

Sam Rice's Romance.

A WESTERN STORY IN THREE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER II.

THE only affair which seemed to have a kernel of seriousness in it was that of Mr. Samuel Rice. Regularly, when the stage was in, on Sam's night, he paid his respects to Mrs. Page. And Mrs. Page always received him with graceful friendliness, asking after the horses and sometimes even going so far as to accompany him to their stables. On these occasions she never failed to carry several lumps of sugar in her pocket, which she fed to the handsome brutes off her own pink palm, until there was not one of them she could not handle at her will.

Thus passed many weeks, until summer was drawing to a close. Two or three times she had gone down to Piney-wood Station and back, on Sam's coach, and always sat on the box, and drove part of the way, but never where her driving would excite remark. It is superfluous to state that on these occasions there was a happy heart beneath Sam's linen duster, or that the bantering remarks of his brother drivers were borne with smiling equanimity, not to say pride; for Sam was well aware that Mrs. Dolly Page's brunette beauty, and his blonde bearded style, together furnished a not unpleasing tableau of personal charms. Besides, Sam's motto was, "Let those laugh who win"; and seemed himself to be on the road to heights of happiness beyond the ken of ordinary mortals—especially ordinary stage-drivers.

"I don't calculate to drive stage more than a year or two longer," Sam said to Mrs. Page, confidentially, on the return from their last trip together to Piney-woods Station. "I've got a little place down in Amador, and an interest in the Nip-and-Tuck gold mine, besides a few hundreds in the bank. I've a notion to settle down some day, in a cottage with vines over the porch, with a little woman to tend the flowers in the front garden."

As if Sam's heightened color and shining eyes had not sufficiently pointed this confession of his desires, it chanced that at this moment the eyes of both were attracted to a wayside picture—a cottage, a flower-bordered walk, a fair young woman standing at the gate with a crowing babe in her arms lifting its little white hands to the sun-browned face of a stalwart young farmer who was smiling proudly on the two. At this sudden apparition of his inmost thoughts, Sam's heart gave a great bound, and there was simultaneous ringing in his ears. His first instinctive act was to crack his whip so fiercely as to set the leaders off prancing; and when, by this diver-

sion, he had partly recovered his self-possession to glance at the face of his companion, a new embarrassment seized him as he discovered two little rivers of tears running over the crimsoned cheeks. But a coach box is not a convenient place for sentiment to display itself; and though the temptation was great to inquire the cause of the tears, with a view of offering consolation, Sam prudently looked the other way and maintained silence. The reader, however, knows those tears sank into the beholder's mind and caused to germinate countless tender thoughts and emotions, which were, on some future occasion, to be laid upon the altar of his devotion to Mrs. Dolly Page. And none the less that in a few minutes the eyes which shed them resumed their roguish brightness and the lady was totally unconscious of having heard, seen or felt any embarrassment. Sentiment between them was successfully tabooed, so far as utterance was concerned, for that time. And so Sam found, somewhat to his disappointment, it continued to fall out that whenever he got upon delicate ground the lady was off like a humming bird, darting hither and yon, so that it was impossible to put a finger upon her or get so much as a look at her brilliant and restless wings. But nobody ever tired of trying to find a humming bird's nest; and so Sam never gave up looking for the opportune moment of speaking his mind.

Meanwhile, Lucky-dog Camp was having a fresh sensation. An organized band of gamblers, robbers and "road agents" had made a swoop upon its property of various kinds, and had succeeded in making off with it. The very night after the ride just mentioned, the best horses in Sam Rice's team were stolen, making it necessary to substitute what Sam called "a pair of ornery cayuses". To put the climax to his misfortunes, the "road agents" attacked him next morning, when, the "ornery cayuses" becoming unmanageable, Sam was forced to surrender the treasure box, and the passengers their bullion. The excitement in Lucky-dog was intense. A vigilance committee, secretly organized, lay in wait for the offenders and after a time made a capture of a well known sporting man, whose presence in camp had for some time been regarded with suspicion. Short shrift was afforded him. That same afternoon his gentlemanly person swung dangling from a gnarled pine-tree limb.

