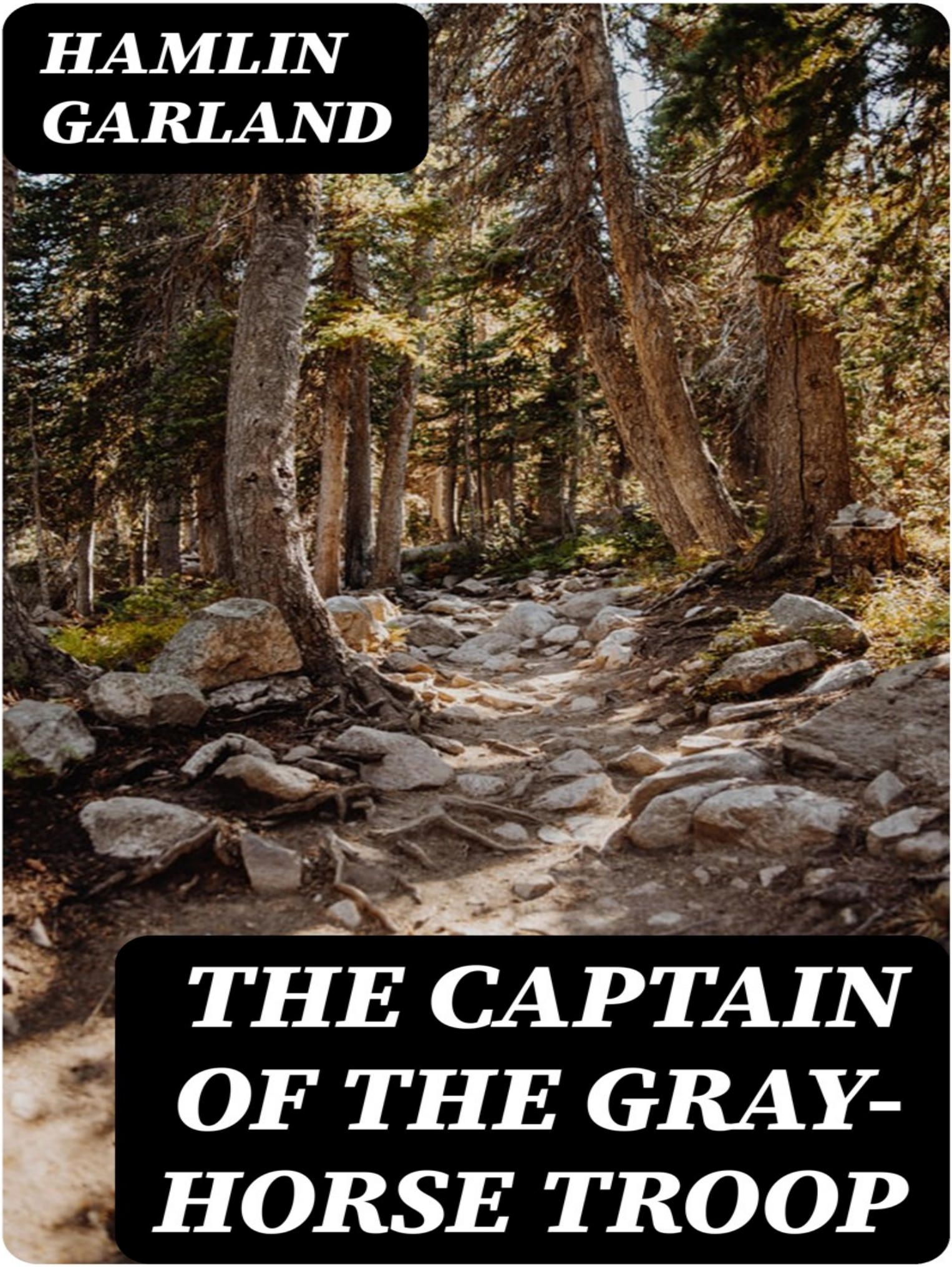
HAMLIN GARLAND



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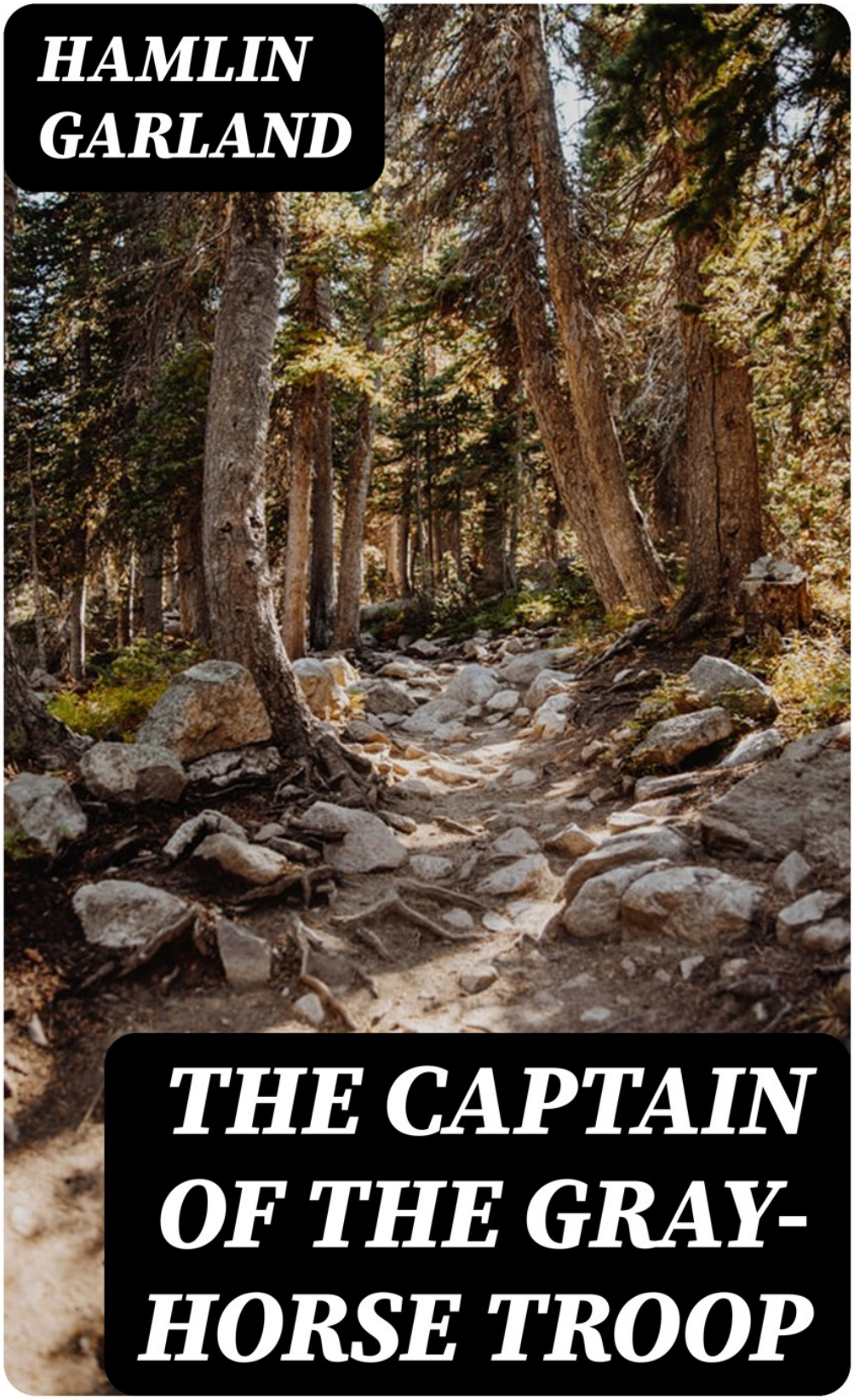

THE CAPTAIN OF THE GRAY-HORSE TROOP

Hamlin Garland

The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop

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A CAMP IN THE SNOW

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Winter in the upper heights of the Bear Tooth Range is a glittering desolation of snow with a flaming blue sky above. Nothing moves, nothing utters a sound, save the cony at the mouth of the spiral shaft, which sinks to his deeply buried den in the rocks. The peaks are like marble domes, set high in the pathway of the sun by day and thrust amid the stars by night. The firs seem hopeless under their ever-increasing burdens. The streams are silenced—only the wind is abroad in the waste, the tireless, pitiless wind, fanged like ingratitude, insatiate as fire.

But it is beautiful, nevertheless, especially of a clear dawn, when the shadows are vividly purple and each rime-wreathed summit is smit with ethereal fire, and each eastern slope is resplendent as a high-way of powdered diamonds—or at sunset, when the high crests of the range stand like flaming mile-stones leading to the Celestial City, and the lakes are like pools of pure gold caught in a robe of green velvet. Yet always this land demands youth and strength in its explorer.

King Frost's dominion was already complete over all the crests, over timber-line, when young Captain Curtis set out to cross the divide which lay between Lake Congar and Fort Sherman—a trip to test the virtue of a Sibley tent and the staying qualities of a mountain horse.

Bennett, the hairy trapper at the head of the lake, advised against it. "The snow is soft—I reckon you better wait a week."

But Curtis was a seasoned mountaineer and took pride in assaulting the stern barrier. "Besides, my leave of absence is nearly up," he said to the trapper.

"Well, you're the doctor," the old trapper replied. "Good luck to ye, Cap."

It was sunrise of a crisp, clear autumn morning when they started, and around them the ground was still bare, but by noon they were wallowing mid-leg deep in new-fallen snow. Curtis led the way on foot—his own horse having been packed to relieve the burdens of the others—while Sergeant Pierce, resolute and uncomplaining, brought up the rear.

