

THE BATTLE CRY

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CHAPTER XXIV—Continued.

The school buildings slept in silent shadows, except that from the open door of the room where her piano stood there came a soft flooding of lamplight—a single dash of orange in the nocturnal darkness. And gray. He went up very quietly, pausing to drink of the fragrance of the honey-suckle, and there drifted out to him, as he paused, the music of the piano and the better music of her voice.

She was singing a love song. Though he had sent no word of his coming, she was once more in evening dress, all black save for a crimson flower at her breast and one of her hair. But this time the sight of her in a costume so foreign to the hills did not distress him; it was a night that called for wonders.

She rose as the man's footstep sounded on the floor, and then, at the memory of their last meeting, the color mounted to her cheeks and she took her hands in his arms. She raised her hands to his shoulders and tried to push him away, but he held her firmly and while she sought to tell him that they must find their way back to the colorless level of friendship, he could feel the wild flutter of her heart.

"Listen," she protested. "You must listen."

But had Anne Harvey laughed. "Ever since the first time I saw you," he declared. "I've been listening."

"It has been a dull affair between you and me. But the devil's over now, and this time I win."

She looked up and her pupils began to widen with that intense gaze which she drew aside from the carnal from a woman's soul, and as though she realized that she could not trust herself to his eyes, she turned her face away. Only in its profile could he read the struggle between mind and heart, and what he read filled him with elation.

"Anne," she said in a very low voice, "give me a truce. For one hour let me think. It involves too much for me always; let me at least have the chance to be sane. Give me an hour."

The man stepped back and released her, and she turned and fled the way out to the porch, where she sank down in the hammock with her face buried in both hands. When at length she looked up she was smiling rather wanly.

"It can't be dear," she said. But while she argued with words and sensible reasons, the night was arguing, too—arguing for him with all its sense-steeping fragrance and all its cadences and appeals to sleeping forth in their hearts!

And while she talked he made no response, but sat there silently waiting. At last he looked at his watch and put it back in his pocket. He rose and said quietly, but with a touch of perfect finality:

"Your truce is over."

"But don't you see?" You haven't answered one of my arguments."

Anne Harvey laughed once more.

"I didn't come to argue," he said; "I came to love."

He drew from his pocket the license and the seal of the Registrar. Anne Talbot was waiting over at my house to marry us. Will you go over there or shall I go back and fetch him here?"

She took an involuntary step to ward him with lifted arms, and then, with a strong effort, as if struggling against a spell, she drew back again, and her voice came very low and broken.

"I can't—I can't!" she pleaded.

"But I wish to God I could."

Then Anne Harvey began to speak.

"You've talked, and I've listened to you as made it a little easier for you."

"You've let us both come to need each other more than food or drink or breath. For me there's no life without you. In all the earth there's just you—you—yours."

For the first time in a day comes where there's just one man, and for every man there's just one woman. What that day does nothing else could do. That's why all those reasons of yours don't mean anything."

His voice had the ring of triumph as he added: "You're going to marry me tonight. Come!"

He raised both arms and held them out, and though for a moment she hung back, her eyes were still irresistibly held by him and the magnetism that dwelled in him. With a gasping exclamation that was half surrender and half echo of his own triumph she swept into his embrace.

As she locked her fingers caressingly behind his dark head she wished for words fine and splendid beyond the mere phrases of eloquence came.

Then she felt his arms grow abruptly rigid and he was pressing her from him with a gentle insistence, while his face turned to the moonlight and the beauty of the world was a mere nothing to the beauty of one who is listening not only with his ears, but with every nerve of his being.

Slowly he drew back, still tense and alert, and from his eyes the tender glow died until they narrowed: not

hardened and the jaw angle stiffened and the lips drew into a smile.

She looked again into the face of the mountaineer, the feudist, of the wild creature turning to stand at bay.

For a moment they remained motionless, and her fingers rested on his arms and felt the strain on his tightened biceps.

"God!" he muttered almost inaudibly.

"What is it?" she whispered, but he replied only with a warning shake of the head.

Once more he stood listening, then gently turned her so that his body was between her and the outside world. He thrust her back into the open door and followed her inside.

"What is it, Anne? What did you hear out there?" Her face had gone pallid and she clung to his arm with a grip that indicated no intention of release.

"Nothing much. Just the crackling of twigs or two; just some steps and some faint voices."

"Little noises that would sound mean much if I didn't know what they do mean. They weren't friendly sounds. They're after me."

"What do you mean?"

"Her voice came in a low panic of whispering, and even as she spoke the man was listening with his head bent toward the closed door.

He laughed merrily under his breath.

"I don't know where they're picked out to get me. It don't matter much, does it? But I know you're picked out, too. I've been thinking for it, but I seem to have let me have one night."

"His lips smiled, and for an instant his eyes softened again to tenderness."

"This was my night."

Suddenly he wheeled and caught her fiercely in his arms holding her very close, and now her heart was beating more wildly than before—beating with a sudden and sickening terror.