When this event became known to Mrs. Dolly Page, she turned ghostly white and then fainted dead away. Mrs. Shaughnessy was much concerned for her friend; berating in round terms the brutishness of people who could talk of such things before a tender hearted lady like that. To Mr. Rice, par-

ticularly, she expatiated upon the coarseness of certain people, and the refined sensitiveness of others; and Sam was much inclined to agree with her, so far as her remarks applied to her friend, who was not yet recovered sufficiently to be visible. Indeed, Mrs. Page was not visible for so many days that Sam began to long for her with a mighty longing. At length she made her appearance, considerably paler and thinner than was her wont, but doubly interesting and lovely to the eyes of so partial an observer as Sam, who would willingly have sheltered her weakness in his strong, manly arms. Sam, naturally enough, would never have hinted at the event which had so distressed her; but she relieved him of all embarrassment on that subject by saying to him almost at once:

"Mr. Rice, am told they have not buried the man they hung so shockingly the other day. They certainly will not leave him there?" she added, with a shudder.

"I don't know—I suppose," stammered Sam, "it is their way, with them fellows."

"But you will not allow it? You cannot allow it!"—excitedly.

"I couldn't prevent them," said Sam, humbly.

"Mr. Rice," and her voice was at once a command and an entreaty, "you can and must prevent it. You are not afraid? I will go with you—this very night—and will help you. Don't say you will not, for I can not sleep till it is done. I have not slept for a week."

She looked so white and so wild as she uttered this confession that Sam would have been the wretch he was not to refuse her. So he said:

"Don't you fret; I'll bury him, if it troubles you so. But you need not go along. You couldn't; it's too far, and you're too weak,"—seeing how she trembled.

"I am not weak—only nervous. I prefer to go along. But we must be secret, I suppose? Oh!"—with a start that was indeed "nervous".

"Yes, we must be secret," said Sam, and he looked as if he did not half like the business, but would not refuse.

"You are a good man, Mr. Rice, and I thank you." And with that Mrs. Dolly Page caught up one of his hands, and kissing it hastily, began to cry as she walked quickly away.

"Don't cry, and don't go until I have promised to do whatever you ask, if it will make you well again," Sam said, following her to the door.

"Then call for me to take a walk with you tonight. The moon is full, but no one will observe us. They would not think of our going there,"—with another shudder—and she slipped away from his detaining hand.

That evening Mr. Samuel Rice

and Mrs. Page took a walk by moonlight. Laughing gossips commented on it after their fashion; and disagreeable gossips remarked that they came home very late, after their fashion. But nobody, they believed, saw where they went or what they did. Yet those two came from performing an act of charity, each with a sense of guilt and unworthiness very irritating to endure, albeit from very different causes. One, because an unwelcome suspicion had thrust itself in his mind; the other—

The ground of Sam's suspicion was a photograph, which, in handling the gambler's body somewhat awkwardly, by reason of its weight—Mrs. Page had found, at the last, that she could render no assistance—had slipped from some receptacle in its clothing. A hasty glance under the full light of the moon had shown him the features of the lady who sat twelve paces away with her hands over her face. It is not always those that sin who suffer most from the consciousness of sin; and Sam, perhaps, with that hint of possible—nay, almost certain—wickedness in his breast pocket, was more burdened by the weight of it than many a criminal about to suffer all the terrors of the law; for the woman that he loved stood accused, if not convicted, before his conscience and her own, and he could not condemn, because his heart refused to judge her.

When the two stood together under the light of the lamp in the deserted parlor of the Silver Brick Hotel, the long silence which, by her quick perceptions, had been recognized as accusing her, upon what evidence she did not yet know, was at length broken by Sam's voice, husky with agitation.

"Mrs. Page," he said, assuming an unconscious dignity of mien and sternness of countenance, "I shall ask you some questions, sometime, which you may not think quite polite. And you must answer me: you understand. I'm bound to know the truth about this man."

"About this man!" Then he suspected her of connection with the wretched criminal whose body had only just now been hidden from mocking eyes? How much did he suspect? How much did he know? Her pale face and frightened eyes seemed to ask these questions of him; but not a sound escaped her lips. The imploring look, so strange upon her usually bright face, touched all that was tender in Sam's romantic nature. In another moment he would have recalled his demand, and trusted her infinitely; but in that critical moment she fainted quite away, to his mingled sorrow and alarm; and Mrs. Shaughnessy being summoned, Sam received a wordy reprimand for having no more sense than to keep a sick woman up half the night; smarting under which undeserved censure, he retired, to think over the events of the evening.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)