

The Girl a Horse and a Dog

By FRANCIS LYNDE

CHAPTER XX.

Cousin Percy Wins

It was awkward for both of us, standing there before the open cabin door, and I pointed to the bench where Daddy Hiram was wont to smoke his evening pipe in good weather.

"Won't you sit down until we can sort of fill it out?" I begged.

"It's a nuisance, whatever," she objected; nevertheless, she did sit down and let me sit beside her.

"I know just how distressed you must be," I began, "and perhaps I can lift a bit of the load from your shoulders. There will be no legal steps taken against you—against Charles Bullerton."

"Thank you," she said; just as short as that.

"And that isn't all," I went on. "After we get into the ore and have some real money to show for it, I'm going to make over a share in the Cinnabar to your father and put him in a position to do the right thing by you when you marry. And he'll do it; you know he'll do it."

"How kind!" she murmured, looking straight out in front of her.

"It isn't kindness; it's bare justice. Between you, you two have saved my legacy for me."

"I wish, now, it hadn't been saved!" she exclaimed, as vindictively as you please.

"Truly, I thought, the ways of women are just finding out; or at least the way of a maid with a man is."

"Can't I say anything at all without putting my foot into it?" I asked in despair. "You break a man's back with a load of obligation one day, and toss him lightly out of your young life the next! I haven't done anything to earn your—to earn the back of your hand; Jeanie; or if I have, I don't know what it is."

"You have committed the unpardonable sin," she accused coolly. "I don't wonder that Miss Randle took your ring off."

"I wasn't going to let the talk shift to Lisette; not if I knew it, and could help it."

"What is the unpardonable sin?" I asked.

"To misunderstand; to think a person capable of a thing when a person is not; to—just take it for granted that a person is guilty—oh—with a little stamp of her foot—I can't bear to talk about it!"

I guess it's a part of a man's equipment to be dense and sort of stupid in his dealings with women, I mean.

So slowly that I thought the catch would never snap and hold, my foot mind crept back along the line, searching blindly for the point at which all this fiery indignation toward me had begun; back and still back to that moment of our deliverance—Daddy's and mine—at the shaft-house door, with this dear girl outwitting her arms from her father's neck, and with me saying, "I'm not hurt, either. Welcome home, Miss Twombly—or should I say Mrs. Bullerton?"

"Jeanie!" I gasped, "do you mean that you're not going to marry Charles Bullerton—that you never meant to?"

"Of course, I'm not!" she retorted, with a savage little out-thrust of the adorable chin. "But you thought so small of me that you simply took it for granted!"

I wagged my head in deepest humility.

"I'm as the dust under your pretty feet, Jeanie; please don't trample me too hard. Bullerton—that is—er—we had a scrap the next morning after you went away, you know, and I well, he rather got the worst of it. And when I had him down and was trying to make him tell us where you were—even your father thought you'd gone off with him—he said you'd planned to go with him to get married, but that you had failed to show up at Atropia in time for the train."

"It's told a lie, because that's the way he is made and he couldn't help it," she said simply, still as cool as a cucumber. "He said we were going to Angola to get married, and I—I didn't say so, nor did I; I just let him talk and didn't say anything at all."

"Won't you tell me a bit more?" I begged.

"You don't deserve it the least little bit, but I will. It began with the deed; your deed to the mine. One day, when you were over at the shaft-house, and had left your coat here in the cabin, I saw him take the deed from your pocket when he didn't know I was looking. He read it and put it back quickly when he heard me stirring in the other room. I knew it hadn't been recorded; you and Daddy had both spoken of that. I felt sure he'd take it again, and perhaps destroy it. At first I thought I'd tell you or Daddy, or both of you. But I knew that would mean trouble."

"We were never very far from the fighting edge in those days," I admitted. "Bullerton had shown me the gun he always carried under his arm, and had told me what to expect in case I were foolish enough to lose my temper."

"I know," she nodded. "He killed a man once; it was when I was a little girl and we were living in Cripple Creek. He was acquitted on the plea of self-defense. So I didn't dare say anything to you or to Daddy. What I did was to steal your deed myself, when I had a chance. Daddy has some blank forms just like it, and I sat up one night in my room and made a copy. It wasn't a very good copy—your grandfather's handwriting was awfully hard to imitate. Besides, I didn't have any notarial seal. But I thought it might do for—some thing to be stolen. Then I hid the real deed and put the copy back in the envelope in your pocket."

"And Bullerton finally stole it, just as you thought he would," I put in.

"He did. You are dreadfully careless with your things; you are al-

ways leaving your coat around, just where you happen to take it off. I knew then that the next thing to be done was to get your deed recorded quickly. He—he was urging me every day to run away with him, and I was afraid to tell him how much I despised him; afraid he'd take it out on you and Daddy. So I just let him go on and talk and believe what he pleased. Of course, he wanted to ride with me the morning we went away, but after we got down the road a piece, I made an excuse to go on ahead by another trail."

"That much of what he told your father and me—when we were having the scrap—was true. He said you went on ahead."