"We must camp beside the sulphur spring to-night," Curtis said, as they left timber-line and entered upon the bleak, wind-swept slopes of Grizzly Bear.

"Very well, sir," Pierce cheerily replied, and till three o'clock they climbed steadily towards the far-off glacial heights, the drifts ever deepening, the cold ever intensifying. They had eaten no food since dawn, and the horses were weak with hunger and weariness as they topped the divide and looked down upon the vast eastern slope. The world before them seemed even more inhospitable and wind-swept than the land they had left below them to the west. The air was filled with flying frost, the sun was weak and pale, and the plain was only a pale-blue sea far, far below to the northeast. The wind blew through the pass with terrible force, and the cold nipped every limb like a famishing white wolf.

"There is the sulphur spring, sir," said Pierce, pointing towards a delicate strand of steam which rose from a clump of pines in the second basin beneath them.

"Quite right, sergeant, and we must make that in an hour. I'd like to take an observation here, but I reckon we'd better slide down to camp before the horses freeze."

The dry snow, sculptured by the blast in the pass, made the threadlike path an exceedingly elusive line to keep, and trailing narrowed to a process of feeling with the feet; but Curtis set his face resolutely into the northeast wind and led the way down the gulch. For the first half-mile the little pack-train crawled slowly and hesitatingly, like a bewildered worm, turning and twisting, retracing its way, circling huge bowlders, edging awful cliffs, slipping, stumbling, but ever moving, ever descending; and, at last, while yet the sun's light glorified the icy kings behind them, the Captain drew into the shelter of the clump of pines from which the steam of the warm spring rose like a chimney's cheery greeting.

"Whoa, boys!" called Curtis, and with a smile at Pierce, added, "Here we are, home again!"

It was not a cheerful place to spend the night, for even at this level the undisturbed snow lay full twelve inches deep and the pines were bowed with the weight of it, and as the sun sank the cold deepened to zero point; but the sergeant drew off his gloves and began to free the horses from their packs quite as if these were the usual conditions of camping.

"Better leave the blankets on," remarked the young officer. "They'll need 'em for warmth."

The sergeant saluted and continued his work, deft and silent, while Curtis threw up a little tent on a cleared spot and banked it snugly with snow. In a very short time a fire was blazing and some coffee boiling. The two men seemed not to regard the cold or the falling night, except in so far as the wind threatened the horses.

"It's hard luck on them," remarked Curtis, as they were finishing their coffee in the tent; "but it is unavoidable. I don't think it safe to try to go down that slide in the dusk. Do you?"

"It's dangerous at any time, sir, and with our horses weak as they are, it sure would be taking chances."

"We'll make Tom Skinner's by noon to-morrow, and be out of the snow, probably." The young soldier put down his tin cup and drew a map from his pocket. "Hold a light, sergeant; I want to make some notes before I forget them."

While the sergeant held a candle for him, Curtis rapidly traced with a soft pencil a few rough lines upon the map. "That settles that water-shed question;" he pointed with his pencil. "Here is the dividing wall, not over there where Lieutenant Crombie drew it. Nothing is more deceptive than the relative heights of ranges. Well, now take a last look at the horses," he said, putting away his pencil, "and I'll unroll our blankets."

As they crawled into their snug sleeping-bags Curtis said again, with a sigh, "I'm sorry for the ponies."

"They'll be all right now, Captain; they've got something in their stomachs. If a cayuse has any fuel in him he's like an engine—he'll keep warm," and so silence fell on them,

and in the valley the cold deepened till the rocks and the trees cried out in the rigor of their resistance.

The sun was filling the sky with an all-pervading crimson-and-orange mist when the sergeant crawled out of his snug nest and started a fire. The air was perfectly still, but the frost gripped each limb with benumbing fury. The horses, with blankets awry, stood huddled close together in the shelter of the pines not far away. As the sergeant appeared they whinnied to express their dependence upon him, and when the sun rose they turned their broadsides to it gratefully.

The two men, with swift, unhesitating action, set to work to break camp. In half an hour the tent was folded and packed, the horses saddled, and then, lustily singing, Curtis led the way down upon the floor of the second basin, which narrowed towards the north into a deep and wooded valley leading to the plains. The grasp of winter weakened as they descended; December became October. The snow thinned, the streams sang clear, and considerably before noon the little train of worn and hungry horses came out upon the grassy shore of a small lake to bask in genial sunshine. From this point the road to Skinner's was smooth and easy, and quite untouched of snow.

As they neared the miner's shack, a tall young Payonnay, in the dress of a cowboy, came out to meet them, smiling broadly.

"I'm looking for you, Captain."

"Are you, Jack? Well, you see me. What's your message?"

"The Colonel says you are to come in right off. He told me to tell you he had an order for you."

