

The Quarterbreed

BY
ROBERT
AMES
BENNET

COPYRIGHT BY BROWNS & HOWELL CO.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

—13—

He, in turn, was so intent upon maneuvering to have himself spoken to 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 close 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 Regie's relatives. He says that, fortunately, his fiancee 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 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," panted 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 now 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."

"Then let it pass. But the little loan?"

"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-repentance. "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 beside Hardy and murmured a few words in his ear. Hardy looked 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 telegram 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.

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 expedite 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, this undoubtedly was the woman, and he looked at her with sharp curiosity as Marie raised the veil. Marie stepped aside and gave him a full view of the girl's face.

"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."

"Oho!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Is it not a happy surprise?" said Marie.

She smiled at the shrinking girl, and drew her about to the president.

"My dear, this is the great White Father of all Indians and of our tribe—he is our father—your excellency, this is Mrs. Reginald Vandervyn."

"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 for you to 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—honorable—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 when 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 triviality 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."

"Ah, the interpreter, you say? This

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 steep 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 doorman conducted them along a corridor into a small waiting room. He passed into the room beyond, but reappeared in a few moments and signified to Hardy to enter.

Hardy stepped into the room, and the door was closed behind him. The aide and the doorman 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.

Hardy turned into his swivel chair and abruptly made a beckoning gesture. Hardy's head 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."

"Oho!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Is it not a happy surprise?" said Marie.

She smiled at the shrinking girl, and drew her about to the president.

"My dear, this is the great White Father of all Indians and of our tribe—he is our father—your excellency, this is Mrs. Reginald Vandervyn."

"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 for you to 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—honorable—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