

The CROSS-CUT

by Courtney Ryley Cooper

ILLUSTRATIONS by R.B. Van Nice

CHAPTER IV

Wonderment which got nowhere. The sheriff's car returned before Fairchild reached the bottom of the grade, and again stopped to survey the scene of defeat.

"Dangerous character?" Fairchild hardly knew why he asked the question. The sheriff smiled grimly.

"If it was the fellow we were after, he was plenty dangerous. We were trailing him on word from Denver—described the car and said he'd pulled a daylight hold-up on a pay-wagon for the Snelter company—so when the car went through Golden, we took up the trail a couple of blocks behind. He kept the same speed for a little while until one of my deputies got a little nervous and took a shot at a tire. Man, how he turned on the juice! I thought that thing was a jack rabbit, the way it went up the hill! I guess it's us back to the office."

The automobile went its way then, and Fairchild his, still wondering. And so thoroughly did the incident engrave him that it was not until a truck had come to a full stop behind him, and a driver mingled a shout with the tooting of his horn, that he turned to allow its passage.

"Didn't hear you, old man," he apologized. "Could you give a fellow a lift?"

"Guess so." It was friendly, even though a bit disgruntled; "hop on."

And Fairchild hopped, once more to sit on the tailboard, swinging his legs, but this time his eyes saw the ever-changing scenery without noticing it. In spite of himself, Fairchild found himself constantly staring at a vision of a pretty girl in a riding habit, with dark-brown hair straying about equally dark-brown eyes, almost frenzied in her efforts to change a tire in time to elude a pursuing sheriff. Some way, it all didn't blend. If she hadn't committed some sort of deprecation against the law, why on earth was she willing to part with ten dollars, merely to save a few moments in changing a tire and thus elude a sheriff? If there had been nothing wrong, could not a moment of explanation have satisfied anyone of the fact?

It was too much for anyone, and Fairchild knew it. Yet he clung grimly to the mystery as the truck clattered on, mile after mile. A small town gradually was coming into view. A mile more, then the truck stopped with a jerk.

"Where you bound for, pardner?"

"Ohadi."

"That's it, straight ahead. I turn off here, Miner?"

Fairchild shrugged his shoulders and nodded noncommittally.

"Just thought I'd ask. Plenty of work around here for single and double jacks. Things are beginning to look up a bit—at least in silver."

"Thanks. Do you know a good place to stop?"

"Yeh. Mother Howard's boarding house. Everybody goes there, sooner or later. You'll see it on the left-hand side of the street before you get to the main block. Good old girl; knows how to treat anybody in the mining game from operators on down. She was here when mining was mining!"

Fairchild lifted his bag from the rear of the vehicle, waved a farewell to the driver and started into the village. And then the vision of the girl departed, momentarily, to give place to other thoughts, other pictures, of a day long gone.

The sun was slanting low, throwing deep shadows from the hills into the little valley with its chattering, milk-white stream, softening the scars of the mountains with their great refuse dumps; reminders of hopes of twenty years before and as bare of vegetation as in the days when the pick and gad and drill of the prospector tore the rock loose from its hiding place under the surface of the ground. The scrub pines of the almost barren mountains took on a fluffier, softer tone; the jutting rocks melted away into their own shadows; it was a picture of peace and of memories.

And it had been here that Thornton Fairchild, back in the nineties, had dreamed his dreams and fought his fight. A sudden cramping caught the son's heart, and it pounded with something akin to fear. The old foreboding of his father's letter had come upon him, the mysterious thread of that elusive, intangible thing great enough to break the will and resistance of a strong man and turn him into a weakling—silent, white-haired—sitting by a window, waiting for death. What had it been? Why had it come upon his father? How could it be fought? He brushed away the beads of perspiration with a gesture almost of anger, then with a look of relief, turned in at a small white gate toward a big, rambling building which proclaimed itself, by the sign on the door, to be Mother Howard's boarding house.

A moment of waiting, then he faced a gray-haired, kindly faced woman who stared at him with wide-open eyes as she stood, hands on hips, before him.

"Don't you tell me I don't know you! If you ain't a Fairchild, I'll never feed another miner corned beef and cabbage as long as I live. Ain't you, now?" she persisted, "ain't you a Fairchild?"

The man laughed in spite of himself. "You guessed it."

"You're Thornton Fairchild's boy?" She had reached out for his handbag, and then, bustling about him, drew him into the big "parlor." "Didn't I know you the minute I saw you? Land, you're the picture of your dad! Sakes alive, how is he?"

There was a moment of silence. Fairchild found himself suddenly halting and boyish as he stood before her.

"He's—he's gone, Mrs. Howard."

"Dead?" She put up both hands.