He bent low and covered her temples and cheeks and lips and eyes with kisses.

"God knows, when I come here tonight," he declared, talking fast and passionately, "I didn't aim to ever go away again without you. Now I've got to go, but if I come through an there's a breath or a drop of blood left in me, I'll be back in a comin' back, dearest, if I live."

His answer was a low moan.

He released her at last and went over to the gun rack.

He looked at her shrine of guns, in her temple of disarmament, he said slowly: "Dearest, I was about the last man to leave my rifle here."

"I reckon I've got to be the first," he said. "I'm sorry. Will you give it to me or must I take it without permission?"

She came slowly over, conscious that her knees were trembling, and that her heart seemed to have taken the place of hot blood in her veins.

"If you need it," she faltered, "take it, dear—nothing else matters—Which one will I give you?"

"My own!" His voice was for the instant imperious. It was almost as if someone had asked Ulysses what he would draw in battle, for he reckoned his own gun good enough for him.

It has been told today."

She withdrew the rifle from the rack herself, and he took it from her trembling hands, but when he had accepted it she thrust her arms and clung to him wildly, her eyes wide with silent suffering and dread.

The crushing grasp of his arms hurt her, and she felt a wild joy in her heart. Then she resolutely whispered: "Go, dearest, go! Time is precious now. Good night!"

"Janita," he said slowly, "I have refused to take it out of your hands and the rough manners of the hills, but I want you to know always, most dear one, that I have loved you more than anything else in my life."

"I don't care, think of that. God knows I love you."

"Don't, Anne!" she cried with a smothered sob. "Don't like a soft, mushy lowlander! Talk to me in your own speech. It rings of strength, and God knows—her voice broke, and she added, with fierce tenderness, "God knows, I love you."

Then she opened the back door very cautiously on the shadows that crept in from the porch, and she slipped away and melted instantly into the murk.

CHAPTER XXV.

Out there the moon was setting. Soon, thank God, it would be dark everywhere. The man she loved needed all the chance he could get. He was sitting alone on the porch, his face a mask of gloom, his hands clasped in his lap. He was waiting for her, but she was not coming. He was waiting for her, but she was not coming. He was waiting for her, but she was not coming.

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At last there came to her ears the sound of heavy feet crashing through the brush, but he had been gone ten minutes then. Perhaps he had just escaped to his escape and were casting aside stealth for the fury of open pursuit. She even thought she heard an oath once, and then it was all quiet and the silence, like the punctuation of an exclamation-mark, came the far-away snap of a rifle.

She had dropped to a chair and sat there tensely, looking forward, her lips parted and her ears straining. Had she heard one shot and its echo, or had there been several? Her imagination and fears were playing her tricks now, and she could hardly be certain of her senses.

The passage of time was a thing of which she had lost count. Each moment was a century.

Then, with a violent start, she sat up. Now she knew she heard a sound, and there could be no doubt this time. It came from out beyond the front door, and she bent forward, listening.

It was a strange sort of sound which she could make out, but in a subtle way it was more terrifying than the clatter of rifles. It was as if some heavy, soft thing were being dragged up the steps and rolling back.

She rose and took a step toward the door, but she halted in doubt. The sound died and then came again, always with halting intervals of silence between, as though whoever were dragging the burden had to pause on each step he took. Then there was a scraping as of boot-leather on the boards and a labored breath outside—a breath that seemed to be agonized.

She bent forward and saw one hand outside the door, the latch, and heard a faint rapping. It was seemingly the rap of very feeble fingers, but that might all be part of a ruse. Was it friend or enemy out there, just beyond the quickness of the heavy door? At all events, she must see.

She braced herself and threw the door open. A figure which had been leaning against it lurched forward, stumbled over the threshold and fell half in and half out.

It was the figure of Anne Harvey.

How far he had hitched himself along, foot by foot, like a mortally wounded animal crawling toward the door, she could not tell, but for one horrified instant she stood gazing down at him in stupefaction.

He had gone out a splendid vital creature of resilient strength and power. He came back like the torn and bleeding wreck of a man, literally shot to pieces, as a quail is shattered when it rises close to a quick-shooting gun.

In the next moment she was stooping with her arms around his body, striving to lift his weight and bring him in. She was strong beyond all seeming of her slenderness, but the man was heavy, and as she raised his head she felt a sound of bitting and stifled agony escaped his white lips, and she knew that her efforts were torturing him.

It was an almost lifeless tongue that he spoke, and it was skinned— "I—wouldn't get here."

Then as she staggered under his inert bulk he tried to speak again. "Just help—drag me."

She threw her into the hall made a mad and terrible journey, and how she ever got him in, half hanging to her, half crawling, stopping at every step, she never knew. Still was done at last and she was kneeling on the floor with his head on her breast.

No wonder they had left him for dead and gone away content. He looked up and a faint smile came to his almost unrecognizable face. The blood which had already dried and caked with the dust through which he had crawled was being fed by a fresher outpouring, and as she held him close to her, her own bosom and arms were red as red as the flower planned in her hair.

