

The Quarterbreed

BY ROBERT AMES BENNET



CHAPTER XXIV—Continued.

He, in turn, was so intent upon maneuvering to have himself spoken to by that most genial of hosts, the president, that he failed to see Marie until she spoke to him. The first sight of her bewildered him, and his bow did not altogether hide the effects of the delicious shock given him by her dazzling beauty. But he quickly recovered his self-possession when he saw that she was with Vandervyn. That young man, though more boyishly handsome than ever, bore himself with rather a sullen air. He met Hardy's clear gaze with a forced smile. The smile became still more forced when the girl transferred her hand from his arm to Hardy's.

"Only a very few minutes," she soothed the disappointed lover.

"Whatever you say!" he deferred to her caprice, and he drew back to speak to a sharp-eyed man near the president.

Hardy was gazing into the wonderful blue-black eyes of his companion. They were as inscrutable as when he had last looked into their depths. He tried to speak calmly, but his voice shook.

"Do you know that you are by far the most beautiful woman here?"

Her long lashes drooped and rose again to disclose the same inscrutable look.

"So I have been told several times already—I wished a few moments with you, that I might thank you for your generosity. It has given me the great opportunity of my trip abroad and this visit in Washington."

"I am saving all the reports of your social triumphs," he said. "They have made me very happy."

Again the girl's lashes drooped. "That is good of you—It is quite necessary for me to become the rage—if I am to force a recognition from Reggie's relatives. He says that, fortunately, his fiancée has become interested in another man who is quite as eligible as himself."

Hardy's eyes contracted, yet he did not falter.

"Since it will bring you happiness, I wish him—good fortune."

"You do?" The question was almost an exclamation. But the girl at once regained her quiet composure. "I do not understand. If you wish him good fortune, why then do you seek to prevent him from receiving his compensation as attorney for the tribe?"

"I said good fortune," replied Hardy. "Any money paid him on that contract would be tainted."

Marie arched her black eyebrows. "Is it not true that he will get through a much larger appropriation than otherwise would have been made?"

"The lands are fully worth the amount agreed upon," stated Hardy. "The tribe should receive all the appropriation. Honest lobbying would carry the bill through at a cost of a few hundred dollars. These supposed friends of the tribe want millions."

"Do you wish to deprive me of the share that I would receive through him?"

"Yes—of every dishonest dollar," said Hardy, his mouth stern, though his eyes besought her to forgive his harshness. "You have enough already."

"Are you certain?" she rejoined. "You may have heard that mines often pinch out or run into valueless ore—You can guess why Pere and I have told no one, least of all Reggie."

Hardy remained unshaken. "If he is worthy of you, that will make no difference to him."

"But myself? I am already used to luxury," pleaded the girl.

"Down in your heart you know the values in life that are real," he said. "You do not wish for wealth gained through fraud."

"I have not admitted that there is any fraud in the contract."

"Perhaps it is as well," he remarked. "You should not doubt your future husband."

She flashed him an odd, quizzical look. "No, I cannot doubt my future husband now, Captain Hardy. I must believe in him if I am to be happy, must I not?"

"Yes," agreed Hardy.

She uttered a gay little trill of laughter.

"That is so good of you to say it, Captain! It makes me feel that I really must do something for you in return. May I not offer you a little loan of, say, three or four thousand dollars? I understand that, for some strange reason—or unreason—you have refused your pay as captain."

"My resignation has not been withdrawn, and I am engaged in a private enterprise. I cannot draw pay as an officer in the service," explained Hardy.

"Few would be so quixotic," she argued. "Most would make the excuse that an attempt to frustrate what they considered a wrong to others is not to be considered a private enterprise."

"I must beg to differ with you, Miss Dupont."

Let it pass. But the little

"Very good of you to offer. However, I believe I have enough left to last me through. And in any event, I could not impose on your generosity. The money would be used against him—which, you see, would hardly do."

"Then you refuse any loan?"

"It was most kind of you to make the offer."

"Don Quixote de la Mancha!" she murmured.

"Tilting at machine windmills!" he replied.

