



BIRTHRIGHT

IN THE third morning, Clifford Bowers and the man with a million dollars rode to Look-out Rock. This view of the valley, with the green ranch land stretching for miles, was a necessity of Clifford's life, like eating, and he often rode out of his way for it. But Harlan Webb merely glanced at the ring of mountains, said the appropriate thing about beautiful scenery, and asked questions about boundaries, drift fences, and water rights.

Afterward Webb stopped to try for the big trout in Cache Lake. The trail home was plain, Clifford assured him, and Webb answered, smiling, that he'd try not to get lost. He was a big, quiet, competent man, and Clifford should have liked him, but couldn't.

Clifford guided his horse through the narrow, lush meadows of Cache Creek, past his own fence to the ramshackle house in which his neighbors, the Carrs, lived. Thin Mrs. Carr informed him her husband had gone to town, parenthetically scolding the six children who tumbled over one another between quarrel and play, like cub bears.

Clifford told her about Harlan Webb and his blond companion, and asked if Carr would do the ranch chores while he took them hunting in the Pocket; Webb was eager to kill one of the big bucks.

Mrs. Carr sighed. "You really going to sell? A person can always get along, Clifford."

"Just getting along isn't enough," he said.

"If your daddy was alive, it'd hurt him to see the place go. What kind of people are they?"

"Webb's a good man. Maybe he pushes his money at you a little, but not much. He'll make it a fine ranch—do what I'd like to do."

"This woman? She's his relation?"

"She's marrying him. I haven't figured her out yet. She looks like a gilded lily, but Webb's a man who'd want more than a doll." Clifford chose his next words carefully. "You won't find her very neighborly. They won't live here the year round, and she seems a little—well, standoffish."

"Stuck-up," sniffed Mrs. Carr. "What do people like that want in the mountains? There'll be arguments over water and fences, likely, and all different from what it was. I hate to see it."

"It'll work out. Then I'll count on Carr coming over to do the chores the day before hunting season? So long, kids."

Clifford rode on, thinking of Carr. The stringy mountaineer's reaction to Webb's fiancée, Virginia Hale, would be a long, silent inspection, then a scornful squirt of tobacco juice. Carr and Webb would get along, but Carr's world and the girl's had no common ground.

She was in the corral when Clifford rode past the log ranch house, and he frowningly watched her trying to corner a skittish sorrel gelding. The loop settled around its neck and the rope-wise animal stood motionless, trembling.

The girl breathed rapidly, but as usual her expression was one of polite boredom. She was out of place here, though dressed for it, or dressed as fashion magazines believed she should be. Yet it wasn't a matter of clothes, he told himself—she'd have that expensive look in a sack. A small, jewel-like blonde, she belonged in an artificial setting.

Virginia's face was unruffled. "You are being stupid," she said. He controlled an impulse to shake the superior manner

Seeing Clifford as he dismounted, she called, "Hello! I couldn't find a lariat, and this rope is limp as string."

Annoyance put sarcasm into his voice. "You're a roper? Now what will you do with him?"

"Ride him. Isn't that what they're for? The mare you gave me to ride falls asleep while she's walking."

"That sorrel's not gentle. Suppose you're hurt? There goes my chance to sell."

"On the other hand, as prospective buyers, shouldn't you humor us?" Behind the smooth mask of her face, she was laughing at him. "Or are you trying to discourage us?"

Turning away, he growled, "Go ahead and break your neck. I don't care."

"I was sure you wouldn't," she said coolly.

From the house he watched her ride around the small lake into the nearest timber. The sorrel's brief bucking did not bother her, and Clifford admitted to himself that she rode well. For a blond doll, he added irritably.

When Harlan Webb returned, Clifford complained to him. The big browns in the lake hadn't been rising, but Webb had seen them cruising in the shallows. He wanted to talk about the fish, but Clifford went on stubbornly.

"At least she shouldn't ride by herself. Suppose she was hurt, and twenty miles to a doctor?"

Webb put a friendly hand on his arm. "Stop worrying, Bowers. Ginny was born on a ranch, and has been riding ever since. Probably rides better than you do."

"That could be, but still—"

"Forget it," Webb said, with a trace of impatience. "She'll do as she pleases, anyhow. And in her own way, she's tougher than either of us."

"I'll bet she is," Clifford agreed, without kindness.

THE girl returned while Clifford was cooking supper, and sauntered into the kitchen. He could not afford a hired hand, much less a cook, so the meals were simple: steak, potatoes, eggs, bread, canned fruit.

For a while the girl looked on in silence, leaning languidly against the wall, hands in pockets. Clifford was awkward with the paring knife, and she wordlessly offered to take it, but he told her brusquely, "Never mind."

She studied him frankly, but with the detached air of a dentist examining one more tooth. He was a big man made lean by hard work, and burned dark by sun and wind. At close quarters she saw that he was younger by years than she had first guessed.

"Harlan says you worried about me. Don't. I seldom take risks." Clifford merely grunted, and she asked casually, "You don't like us, do you?"

Her directness startled him. "Hadn't thought about it."