A slouching figure, supporting a heap of greasy rags, drew near, and a low voice drawled, weakly: "Jack's been here since Friday. I told him where you was, but he thought he'd druther lay by my fire than hunt ye."

Curtis studied the squat figure keenly. "You weren't looking for the job of crossing the range yourself, were you?"

The tramplike miner grinned and sucked at his pipe. "Well, no—I can't say that I was, but I like to rub it into these lazy Injuns."

Jack winked at Curtis with humorous appreciation. "He's a dandy to rub it into an Injun, don't you think?"

Even Skinner laughed at this, and Curtis said: "Unsaddle the horses and give them a chance at the grass, sergeant. We can't go into the fort to-night with the packs. And, Skinner, I want to hire a horse of you, while you help Pierce bring my outfit into the fort to-morrow. I must hurry on to see what's in the wind."

"All right, Captain, anything I've got is yours," responded the miner, heartily.

The bugles were sounding "retreat" as the young officer rode up to the door of Colonel Quinlan's quarters and reported for duty.

"Good-evening, Major," called the Colonel, with a quizzical smile and a sharp emphasis on the word major.

"Major!" exclaimed Curtis; "what do you mean—"

"Not a wholesale slaughter of your superiors. Oh no! You are Major by the grace of the Secretary of Indian Affairs. Colonel Hackett, of the War Department, writes me that you

have been detailed as Indian agent at Fort Smith. You'll find your notification in your mail, no doubt."

Curtis touched his hat in mock courtesy. "Thanks, Mr. Secretary; your kindness overwhelms me."

"Didn't think the reform administration could get along without you, did you?" asked the Colonel, with some humor. He was standing at his gate. "Come in, and we'll talk it over. You seem a little breathless."

"It does double me up, I confess. But I can't consistently back out after the stand I've made."

"Back out! Well, not if I can prevent it. Haven't you hammered it into us for two years that the army was the proper instrument for dealing with these redskins? No, sir, you can't turn tail now. Take your medicine like a man."

"But how did they drop onto me? Did you suggest it?"

The Colonel became grave. "No, my boy, I did not. But I think I know who did. You remember the two literary chaps who camped with us on our trial march two years ago?"

The young officer's eyes opened wide. "Ah! I see. They told me at the time that they were friends of the Secretary. That explains it."

"Your success with that troop of enlisted Cheyennes had something to do with it, too," added the Colonel. "I told those literary sharps about that experience, and also about your crazy interest in the sign-language and Indian songs."

"You did? Well, then you *are* responsible, after all."

The Colonel put his hand on his subordinate's shoulder. "Go and do the work, boy! It's better than sitting around here waiting promotion. If I weren't so near retirement I'd resign. I have lived out on these cursed deserts ever since

1868—but I'll fool 'em," he added, with a grim smile. "I'm going to hang on to the last, and retire on half-pay. Then I'll spend all my time looking after my health and live to be ninety-five, in order to get even."

Curtis laughed. "Quite right, Colonel," and, then becoming serious, he added, "It's my duty, and I will do it." And in this quiet temper he accepted his detail.

Captain George Curtis, as the Colonel had intimated, was already a marked man at Fort Sherman—and, indeed, throughout the western division of the army. He feared no hardship, and acknowledged no superior on the trail except Pierce, who was as invincible to cold and snow as a grizzly bear, and his chief diversions were these trips into the wild. Each outing helped him endure the monotony of barrack life, for when it was over he returned to the open fire of his study, where he pored over his maps, smoking his pipe and writing a little between bugle-calls. In this way he had been able to put together several articles on the forests, the water-sheds, and the wild animals of the region he had traversed, and in this way had made himself known to the Smithsonian Institution. He was considered a crank on trees and Indians by his fellow-officers, who all drank more whiskey and played a better hand at poker than he; "but, after all, Curtis is a good soldier," they often said, in conclusion. "His voice in command is clear and decisive, and his control of his men excellent." He was handsome, too, in a firm, brown, cleanly outlined way, and though not a popular officer, he had no enemies in the service.

His sister Jennie, who had devotedly kept house for him during his garrison life, was waiting for him at the gate of

his little yard, and cried out in greeting:

"How *did* you cross the range in this weather? I was frightened for you, George. I could see the storm raging up there all day yesterday."

"Oh, a little wind and snow don't count," he replied, carelessly. "I thought you'd given up worrying about me."

"I have—only I thought of poor Sergeant Pierce and the horses. There's a stack of mail here. Do you know what's happened to you?"

"The Colonel told me."

"How do you like it?"

"I don't know yet. At this moment I'm too tired to express an opinion."

From the pile of mail on his desk he drew out the order which directed him to "proceed at once to Fort Smith, and as secretly as may be. You will surprise the agent, if possible—intercepting him at his desk, so that he will have no opportunity for secreting his private papers. You will take entire charge of the agency, and at your earliest convenience forward to us a report covering every detail of the conditions there."