Though there was no trace of bitterness or satire in his wit, her chin lifted to the angle of offended pride. "That is sufficient, Captain Hardy. May I ask you to take me back to him?"

Vandervyn was waiting for her near the president. As they approached him, she gave Hardy a look of half-repentment. "You must understand, Captain, that I must do as my heart dictates, though I confess that lobbying is far from agreeable to me. I have already met his excellency, and he has been so kind as to promise me a hearing."

"I cannot wish you success," he replied.

She gave him a quizzical glance and turned away with Vandervyn.

Standing in the eager, jostling crowd that waited for a word or even a nod from the president, he fully appreciated the ease with which, in the midst of so great a crush, she managed to obtain several moments' conversation apart with the nation's chief magistrate.

She was still beside the president when the sharp-eyed man to whom Vandervyn had spoken came around Hardy and murmured a few words in his ear. Hardy looked at him in the eye, bowed, and quietly started to move away. The man followed him until he had left the White House.

CHAPTER XXV.

Condemned.

The court-martial began its session at nine in the morning, and the trial of Hardy was over before three in the afternoon. Vandervyn testified to the suppression by the accused of the existence of the developed mine and of Redbear's misconduct.

Hardy's statements in explanation of his actions were as brief as they were cold and dry. Acting as a civil officer, he had considered the question of withholding any mention of the mine as a matter within his discretion. When interrogated whether he had not taken advantage of this suppression to enter the contest and win the mine for himself, his bald admission of the fact, unaccompanied by any explanation of his motives, was received by his officer judges with marked gravity.

The other charges were far more serious, and he opposed them with vigor. He denied emphatically any intention to desert or to remain permanently absent from his proper duties without leave, and showed the tele-



"I Could Not Impose on Your Generosity."

gram from a high official in the war department that led him to believe his resignation and application for leave of absence would be at once favorably acted upon by his commanding officer at Vancouver barracks. This, in some circumstances, might have been considered sufficient excuse for his conduct. But his refusal to explain his reason for taking advantage of his secret knowledge of the mine perceptibly influenced the members of the court to doubt the statement of his purpose in coming to Washington.

Though the court-martial adjourned without rendering its findings, he left the courtroom ten years older in appearance than when he entered. The regretful, commiserating glance of the most friendly of his judges seemed plainly to indicate what would be the findings. The thought of voluntarily resigning from the service had been hard. To be cashiered was almost unendurable.

Yet he walked out with his back straight and his head well up. He went directly to the White House and sent in a written application for an

interview with the president. It was refused. He went to his lodgings and spent the remainder of the day and half the night drafting and redrafting a concise statement of his argument against Vandervyn's contract. This he addressed to the president and stamped for mailing. He wrote nothing with regard to his own case.

When, near morning, he at last fell asleep, he was so near exhaustion that he did not waken until late. The hour set for the reconvening of the court-martial had already come. He sprang into his uniform with a celerity that might have reminded a fellow officer of reveille in cadet barracks at West Point.

The worn soles of his highly polished shoes beat a tattoo on the carpeted old stairs by which he descended to the street. He did not turn to go in for a belated breakfast at the meager table of his landlady. He hastened along the few feet of narrow hall to the street door. As he drew it open, another man in uniform stepped into the doorway and confronted him. The other officer saluted Hardy responded mechanically. For all his cool look, he was astonished. The man before him was the president's military aide.

"Captain Floyd Hardy?"

"At your service."

"You should now be in attendance upon the court-martial," stated the aide with cold severity.

"I shall explain to the court," replied Hardy. "If not delayed, I shall be only a few—"

"You will come with me," interrupted the aide, still more severely. "Your conduct has been brought to the attention of the president. It is to be seen, sir, whether you will continue to refuse to answer the inquiries of your superiors."

Hardy went white, but his jaw set firm with grim resolution. He stepped out beside the aide, and crossed the sidewalk to the waiting motor. As they were whirled away over the sleety asphalt, the aide sat with more than military stiffness, his head and body half averted from his companion as if to avoid contamination. Hardy sat as stiffly at the other extreme of the seat.