"You should. Why are you selling this place?"

He almost told her. While Clifford was in the Navy, his father had died. The stock had been sold, the buildings and fences left untended. Starting again from scratch, Clifford worked from dawn till dark, and did a little better than break even. In a dozen years, he might have the sort of ranch he dreamed of, but a couple of bad winters, disease, or a breaking market could at any time knock him back to the starting point. The smart thing was to sell, buy a smaller place already stocked and operating. Nothing held him here but sentiment, and that

was balanced by a feeling he could not name, a sense of losing touch with the world, like a man slowly dying. Not loneliness—he could not be lonely here, and had never needed people around him. His reply to her question was short and meaningless: "Just decided to get out."

"But you love the place. It shows in your talk. And if you want it so badly—"

He broke in curtly. "Not what you want, but what you can get. A man can kill himself jumping at the moon, and never get very far off the ground."

"So what should he do? Sit down? Not my kind of man."

"Your kind would buy an airplane," he said rudely, and had the satisfaction of seeing the jewel-like mask twitch.

"This place can pay its way," she said. "It could do more than that. If I had a working partner with a few thousand—" Clifford broke off, frowning at her. "He's buying the place for you? You?"

"What's wrong with me?" Before Clifford could find an answer, Harlan Webb came into the kitchen, sniffing. "Hah! I could eat a wolf. About ready, Bowers?"

AFTER supper, on the wide porch, Virginia Hale sat hugging her shoulders, and Webb asked businesslike questions and juggled figures in his head. The sun slid behind a mountain.

Webb said, "Someday we'll live up here, but now I'll need a manager for the place. Interested?"

"No."

"I'll pay well, and you'll have enough help."

"I won't stay here."

"I thought you liked the place."

Virginia said, "Of course he does. That's it."

"What? Oh. Then perhaps you know a man who—" Webb broke off, listening. Far down the valley echoed another shot. "What was that? A signal?"

"Old man Ellis, probably," Clifford said. "Two shots—he's slipping. He's an ex-trapper, with a cabin south of Carr. Squatting, really. Over eighty, and claims venison is what keeps him spry."

"Sounds like quite a character. What was he shooting at?"

"He thinks it's time wasted to tramp the woods for deer, when all you have to do is watch a salt log."

Webb was shocked. "Deer season isn't open yet, and it's dark, and—the whole thing is illegal!"

"For you or me it would be."

"For anyone! I suppose he shoots doe, too?"

Webb was truly indignant, and Clifford tried to justify the old man. "Ellis kills four or five deer a year, and doesn't even waste the hoofs. He traps dozens of coyotes and bobcats every winter, and saves a hundred or so fawns, so he's earned a little extra venison. He's a special case."

Webb stood up, a big shadow in the dusk. "The game laws are for all, to conserve the—"

"He hasn't any money," Clifford said sharply.

"The old boy has to live."

"I'd put a stop to it. Not that I'd let him go hungry."

Virginia murmured, "Perhaps he doesn't want that sort of help. Some old men are proud."

"The fact remains—"

"Oh, Harlan! It's none of your business."

"It will be my business," he insisted.

Clifford rose to his feet. (Continued on page 55)

The Suitable Present

By RACHEL THORNTON



Collier's SHORT SHORT

WITH endearments, mementos and souvenirs, by celebrating anniversaries and remembering birthdays, old Mrs. Lane endeavored to create an island of sentiment, of feeling, in the great sea of selfishness and thoughtlessness that seemed to her to make up the modern world. Her children were Sonny and Sister and Brother; they were dears, darlings, loves; they and her daughter-in-law, John's wife, were Mrs. Lane's pets, her chickens, her babies. And, to a milder degree, the tentacles of Mrs. Lane's all-embracing heart reached out to everyone with whom she came in contact.

"A tip is so cold, so impersonal," Mrs. Lane would explain gustily, "but I do enjoy giving people something really suitable to them. This Easter card is just the thing for that nice delivery boy from the drugstore." Mrs. Lane scattered cards of congratulation and condolence, of rejoicing and sympathy with a lavish, prodigal hand—the only thing she never disbursed was money.

For Mrs. Lane was, in the old-fashioned phrase, close, very close indeed, taking a positively creative pleasure in all sorts of small economies involving hoarded string and smoothed-out wrapping paper and slivers of soap pressed together into a varicolored but ultimately usable piece. Beyond her rather large fixed expenses—to which she had never become wholly resigned—parting with money, real money, caused her such acute anguish that she had become expert not only in avoiding such anguish but even in serenely avoiding the painful knowledge of other people's financial problems.

So when sweet little Nancy, John's, Baby Brother's wife, got a job selling in an antique shop, Mrs. Lane was simply delighted that the dear child had found some occupation, stubbornly overlooking the obvious fact that women struggling with three small children and the occasional services of an incompetent and underpaid maid are not usually searching for something to do.

"Isn't Mother wonderful?" John said, pressing the starter, kicking at the clutch of the elderly sedan, listening hopefully, futilely for the engine and then repeating the process. "She is the most generous person," he went on. "She said she found a card that says, 'Congratulations on your new job,' to send you. Don't let her know I told you. Apparently she spent hours looking for it."