"Now that promises well," he said, as he finished reading the order. "We start with a fair expectancy of drama. Sis—we are Indian agents! All this must be given up." He looked round the room, which glowed in the light of an open grate fire. The floor was bright with Navajo blankets and warm with fur rugs, and on the walls his books waited his hand.

"I don't like to leave our snug nest, Jennie," he said, with a sigh.

"You needn't. Take it with you," she replied, promptly.

He glanced ruefully at her. "I knew I'd get mighty little sympathy from you."

"Why should you? I'm ready to go. I don't want you trailing about over these mountains till the end of time; and you know this life is fatal to you, or any other man who wants to do anything in the world. It's all very well to talk about being a soldier, but I'm not so enthusiastic as I used to be. I don't think sitting around waiting for some one to die is very noble."

He rose and stood before the fire. "I wish this whole house could be lifted up and set down at Fort Smith; then I might consider the matter."

She came over, and, as he put his arm about her, continued earnestly: "George, I'm serious about this. The President is trying to put the Indian service into capable hands, and I believe you ought to accept; in fact, you can't refuse. There is work for us both there. I am heartily tired of garrison life, George. As the boys say, there's nothing in it."

"But there's danger threatening at Smith, sis. I can't take you into an Indian outbreak."

"That's all newspaper talk. Mr. Dudley writes—"

"Dudley—is he down there? Oh, you are a masterful sly one! Your touching solicitude for the Tetongs is now explained. What is Dudley doing at Smith besides interfering with my affairs?"

"He's studying the Tetong burial customs—but he isn't there at present."

"These Smithsonian sharps are unexpectedly keen. He'd sacrifice me and my whole military career to have you study skulls with him for a few days. Do you know, I suspect him

and Osborne Lawson of this whole conspiracy—and you—you were in it! I've a mind to rebel and throw everything out o' gear."

Jennie gave him a shove. "Go dress for dinner. The Colonel and his wife and Mr. Ross are coming in to congratulate you, and you must pretend to be overjoyed."

As he sat at the head of his handsome table that night Curtis began to appreciate his comforts. He forgot the dissensions and jealousies, the cynical speculations and the bitter rivalries of the officers—he remembered only the pleasant things.

His guests were personable and gracious, and Jennie presided over the coffee with distinction. She was a natural hostess, and her part in the conversation which followed was notable for its good sense, but Mr. Ross, the young lieutenant, considered her delicate color and shining hair even more remarkable than her humor. He liked her voice, also, and had a desire to kick the shins of the loquacious Colonel for absorbing so much of her attention. Mrs. Quinlan, the Colonel's wife, was, by the same token, a retiring, silent little woman, who smiled and nodded her head to all that was said, paying special attention to the Colonel's stories, with which all were familiar; even Mr. Ross had learned them.

At last the Colonel turned to Curtis. "You'll miss this, Curtis, when you're exiled down there at old Fort Smith among the Tetongs. Here we are a little oasis of civilization in the midst of a desert of barbarians; down there you'll be swallowed up."

"We'll take civilization with us," said Jennie. "But, of course, we shall miss our friends."

"Well, you'll have a clear field for experiment at Smith. You can try all your pet theories on the Tetongs. God be with them!—their case is desperate." He chuckled gracelessly.

"When do you go?" asked Mrs. Quinlan.

"At once. As soon as I can make arrangements," replied Curtis, and then added: "And, by-the-way, I hope you will all refrain from mentioning my appointment till after I reach Fort Smith."

The visitors did not stay late, for their host was plainly preoccupied, and as they shook hands with him in parting they openly commiserated him. "I'm sorry for you," again remarked the Colonel, "but it's a just punishment."

After they were gone Curtis turned to his sister. "I must leave here to-morrow morning, sis."

"Why, George! Can't you take time to breathe and pack up?"

"No, I must drop down on that agent like a hawk on a June-bug, before he has a chance to bury his misdeeds. The Colonel has given out the news of my detail, and the quicker I move the better. I must reach there before the mail does."

"But I want to go with you," she quickly and resentfully replied.

"Well, you can, if you are willing to leave our packing in Pierce's hands."

"I don't intend to be left behind," she replied. "I'm going along to see that you don't do anything reckless. I never trust a man in a place requiring tact."

Curtis laughed. "That's your long suit, sis, but I reckon we'll need all the virtues that lie in each of us. We are going into battle with strange forces."

II

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THE STREETER GUN-RACK

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There is a good wagon-road leading to old Fort Smith from Pinon City, but it runs for the most part through an uninteresting country, and does not touch the reservation till within a few miles of the agency buildings. From the other side, however, a rough trail crosses a low divide, and for more than sixty miles lies within the Tetong boundaries, a rolling, cattle country rising to grassy hills on the west.

For these reasons Curtis determined to go in on horseback and in civilian's dress, leaving his sister to follow by rail and buckboard; but here again Jennie promptly made protest.