"I didn't go to Atropia, as he expected me to," she continued calmly. "I took the old Haversack trail across the mountain to Greaser siding. I knew that the Cophah train would stop there on the side-track. When I got there on the Haversack I thought I heard somebody following me. I was scared and didn't know what to do. I was afraid my coping of the deed had been discovered and that the original would be taken away from me, so I hurried to hide the real deed. The old Haversack tunnel seemed to be a good place, but while I was in there Barney began to bark, and I looked out and saw that the noise I had heard had been made by a stray cow from one of the foothill ranches. So I remounted and rode on to catch the train to Cophah. At Greaser siding I tried to make Barney lead the pony home, and Barney tried his best to do it. But Winkle wanted to graze, and I had to go off and leave them when the train came. That's all, I think; except that I had to wait two days at my cousin's in Cophah before I could get the deed back from the recorder's office. They were awfully slow about it."

"It isn't quite all," I amended. "You haven't told me how you happened to come back with Beasley and his posse."

"That was just a coincidence. I reached Atropia on the early morning train and met Mr. Beasley and his men just as they were starting up the mountain. Cousin Buddy Fuller had told me how he had telegraphed to Angela for Mr. Beasley, and I was scared to death, of course, because I knew what it meant. So I borrowed the Haggerty's pony and came along with the posse."

There was silence for a little time; such silence as the clattering and hammering of the carpenters and steam-fitters permitted. Then I said: "And when you got here, the first thing I did was to call you Mrs. Bullerton. I don't blame you for not being able to forgive me, Jeanie, girls honestly, I don't."

"It was worse than a crime," she averred solemnly; "it was a blunder. What made you do it?"

"Partly because I was a jealous fool, but mostly because I was sore and sorry and disappointed. I thought Bullerton had beaten me to it."

"No," she said quite soberly; "it was Miss Randle who beat you to it."

I gasped. There were tremendous possibilities in that cool answer of hers; prodigious possibilities.

"But say!" I burst out; "didn't I tell you that Lisette had pushed me overboard long ago?"

"I know. She was sensible enough to see that you and she couldn't live on nothing a year. But now that you are rich, or are going to be—well, sure you are not going to be less generous than she was. What if she did take your ring off in a moment of discouragement, and knowing that you couldn't buy her hair? You can be very sure she put it on again as soon as your back was turned."

There we were; no sooner over one hurdle before another and a higher one must jump up. I groaned and thrust my hand into my pockets. A paper rustled and I drew it out. It was the telegram Buddy Fuller had handed me, still unread. I opened it half absently, holding it down so that the glow of the nearest flare fell upon the writing. Then I gave a little yelp, swallowed hard two or three times and nearly choked doing it, and read the thing again. After all of which I said, as calmly as I could:

"But, in spite of all that I had told you about Lisette, you asked me once to kiss you."

"Is—is it quite nice of you to remind me of it?" she inquired reproachfully.

"It wouldn't be—in ordinary circumstances; it would be beastly. But, listen, Jeanie; haven't you been mad clear through, sometimes, in reading a story, to have a coincidence rung in on you when you knew perfectly well that the thing couldn't possibly have happened so put in the nick of time?"

"I suppose I have; yes."

"Well, don't ever let it disturb you again. Because the real thing is a lot more wonderful and unbelievable, you know. Listen to this: it's a wire from my cousin, Percy; the one who sent me out into the wide, wide world to look for a girl, a horse and a dog, and who is the only human being outside of Colorado who knows where I am likely to be reached by telegraph. He is in Boston, and this is what he says: 'Recalled home when we reached Honolulu, out-bound. Lisette and I were married today. Congratulate us.'"

For a minute there was a breathless sort of pause, and I broke it:

"Jeanie, dear, was it just common honesty and good faith that made you take all these chances, with the deed, and with Bullerton?"

"Yes, I'm commonly honest," said the small voice at my shoulder.

"Bullerton is a shrewd, smart fellow," I went on. "I'll venture to say that he never made such a bonehead break as I did the morning you came back. You must think something of him or you wouldn't have asked me not to prosecute him for trying to murder your father and me."

She looked down at her pretty feet, which were crossed.

"I think—a little something—of myself," she said, with small breath-catching between the words; "I owed myself that much, don't you think if I didn't deceive him outright, I'm afraid I did let him deceive himself. So that made me responsible, in a way, and I couldn't let you send him to jail, could I?"

"But what about me?—Are you going to send me to a worse place than any jail—for that is what the whole wide world is going to be to me without you, Jeanie, dear."

Her answer was just like her: She turned and put up her face to me and said, "Kiss me again, Grandie." And though all the carpenters on the job were looking on, as I suppose they were, by this time, I took her in my arms.

It was a short space; it sort of had to be in the public circumstances. When it was over, I folded Percy's telegram, took out my pencil, and with the gear that looking on, printed my reply on what was left of the message blank. "This is what I said:—"

"The same to you: Have found the G, the H, and the D, and Miss Jeanie Twombly and I are to be married as soon as we can find a minister. Incidentally, I have learned how to work. Hope it will be a comfort to you, to Grandfather Jasper—if he is where he can hear of it—and to all concerned."

"STANNIE!"

THE END.

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