won't have no need of nothin' no more—Great God, here she comes."

As he spoke there was a sudden, swift downpour of rain, not in drops, but in a torrent. Catching up his own pack and motioning the woman to do likewise with her load, Kirkby caught her by the hand, and half led, half dragged her up the steep trail from the brook to the ridge which bordered the side of the canon. The canon was much wider here than further up and there was much more room and much more space for the water to spread. Yet, they had to hurry for their lives as it was. They had gone up scarcely a hundred feet when the disgorgement of the heavens took place. The water fell with such force, directness and continuousness that it almost beat them down. It ran over the trail down the side of the mountain in sheets like water falls. It required all the old man's skill and address to keep himself and companion from losing their footing and falling down into the seething tumult below.

The tents went down in an instant. Where there had been a pleasant bit of meadow land was now a muddy, tossing lake of black water. Some of the horses and most of the burros which Pete had been unable to do anything with were engulfed in a moment. The two on the mountain side could see them swimming for dear life as they swept down the canon. Pete himself, with a few of the animals, was already scrambling up to safety.

"Great God!" He Cried. "Where Is Enid?"

Speech was impossible between the noise of the falling rain and the incessant peals of thunder, but by persistent gesture, old Kirkby urged the terrified, trembling woman up the trail until they finally reached the top of the hog back, where under the poor shelter of the stunted pines they joined Pete with such of the horses as he had been able to drive up. Kirkby, taking a thought for the morrow, noted that there were four of them, enough to pull the wagon if they could get back to it.

After the first awful deluge of the cloudburst it moderated slightly, but the hard rain came down steadily, the wind rose as well, and in spite of their oilskins they were soon wet and cold. It was impossible to make a fire, there was no place for them to go, nothing to be done. They could only remain where they were and wait. After a half hour of exposure to the merciless fury of the storm, a thought came suddenly to Mrs. Maitland. She leaned over and caught the frontiersman by his wet sleeve. Seeing that she wished to speak to him, he bent his head toward her lips.

"Enid," she cried, pointing down the canon. She had not thought before of the position of the girl.

Kirkby, who had not forgotten her, but who had instantly realized that he could do nothing for her, shook his head, lifted his eyes and solemnly pointed his finger up to the gray skies. He had said nothing to Mrs. Maitland before. What was the use of troubling her.

"God only kin help her," he cried. "She's beyond the help of man."

Ah, indeed, old trapper, whence came the confident assurance of that dogmatic statement? For as it chanced, at that very moment the woman for whose peril your heart was wrung was being lifted out of the torrent by a man's hand! And, yet, who shall say that the old hunter was not right, and that the man himself, as men of old have been, was sent from God?

"It can't be," began Mrs. Maitland in great anguish for the girl she had grown to love.

"Ef she seed the storm an' realized what it was, an' had sense enough to climb up the canon wall," answered the other, "she won't be no worse off'n we are; ef not——"

Mrs. Maitland had only to look down into the seething cauldron to understand the possibility of that "if."

"Oh," she cried, "let us pray for her that she sought the hills."

"I've been a doin' it," said the old man gruffly.

He had a deep vein of piety in him, but, like other rich ores, it had to be mined for in the depths before it was apparent.

By slow degrees the water subsided, and after a long while the rain ceased, a heavy mist lay on the mountains and the night approached without any further appearance of the veiled sun. Toward evening Robert Maitland, with the three men and the three children, joined the wretched trio above the camp. Maitland, wild with excitement and apprehension, had pressed on ahead of the rest. It was a glad-faced man indeed who ran the last few steps of the rough way and clasped his wife in his arms, but as he did so he noticed that one was missing.

"Great God," he cried, releasing his wife, "where is Enid?"

"She went down the canon early this mornin' intendin' to stay all day," slowly and reluctantly answered old Kirkby, "an'——"

He paused there. It wasn't necessary for him to say anything more.

Maitland walked to the edge of the trail and looked down into the valley. It had been swept clean of the camp. Rocks had been rolled over upon the meadow land, trunks of trees torn up by the roots had lodged against them. It was a scene of desolate and miserable confusion and disaster.

"Oh, Robert, don't you think she may be safe?" asked Mrs. Maitland.

"There's just a chance, I think, that she may have suspicioned the storm an' got out of the canon," suggested the old frontiersman.

"A slim chance," answered Maitland gloomily. "God, I wouldn't have had this happen for anything on earth."

"Nor me. I'd a heap ruther it had got me than her," said Kirkby simply.

"I didn't see it coming," continued Maitland, nodding as if Kirkby's statement were to be accepted as a matter of course, as indeed it was. "We were on the other slope of the mountain until it was almost overhead."

"Nuther did I. To tell the truth I was lyin' down nappin' w'en Pete, yere, who'd been down the canon rounding up some of the critters, came bustin' in on us."

"I ain't saved but four hosses," said Pete mournfully, "and there's only one burro on the hog back."

"We came back as fast as we could," said Maitland. "I pushed on ahead, George, Bradshaw and Phillips are bringing Bob and the girls. We must search the canon."

"It can't be done tonight, old man," said Kirkby.

"I tell you we can't wait, Jack!"

"We've got to, I'm as willin' to lay down my life for that young gal as anybody on earth, but in this yere mist an' as black a night as it's goin' to be, we couldn't go ten rod without killin' ourselves an' we couldn't see nothin' noways."

"But she may be in the canon."

"If she's in the canon 'twon't make no difference to her w'ether we finds her tomorrer or next day or next year, Bob."

Maitland groaned in anguish.

"I can't stay here inactive," he persisted stubbornly.

"It's a hard thing, but we got to wait till mornin'. Ef she got out of the canon and climbed up on the hog back she'll be all right, she'll soon find out she can't make no progress in this mist and darkness. No, old friend, we're up agin it hard. We jest got to stay the night w'ere we are an' as long as we got to wait we might as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible. For the wimmen an' children, anyway. I fetched up some ham and some canned goods and other eatin's in these yere canvas sacks. We might kiddle a fire——"

"It's hardly possible," said Maitland. "We shall have to eat it cold."

"Oh, Robert," pleaded his wife, "isn't it possible that she may have escaped?"

"Possible, yes, but——"

"We won't give up hope, ma'am," said Kirkby, "until tomorrer w'en we 've had a look at the canon."

By this time the others joined the party. Phillips and Bradshaw showed the stuff that was in them. They immediately volunteered to go down the canon at once, knowing little or nothing of its dangers and indifferent to what they did know, but as Kirkby had pointed out, the attempt was clearly impossible. Maitland bitterly reproached himself for having allowed the girl to go alone, and in those self-reproaches old Kirkby joined.

They were too wet and cold to sleep. There was no shelter and it was not until early in the morning they succeeded in kindling a fire. Meanwhile the men talked the situation over very carefully. They were two days' journey from the wagons. It was necessary that the women and children should be taken back at once. Kirkby hadn't been able to save much more than enough to eat to get them back to a ranch or settlement, and on very short rations at best. It was finally decided that George and Pete and Mrs. Maitland, the two girls and the youngster, should go back to the wagon, drive to the nearest settlement, leave the women and then return on horseback with all speed to meet Maitland and Kirkby, who would meanwhile search the canon.

The two men from the east had to go back with the others, although they pleaded gallantly to be allowed to remain with the two who were to take up the hunt for Enid. Maitland might have kept them with him, but that meant retaining a larger portion of the scanty supplies that had been saved and he was compelled against his will to refuse their requests. Leaving barely enough to subsist Maitland and Kirkby for three or four days, or

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