"I'll not go that way, George. I am going to keep with you, and you needn't plan for anything else—so there!"

"It's a hard ride, sis—sixty miles and more. You'll be tired out."

"What of that? I'll have plenty of time to rest afterwards."

"Very well. It is always a pleasure to have you with me, you stubborn thing," he replied, affectionately.

It had been hard to leave everything at the Fort, hard to look back from the threshold upon well-ordered books and

furniture, and harder still to know that rude and careless hands would jostle them into heaps on the morrow, but Jennie was accustomed to all the hardships involved in being sister to a soldier, and, after she had turned the key in the lock, set her face to the south cheerfully. There was something of the missionary in her, and she had long burned with a desire to help the red people.

They got off at a squalid little cow-town called "Riddell" about noon of the second day, and Curtis, after a swift glance around him, said: "Sis, our chances for dinner are poor."

The hotel, a squat, battlemented wooden building, was trimmed with loafing cowboys on the outside and speckled with flies on the inside, but the landlord was unexpectedly attractive, a smiling, courteous host, to whom flies and cowboys were matters of course. It was plain he had slipped down to his present low level by insensible declinations.

"The food is not so bad if it were only served decently," said Jennie, as they sat at the table eying the heavy china chipped and maimed in the savage process of washing.

"I hope you won't be sorry we've left the army, sis."

"I would, if we had to live with these people," she replied, decisively, looking about the room, which was filled with uncouth types of men, keen-eyed, slouchy, and loud-voiced. The presence of a pretty woman had subdued most of them into something like decorum, but they were not pleasant to look at. They were the unattached males of the town, a mob of barkeepers, hostlers, clerks, and railway hands, intermixed with a half-dozen cowboys who had ridden in to "loaf away a day or two in town."

"The ragged edge of the cloth of gold," said Curtis, as he glanced round at them. "Civilization has its seamy side."

"This makes the dear old Fort seem beautiful, doesn't it?" the girl sighed. "We'll see no more green grass and well-groomed men."

An hour later, with a half-breed Indian boy for a guide, they rode away over the hills towards the east, glad to shake the dust of Riddell off their feet.

The day was one of flooding sunlight, warm and golden. Winter seemed far away, and only the dry grass made it possible to say, "This is autumn." The air was without dust or moisture—crystalline, crisp, and deliciously invigorating.

The girl turned to her brother with radiant face. "This is living! Isn't it good to escape that horrid little town?"

"You'd suppose in an air like this all life would be clean and sweet," he replied. "But it isn't. The trouble is, these people have no inner resource. They lop down when their accustomed props are removed. They come from defective stock."

The half-breed guide had the quality of his Indian mother—he knew when to keep silence and when to speak. He led the way steadily, galloping along on his little gray pony, with elbows flapping like a rooster about to take flight.

There was a wonderful charm in this treeless land, it was so lonely and so sinister. It appealed with great power to Curtis, while it appalled his sister. The solitary buttes, smooth of slope and grotesque of line; the splendid, grassy hollows, where the cattle fed; the burned-up mesas, where nothing lived but the horned toad; the alkaline flats, leprous and ashen; the occasional green line of cottonwood-trees,

deep sunk in a dry water-course—all these were typical of the whole vast eastern water-shed of the continental divide, and familiar to the young officer, for in such a land he had entered upon active service.

It was beautiful, but it was an ill place for a woman, as Jennie soon discovered. The air, so dry, so fierce, parched her skin and pinched her red lips. The alkali settled in a gray dust upon her pretty hair and entered her throat, increasing her thirst to a keen pain.

"Oh, George! here is a little stream," she cried out.

"Courage, sis. We will soon get above the alkali. That water is rank poison."

"It looks good," she replied, wistfully.

"We'll find some glorious water up there in that clump of willows," and a few minutes' hard riding brought them to a gurgling little brook of clear, cold water, and the girl not merely drank—she laved away all traces of the bitter soil of the lower levels.

At about four o'clock the guide struck into a transverse valley, and followed a small stream to its source in a range of pine-clad hills which separate the white man's country from the Tetong reservation. As they topped this divide, riding directly over a smooth swell, Curtis drew rein, crying out, "Wait a moment, Louie."

They stood on the edge of a vast dip in the plain, a bowl of amethyst and turquoise. Under the vivid October sun the tawny grass seemed to be transmuted into something that shimmered, was translucent, and yet was firm, while the opposite wall, already faintly in shadow, rose by two degrees to snow-flecked mountains, faintly showing in the

west and north. On the floor of this resplendent amphitheatre a flock of cattle fed irregularly, luminous as red and white and deep-purple beads. The landscape was silent—as silent as the cloudless sky above. No bird or beast, save the cattle, and the horses the three travellers rode, was abroad in this dream-world.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" exclaimed Jennie.