The ride was short. The car made a sudden turn, and curved around to the executive offices of the president. Hardy looked at his companion, perplexed. The face of the aide showed only the stern watchfulness of one who has a reputedly dangerous prisoner under arrest. At the entrance he stepped behind, as if apprehensive that Hardy might attempt to escape. A doorkeeper conducted them along a corridor into a small waiting room. He passed into the room beyond, but reappeared in a few moments and signed to Hardy to enter.

Hardy stepped into the room, and the door was closed behind him. The aide and the doorkeeper had remained outside. Hardy looked around with a frown of perplexity. Across the room a man sat writing at a businesslike desk. There was no one else present.

The man turned in his swivel chair and abruptly made a beckoning gesture. Hardy's hand went up in salute as he stepped forward. He was in the presence of the commander in chief of the army and navy.

The president looked him up and down with a severe glance.

"You are Captain Floyd Hardy?"

"Yes, sir."

"The same who suppressed the late insurrection in the Sulus?"

"I happened to be in command at the time, sir."

"After that you obtained a detail, your conduct in discharge of which has resulted in your trial by court-martial on serious charges. I have before me the findings of the court. The circumstances are exceptional. Because of your record and of certain statements that have been presented to me, I have been persuaded to give you an opportunity to explain your conduct."

Hardy saluted. "Permit me, sir, to first present for your consideration a matter relating to the interests of the tribe which—"

"Stop!" ordered the president. "Others are waiting for interviews. I can give you only ten minutes. If you expend them on this other matter, you will have no further opportunity to state your own case."

"The evidence before the court-martial covered the facts, sir. If those facts sustain the charges against me, then I am guilty, and desire no clemency. That is all I have to say on my own case, sir. With regard to the matter which I desire to present—"

"Sit down!" ordered the president. "You have nine minutes. Be brief."

Hardy seated himself and proceeded to present his argument against the Vandervyn contract. He spoke deliberately, but with a consciousness that covered what he had to say fully and clearly. In words as forceful as they were few. The president listened attentively, but with no change in his expression. At the end of eight minutes Hardy stopped.

The president showed a trace of surprise. "Is that all you have to say? There is still a minute."

"That is all, sir," replied Hardy, rising.

The president touched a call button, but raised his finger. "One moment. What if I should confront you with witnesses?"

"As I have stated, sir, my only request is that all the witnesses in the case be examined."

"There are some already at hand. You shall see what they have to say about your charges."

The aide appeared and immediately went out again at a sign from the president. He returned with Vander-

vyn and Marie. At sight of Hardy the young man stopped short, but, meeting the president's cordial smile, came forward with easy assurance. Marie did not look at Hardy, as she followed.

The president addressed Vandervyn: "Captain Hardy has declined to ask for clemency. I have decided to stick to the findings of the court-martial. In the face of all this, he has had the temerity to make a charge of fraud against your Indian contract."

Vandervyn nodded: "Captain Hardy is too skilled a strategist not to realize that the best way to shield himself is to raise the cry of 'stop thief!' against others. Does he allege that the signatures to my contract are forged?"

"The signatures are genuine. They were obtained by fraud," bluntly charged Hardy.

"My word is as good or perhaps somewhat better than that of a cashiered officer," rejoined Vandervyn.

"You deny the charge," the president stated rather than inquired.

"Most emphatically," pleasantly agreed Vandervyn. He looked significantly from Hardy to Marie. "As a soldier—"

"Your friend Redbear seems to have enjoyed shooting at agents," remarked the president. "He also confessed to having made two attempts on the life of Captain Hardy. In view of your perjured testimony at the Nogen Inquest, one is led to infer a not improbable connection between those attempts and your enmity to Captain Hardy. But the point at present is whether you still insist upon the validity of your contract. Do you wish an official investigation that will take the evidence of the Indian witnesses?"

A cold sweat was gathering on Vandervyn's forehead. He looked at Marie. She turned from him, afraid that he might misconstrue the womanly softness into which her fierce resentment had melted. He wheeled about, and left the room, sullen, unrepentant, defiant.