She must stanch his wounds and pour whiskey down his throat before the flickering wisp of life flame burned out.

"Wait, dearest," she said to a broken voice. "I must get things you need."

"I ain't!" he pushed a moment for the breath which came very hard—"scarcely—worth while I'm done."

But she flew to the cupboard where there was brandy. She tore linen from her petticoat and brought water from the drinking cup and poured it over his head and down his face.

But when she pressed the flask to his lips he closed them and shook his head a little.

"I ain't never touched drop in my life," he said. "I reckon I might as well—finish out—'twon't be long. It's too late to begin now."

For a while he lay gasping, then spoke again, weakly: "Just kiss me—dearest—that's what I come for."

After a pause he spoke again. "There's one thing—I've got to ask you: Why did you swear I'd die for me—in court?"

Her head came up and she answered steadily:

"Dearest, I'd never asked myself that question until the lawyer asked it. I didn't know the answer myself. I didn't know I meant to tell you. It was our business, not his. There was to help you, and it wouldn't have helped you to tell them that I was fighting for my own heart. And, besides, I didn't know then."

She went on bathing and stanching his wounds as best she could, but a spirit of despair settled on her. There were so many of them, and they were so deep and ragged.

"I didn't—come for help," he told her, and through the grim and blood-

dashed a ghost of his rare and boyish smile. "I'm past mendin' now. I can't because 'I'm dyin'—an' I wanted to die in your arms!"

"You shan't die," she breathed fiercely between her teeth. "My arms shall always be around you."

But he shook his head and his figure sagged a little against her knees.

"I know—when I'm done," he said slowly. "It's all right now—I've done got here. That's enough—I loves you."

For a time she wondered whether he had lost consciousness, and she laid him some little ways and brought cushions with which to soften his position. It was almost daybreak now.

She sat there beside him, and as her heart beat close to him he seemed to draw from it some of its abundant vitality, for he revived a little, and though his eyes were closed and she had to bend down to catch his words, his voice grew somewhat stronger.

"I ain't never felt losemore—before. But out there—dying by myself—the last of my family—I had to come. Dyin' ain't like livin'—I couldn't die without you."

"You aren't dying," she argued desperately. "You shan't die."

"I ain't that," he breathed with great difficulty. "They'll come back here. They'll get me yet—an' I'd rather die first."

She bent her head very gently on the pillows and rose to her feet. In the instant she stood transfixed. Deep in her violet eyes blazed such a blue fire as that which burns at the heart of a storm that turns the lips of the grim set of light and blood-lust.

The crushed flower on her bosom rose and fell under a violent tempest of passion. The skirt of her evening gown had been torn in her effort to carry him. Somehow one silk stocking was snagged above her slipper. His blood reddened her white arms and bosom. She was shaking with it, and clenched her hands. The disciple of peace was gone, and there stood there in its stead the hot-breathed incarnation of some valkyrie hovering over the din of battle and urging on the fight.

Yet her voice was colder and steadier than he had ever heard it. She pointed to the door.

"Get you!" she exclaimed scornfully. "No man but a Harvey crosses my threshold while I live. I'm a Harvey now and we live or die together. Get you!" Her voice broke in a low laugh. "Let them come!"

No bitterly bled daughter of the mountain, she was now the daughter of the mountain woman as this transformed and reborn girl of the cultured East. She moved about the place with a steady, indomitable energy. With strength beyond her meekness, she upset the great oaken table and barricaded the door, laughing as she heard the clatter of pedagogic volumes on the floor. Fox's "Book of Martyrs" fell at her feet, and she trampled it viciously to the side.

She went and stood before her rack of guns, and her lips curled as she caught up a heavy-caliber repeater with all the fierce desire of a duelist.

She drank, she stood there loading rifles and setting them in an orderly line against the wall. She devastated her altar of peace with the untamed joy of a barbarian seeking a temple.

Then she turned to the door. Her eyes were wild with admiration. "It burned above his fever, and she said to him once more, "Now let 'em come."

He shook his head, but strangely enough his love and awe and respect had strengthened and quickened him like brandy, and he pleaded: "Drag me over where I can get just one shot."

Then Janita blew out the lamp and stood silent in the dusk that comes before dawn. She did not have to wait long, for soon she heard hoofbeats in the road, and they stopped just at the turn.

"Hello, stranger!" she shouted, and she took all her strength to command her voice. "Halt where you are."

There was an instant's silence in the first misty gray that was bringing the veiled sunrise.

A stifled murmur of voices came from the road, and she caught the words, "He's in there all right." A moment later someone called out suddenly from the shadows:

"We gives you three minutes ter leave that place, or we'll burn it."

Heaven's own! He ain't no better than a rat, rather not ter harm ye. Git out quick."

"Ye can't save me, dearest. It's too late. For God's sake, go out," pleaded Anne Harvey, her eyes wild.

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