Curtis sat in silence till the guide said: "We must hurry. Long ways to Streeter."

Then he drew a sigh. "That scene is typical of the old time. Nothing could be more moving to me. I saw the buffaloes feed like that once. Whose are the cattle?" he asked of the boy.

"Thompson's, I think."

"But what are they doing here—that's Tetong land, isn't it?"

The guide grinned. "That don't make no difference to Thompson. All same to him whose grass he eats."

"Well, lead on," said Curtis, and the boy galloped away swiftly down the trail. As they descended to the east the sun seemed to slide down the sky and the chill dusk rose to meet them from the valley of the Elk, like an exhalation from some region of icy waters. Night was near, but Streeter's was in sight, a big log-house, surrounded by sheds and corrals of various sorts and sizes.

"How does Mr. Streeter happen to be so snugly settled on Indian land?" asked Jennie.

"He made his location before the reservation was set aside. I believe there are about twenty ranches of the same sort within the lines," replied Curtis, "and I think we'll find in

these settlers the chief cause of friction. The cattle business is not one that leads to scrupulous regard for the rights of others."

As they clattered up to the door of the ranch-house a tall young fellow in cowboy dress came out to meet them. He was plainly amazed to find a pretty girl at his door, and for a moment fairly gaped with lax jaws.

"Good-evening," said Curtis. "Are you the boss here?"

He recovered himself quickly. "Howdy—howdy! Yes, I'm Cal Streeter. Won't you 'light off?"

"Thank you. We'd like to take shelter for the night if you can spare us room."

"Why, cert. Mother and the old man are away just now, but there's plenty to eat." He took a swift stride towards Jennie. "Let me help you down, miss."

"Thank you, I'm already down," said Jennie, anticipating his service.

The young man called shrilly, and a Mexican appeared at the door of the stable. "Hosy, come and take these horses." Turning to Jennie with a grin, he said: "I can't answer for the quality of the grub, fer Hosy is cooking just now. Mother's been gone a week, and the bread is wiped out. If you don't mind slapjacks I'll see what we can do for you."

Jennie didn't know whether she liked this young fellow or not. After his first stare of astonishment he was by no means lacking in assurance. However, she was plains-woman enough to feel the necessity of making the best of any hospitality when night was falling, and quickly replied: "Don't take any trouble for us. If you'll show me your kitchen and pantry I'll be glad to do the cooking."

"Will you? Well, now, that's a sure-enough trade," and he led the way into the house, which was a two-story building, with one-story wings on either side. The room into which they entered was large and bare as a guard-room. The floor was uneven, the log walls merely whitewashed, and the beams overhead were rough pine boles. Some plain wooden chairs, a table painted a pale blue, and covered with dusty newspapers, comprised the visible furniture, unless a gun-rack which filled one entire wall could be listed among the furnishings. Curtis brought a keen gaze to bear on this arsenal, and estimated that it contained nearly a score of rifles—a sinister array.

Young Streeter opened a side door. "This is where you are to sleep. Just make yourself to home, and I'll rub two sticks together and start a fire."

After Jennie left the room, the young fellow turned abruptly. "Stranger, what might I call you?"

"My name is Curtis. I'm going over to visit the agency."

"She your wife?" He pointed his thumb in Jennie's direction.

"No, my sister."

"Oh! Well, then, you can bunk with me in this room." He indicated a door on the opposite side of the hall. "When she gets ready, bring her out to the kitchen. It's hard lines to make her cook her own grub, but I tell you right now I think she'd better."

As Jennie met her brother a few moments later, she exclaimed, "Isn't he handsome?"

"M—yes. He's good-looking enough, but he's just a little self-important, it seems to me."

"Are you going to let him know who you are?"

"Certainly not. I want to draw him out. I begin to suspect that this house is a rendezvous for all the interests we have to fight. These guns are all loaded and in prime order."

"What a big house you have here," said Jennie, ingratiatingly, as she entered the kitchen. "And what a nice kitchen."

"Oh, purty fair," replied the youth, busy at the stove. "Our ranch ain't what we'd make it if these Injuns were out o' the way. Now, here's the grub—if you can dig up anything you're welcome."

He showed her the pantry, where she found plenty of bacon and flour, and some eggs and milk.

"I thought cattlemen never had milk?"

"Well, they don't generally, but mother makes us milk a cow. Now, I'll do this cooking if you want me to, but I reckon you won't enjoy seein' me do it. I can't make biscuits, and we're all out o' bread, as I say, and Hosy's sinkers would choke a dog."

"Oh, I'll cook if you'll get some water and keep a good fire going."

"Sure thing," he said, heartily, taking up the water-pail to go to the spring. When he came back Jennie was dabbling the milk and flour. He stood watching her in silence for some minutes as she worked, and the sullen lines on his face softened and his lips grew boyish.

"You sure know your business," he said, in a tone of conviction. "When I try to mix dough I get all strung up with it."