"A very great pity," commented the president. "Young and clever, handsome, well educated, good social standing—yet all wasted! Courage—miserable; no sense of shame; unmoral, rather than immoral. He will ride hard to still harder falls than this one, or else to what the world calls success. But I am too busy a man to moralize. If you will pardon me, ladies, there is to be a cabinet meeting."

He bowed to them, and then confronted Hardy. "Sir, I warned you that if you did not speak in your own defense, you would have no other opportunity. I shall not reverse my approval of the findings of the court-martial."

Hardy had stood an amazed and dumfounded spectator to the rejection and disgrace of his rival. But throughout it all Marie had never once looked at him. If her scornful casting off of Vandervyn had roused any hopes for himself, they must have been dashed when she led Olina away without favoring him with so much as a glance of recognition. There was a slight stoop in his shoulders as he saluted the president.

"If the sentence approved by your excellency does not make association with me scandalous," he said, "I beg leave to express my thanks for the intimation that you will invalidate the fraudulent contract."

Without replying, the president abruptly faced about to his desk. Hardy again saluted, and marched from the room as if on dress parade.



"My Word's as Good or Better Than a Cashiered Officer's."

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you wish him to acknowledge you as his wife?"

"No, no, sir!" she disclaimed. "I don't want him any more."

"I am pleased to hear you say that," replied the president. He turned to Vandervyn. "I understand this witness is prepared to testify that the signatures to your contract were obtained on the false representation that it was a second copy of the minutes of the tribal council."

"It's a lie!" hoarsely replied the young man. "Hardy knows nothing about it. There's only her word against mine."

"We can send for the Indian witnesses, if necessary. Another matter—at the inquest you testified under oath that a certain Indian killed Agent Nogen, and that you and Redbear then killed the murderer. When you shot Redbear, you rode off, certain that he was dead. He lived long enough to confess himself the murderer of Agent Nogen. Why did you perjure yourself at the inquest?"

"You can't prove it," defiantly challenged Vandervyn. "I stand by my testimony. This squaw and Hardy have hatched up the lie between them. Even if Redbear made such a confession, it is only hearsay and not legal evidence."

"Your friend Redbear seems to have enjoyed shooting at agents," remarked the president. "He also confessed to having made two attempts on the life of Captain Hardy. In view of your perjured testimony at the Nogen Inquest, one is led to infer a not improbable connection between those attempts and your enmity to Captain Hardy. But the point at present is whether you still insist upon the validity of your contract. Do you wish an official investigation that will take the evidence of the Indian witnesses?"

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CHAPTER XXVI.

The Sentence.

In the anteroom the doorkeeper waved Hardy to a door on the right. It led him into a stenographers' room. He saw the flounce of a woman's skirt behind a revolving bookcase near the far end of the room, and paused. Someone stepped into the room after him, and touched him authoritatively on the shoulder.

"One moment, Captain Hardy—your sentence."

He turned and faced the president's aide with the clear, unflinching gaze of a brave man about to be shot. The aide saluted with punctilious formality. Hardy responded with equal formality. The aide presented an official document, saluted, and withdrew from the room.

For a long moment Hardy stood with the decree of his fate slowly crumpling in his hand. His eyes were fixed on vacancy. Doubtless he was seeing the years of soldierly comradeship and duty that now lay in the past and the vision of the career to which he was to have given the utmost of his powers. He had always loved his profession—and now—

The woman whose skirt he had seen was in front of him before he became aware of her presence. He found himself looking into the cool, half-mocking face of Marie.

"Are you afraid to read your sentence?" she taunted. "Had it not been for you, he would have had the mine and a million from his contract and me. The president conferred with Senator Clemmer an hour ago. The treaty appropriation bill will be passed with a clause that no commission is to be paid for the services of any tribal agent or representative. He has lost everything. And now—I am waiting to see you read that paper."

Hardy drew himself up, opened the envelope, took out the document and read.

As Marie saw the look of blank incredulity that came into his face, her eyes flashed under the lowering veil of their long lashes. He stared up at her,

but was too dazed to perceive the change in her expression.