Mrs. Lane loved her family, Nancy knew. She meant well. Still, "generous" was not quite the word Nancy would have chosen to describe her husband's mother. But John was such an angel, incapable of believing that anyone, least of all his mother, could be less considerate, less thoughtful than himself. She squeezed his arm as the car coughed its ostentatiously painful way into the garage.

"You're the wonderful one," she told him and John bent to kiss her.

"We've got to think of a really special present for Mother's birthday," he said.

But what on earth could she and John, frantically stretching their meager income, give a wealthy old lady who had every conceivable thing that she needed or wanted? Their birthday present to Mrs. Lane, thought Nancy, would have to be, as it always was, some ridiculous thing like an embroidered hot-water bottle cover or monogrammed soap or hand-painted coat hangers, some small symbolic object that would assure Mrs. Lane of their love, that she could display to augment the impressive total of her birthday loot, the useless little presents showered on her by people who had been alerted about the approaching event by the ebullient Mrs. Lane herself.

"People spoil me," said Mrs. Lane, as happily complacent as a child. "It shows people do appreciate it if you show them some real personal feeling. What a lot of thank-you notes I'll have to write! I keep a list, you know, of all the presents I get and who gave them to me. It's the biggest help in the world in writing notes."

It was also, although Mrs. Lane failed to mention it, a tremendous help in giving presents. For it was Mrs. Lane's thrifty custom to pass on whenever possible the gifts given to her. By keeping a long and complicated list of who had given her what, Mrs. Lane was able to avoid the humiliating possibility of someday returning some present to its original donor. It was, Mrs. Lane assured herself, the thought that counted, and thus she was enabled to be spectacularly generous while actually spending very little money. By careful management, there was almost always something tucked away on the top shelf of Mrs. Lane's linen closet that she could give to someone without having to pay for anything.

However, this system of revolving credit sometimes broke down, and sweet little Nancy's approaching birthday was unfortunately one of these depressing occasions. Mrs. Lane's linen closet yielded up only a box of sachets given to her by Nancy herself, a set of iced-tea glasses which had been the gift of darling Sister who would be sure to recognize them at Nancy's house and a bridge set, a very handsome one, but not handsome enough to blind Mrs. Lane to the fact that neither Nancy nor John played bridge.

Mrs. Lane was, in fact, face to face with the horrid possibility of actually having to buy a present for Nancy. (And surely the child couldn't have been hinting, she told herself stoutly, when she said that a new battery might improve the ominously inadequate performance of that malevolent car of theirs. No one could really want as drearily practical—and as dreadfully expensive—a present

as a battery, which, Mrs. Lane recalled shuddering, would cost about twenty dollars.) Galvanized by her appalling problem, Mrs. Lane's memory gave a convulsive, inspired twitch. In the guest-room bureau were some things that had belonged to her great-grandmother—and sweet little Nancy just loved antiques. That was why she had taken that job, Mrs. Lane reminded herself. This, then, would be the very thing, the ideal present, and it hadn't cost a penny. . . .

The package was very small and Nancy, dutifully exclaiming, gave up her hope of underwear or stockings, both of which she desperately needed. It was perfume probably—just as the car was lumbering grimly past the point where it could possibly be repaired. Or costume jewelry to be worn, incongruously jaunty, on the lapel of her only suit. But it was neither. It was a tiny, exquisitely ornamented box, decorated with a fairy landscape in which miniature shepherds pursued evasive nymphs.

"Why, it's perfectly lovely," Nancy said, tucking it in her purse, loyally refusing to think that a check would have been even lovelier. "It's the sweetest thing I ever saw."

She repeated the same thing to the young man at the shop next morning as he turned the little box about in his knowledgeable hands.

"It's more than sweet," he told her. "It's Battersea enamel, a very fine piece. I wonder if you'd consider selling it?"

Nancy laughed. "I guess I'd sell it," she said. "What would I get for it?"

"Around eight hundred. Maybe a thousand," he told her. "I'll give you eight hundred and fifty right now," and when Nancy gasped, "Dollars?" he stared at her.

"Make out the check to John and Nancy Lane," she said, recovering quickly.

A WEEK later Mrs. Lane, wrapping up the bridge set from her linen closet to give to the sick mother-in-law of one of the elevator boys, just hoped that this would be as successful a present as the little box she had given Nancy. The child had thanked her for it over and over again with such enthusiasm, such warmth, such real feeling. How nice that in the top drawer of the guest-room bureau there still remained two more little boxes and a beautiful old ivory figure and an antique lace fan—presents for Nancy on birthdays, at Christmas, at Easter. Because the child's love for antiques was plainly genuine. Mrs. Lane no longer had the slightest fear that Nancy might have taken her job for any other reason than a disinterested love for lovely things. Obviously Baby Brother and sweet little Nancy were getting on all right since they'd just bought a new car to replace that vindictive monster they'd been struggling with for so many years.

THE END