She replied with a smile. "Is the oven hot? These biscuit must come out just right."

He stirred up the fire. "A man ain't fitten to cook; he's too blame long in the elbows. We have an old squaw when mother is home, but she don't like me, and so she takes a vacation whenever the old lady does. That throws us down on Hosy, and he just about poisons us. A Mexican can't cook no more'n an Injun. We get spring-poor by the time the old lady comes back." Jennie was rolling at the dough and did not reply to him. He held the door open for her when she was ready to put the biscuit in the oven, and lit another bracket-lamp in order to see her better.

"Do you know, you're the first girl I ever saw in this kitchen."

"Am I?"

"That's right." After a pause he added: "I'm mighty glad I didn't get home to eat Hosy's supper. I want a chance at some of them biscuit."

"Slice this bacon, please—not too thick," she added, briskly.

He took the knife. "Where do you hail from, anyway?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"From the coast," she replied.

"That so? Born there?"

"Oh no. I was born in Maryland, near Washington."

"There's a place I'd like to live if I had money enough. A feller can have a continuous picnic in Washington if he's got the dust to spare, so I hear."

"Now you set the table while I make the omelette."

"The how-many?"

"The omelette, which must go directly to the table after it is made."

He began to pile dishes on the table, which ran across one end of the room, but found time to watch her as she broke the eggs.

"If a feller lives long enough and keeps his mouth shut and his eyes open he'll learn a powerful heap, won't he? I've seen that word in the newspaper a whole lot, but I'll be shot if I ever knew that it was jest aigs."

Jennie was amused, but too hungry to spend much time listening. "You may call them in," she said, after a glance at the biscuit.

The young man opened the door and said, lazily, "Cap, come to grub."

Curtis was again examining the guns in the rack, "You're well heeled."

"Haff to be, in this country," said the young fellow, carelessly. "Set down anywhere—that is, I mean anywhere the cook says."

Jennie didn't like his growing familiarity, but she dissembled. "Sit here, George," she said, indicating a chair at the end. "I will sit where I can reach the coffee."

"Let me do that," said Calvin. "Louie, I guess you're not in this game," he said to the boy looking wistfully in at the door.

"Oh, let him come—he's as hungry as we are. Let him sit down," protested Jennie.

Young Streeter acquiesced. "It's all the same to me, if *you* don't object to a 'breed," he said, brutally. Louie took his

seat in silence, but it was plain he did not enjoy the insolence of the cowboy.

Curtis was after information. "You speak of needing guns—there isn't any danger, I hope?"

"Well, not right now, but we expect to get Congress to pass a bill removing these brutes, and then there may be trouble. Even now we find it safer to go armed. Every little while some Injun kills a beef for us, and we want to be prepared to skin 'em if we jump 'em up in time. I wouldn't trust one of 'em as far as you could throw a yearling bull by the tail."

"Are they as bad as that?" asked Jennie, with widely open eyes.

"They're treacherous hounds. Old Elk goes around smiling, but he'd let a knife into me too quick if he saw his chance. Hark!" he called, with lifted hand.

They all listened. The swift drumming of hoofs could be heard, mingled with the chuckle of a carriage. Calvin rose. "That's the old man, I reckon," and going to the door he raised a peculiar whoop. A voice replied faintly, and soon the buggy rolled up to the door and the new-comer entered the front room. A quick, sharp voice cried out:

"Whose hat is that? Who's here?"

"A feller on his way to visit the agent. He's in there eatin' supper."

A rapid, resolute step approached the door, and Curtis looked up to meet the keen eyes of a big, ruddy-faced man of fifty, with hair and beard as white as wool. His eyes were steel-blue and penetrating as fire.

"Good-evening, sir. Good-evening, madam. Don't rise. Keep your seats. I'll just drop my coat and sit down with you."

He was so distinctly a man of remarkable quality that Curtis stared at him in deep surprise. He had expected to see a loose-jointed, slouchy man of middle-age, but Joseph Streeter was plainly a man of decision and power. His white hair did not betoken weakness or age, for he moved like one in the full vigor of his late manhood. To his visitors he appeared to be a suspicious, irascible, and generous man.

"Hello!" he called, jovially, "biscuit! Cal, you didn't do these, nor Hosy, neither."

Cal grinned. "Well, not by a whole row o' dogs. This—lady did 'em."

Streeter turned his vivid blue eyes on Jennie. "I want to know! Well, I'm much obliged. When did you come?" he asked of Curtis.

"About an hour ago."

"Goin' far?"

"Over to the agency."

"Friend of the agent?"

"No, but I have a letter of introduction to him."

Streeter seemed to be satisfied. "You'll find him a very accommodating gentleman."

"So I hear," said Curtis, and some subtle inflection in his tone caused Streeter to turn towards him again.

"What did I understand your name was?"

"Curtis."

"Where from?"

"San Francisco."