"Acquitted—honorably—on all charges!" he murmured. "On all charges—! Honorable mention recommended—Approved—the President."

Marie smiled with cool condescension.

"Merely a question of doing justice to you, Captain Hardy. When a man has done his duty, however harshly, it is the duty of others to see that he receives just compensation. I take credit for having helped to bring this about."

"You?" he exclaimed. "Of course, though, if you really did not love him—"

"That does not follow. You must know I did love him. But to find that I had for rival another 'breed girl'—one not half so beautiful as I—I could not endure the thought. You have seen the proof that there is a good deal of my mother's red grandfather in my blood. No, I had to give him up, and I have decided to marry another man."

"Another?" echoed Hardy.

"Will you not congratulate me?" she asked.

He rallied. "I congratulate him. After what has happened, I feel confident that you must have chosen someone more worthy of you."

"He is!" declared the girl, her glorious eyes melting with tenderness. "He is far more worthy of me than I am of him!"

With an effort she recovered her cool composure.

"But now, before going, I wish to take this opportunity to discharge in a way the obligation that, as a member of the tribe, I owe to you for your services. I shall therefore return the mine to you."

She held out a document. He stepped back.

"No, Miss Dupont," he said. "I cannot accept it."

"You must. I took it from you. Though I have used the income from it not altogether for personal gratification, you must realize that my pride will not permit me to keep it any longer. Let me add that it has not pinched out, as you may have inferred from what I said at the ball. It is a bonanza."

"I regret that I cannot accept it," he replied. "A captain's pay is quite sufficient for a—bachelor."

Marie gave him a mocking glance. "Really now, Captain Hardy, you do not expect me to believe you will long remain unmarried?"

He tried his best to conceal how her frivolity tortured him. "You may not believe it, Miss Dupont. Yet it is true."

"It is not," she contradicted. "When we were abroad, Pere and I went to Monte Carlo. I fancy the gambling spirit infected me. Let us settle the ownership of the mine with a wager. If you do not marry this year, I agree to keep it. But if you marry within that time, you will accept it back from me on your wedding day."

"It is not fair for me to bet on a certainty; but if you insist, I agree to the wager," said Hardy.

"Then be prepared to take the mine a week from today," she bantered.

He tore his gaze away from the lovely face whose gay smile appeared so heartlessly mocking.

"You—cannot realize—how this—"

She handed him another sealed envelope.

"Here is the order detailing you to special service with the general staff for the winter. You will then be required to return to the reservation and carry out all the plans recommended by you for the civilizing of the tribe. Your mare is in the same stable as the thoroughbred that I have bought to use as her riding mate."

The changed tone in the girl's voice compelled Hardy to look up. In her radiant eyes he saw a look that could not be mistaken. The smile that had seemed so mocking was now tenderly teasing.

"Marie—you—" he stammered. "Are you certain it is—love—not a passing feeling of pity?"

"Pity! For you?" she cried. "Do you think I could dare pity you?—a man like you! I could not have been so presumptuous even had those treacherous conspirators succeeded in crushing you. Do you think it was pity that made me live a lie all this time—that forced me to flout you and accept his detestable attentions?"

Her voice sank to a note of deep humility.

"I know how very unworthy of you I am. Yet I hope I am not so unworthy as that first day at the cooler, when I scorned you, and you, with your skill and courage and moderation, saved us without harming those whose attack he had wantonly brought upon us. I was a coquette—a coquette infatuated with the kind of man with whom a coquette deserves to be infatuated. But I was not altogether frivolous. I soon perceived your immeasurable superiority over him. Only my head could not overcome the fascination that had bound my heart. My soul sought to free itself from the spell—I struggled and prayed— Yet not until there at the mine, when you showed yourself the bravest, the most generous—"

She flung out her arms to him in piteous appeal. "Captain! My captain! Say that you do not think me—altogether what he—thought me!"

Hardy drew her hands together, and bent to kiss them with reverent passion.

"Dearest," he replied, "you forget that other day in the cooler—that day when you thought me dying. I gazed up into your eyes, and I saw the look of my mother."

(THE END.)