"It don't seem possible. And me re-



"He's—He's Gone, Mrs. Howard."

membering him looking just like you, full of life and strong and—"

"Our pictures of him are a good deal different. I—I guess you knew him when everything was all right for him. Things were different after he got home again."

Mother Howard looked quickly about her, then with a swift motion closed the door.

"Son," she asked in a low voice, "didn't he ever get over it?"

"It?" Fairchild felt that he stood on the threshold of discoveries. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't he ever tell you anything, Son?"

"No. I—"

"Well, there wasn't any need to."

But Mother Howard's sudden embarrassment, her change of color, told Fairchild it wasn't the truth. "He just had a little bad luck out here, that was all. His—his mine pinched out just when he'd thought he'd struck it rich—or something like that."

"Are you sure that is the truth?" For a second they faced each other. Robert Fairchild serious and intent, Mother Howard looking at him with eyes defiant, yet compassionate. Suddenly they twinkled, the lips broke from their straight line into a smile, and a kindly hand reached out to take him by the arm.

"Don't you stand there and try to tell Mother Howard she don't know what she's talking about!" came in tones of mock severity. "Hear me? Now, you get up them steps and wash up for dinner. Take the first room on the right. It's a nice, cheery place."

In his room, Fairchild tried not to think. His brain was becoming too crammed with queries, with strange happenings and with aggravating mysticisms of the life into which his father's death had thrown him to permit clearness of vision. Even in Mother Howard he had not been able to escape it; she told all too plainly, both by her actions and her words, that she knew something of the mystery of the past—and had falsified to keep the knowledge from him.

It was too galling for thought. Robert Fairchild hastily made his toilet, then answered the ringing of the dinner bell, to be introduced to strong-shouldered men who gathered about the long tables; Cornishmen, who talked an "h-less" language, ruddy-faced Americans, and a sprinkling of English, all of whom conversed about things which were to Fairchild as much Greek—"levels" and "stopes" and "winzes," of "skips" and "manways" and "rises," which meant nothing to the man who yet must master them all, if he were to follow his ambition.

Robert Fairchild spoke but seldom, except to acknowledge the introductions as Mother Howard made him known to each of his table mates. But it was not aloofness; from the first, the newcomer had liked the men about him, liked the ruggedness, the mingling of culture with the lack of it, liked the enthusiasm, the muscle and brawn, liked them all—all but two.

Instinctively, from the first mention of his name, he felt they were watching him, two men who sat far in the rear of the big dining room, older than the other occupants, far less inviting in appearance. One was small, though chunky in build, with sandy hair and eyebrows; with weak, filmy blue eyes over which the lids blinked constantly. The other, black-haired with streaks of gray, powerful in his build, and with a walrus-like mustache drooping over hard lips, was the sort of antithesis naturally to be found in the company of the smaller, sandy complexioned man. Who they were, what they were, Fairchild did not know, except from the general attributes which told that they too followed the great gamble of mining. But one thing was certain; they watched him throughout the meal; they talked about him in low tones and ceased when Mother Howard came near; they seemed to recognize in him someone who brought both curiosity and innate enmity to the surface. And more; long before the rest had finished their meal, they rose and left the room, intent, apparently, upon some important mission.

After that, Fairchild ate with less of a relish. In his mind was the certainty that these two men knew him—or at least knew about him—and that they did not relish his presence. Nor were his suspicions long in being fulfilled. Hardly had he reached the hall, when the beckoning eyes of Mother Howard signaled to him. Instinctively he waited for the other diners to pass him, then looked eagerly toward Mother Howard as she once more approached.

"I don't know what you're doing here," came shortly, "but I want to."

Fairchild straightened. "There isn't much to tell you," he answered quietly. "My father left me the Blue Poppy mine in his will. I'm here to work it."

"Know anything about mining?"

"Not a thing."

"Or the people you're liable to have to buck up against?"

"Very little."

"Then, Son," and Mother Howard laid a kindly hand on his arm, "whatever you do, keep your plans to yourself and don't talk too much. And what's more, if you happen to get into communication with Blindeye Bozeman and Taylor Bill, lie your head off. Maybe you saw 'em, a sandy-haired fellow and a big man with a black mustache, sitting at the back of the room?" Fairchild nodded.

"Well, stay away from them. They belong to 'Squint' Rodaine. Know him?"

She shot the question sharply. Again Fairchild nodded.

"I've heard the name. Who is he?"

A voice called to Mother Howard from the dining room. She turned away, then leaned close to Robert Fairchild. "He's a miner, and he's always been a miner. Right now, he's mixed up with some of the biggest people in town. He's always been a man to be afraid of—and he was your father's worst enemy!"

Then, leaving Fairchild staring after her, she moved on to her duties in the kitchen.

CHAPTER V

Impatiently Fairchild awaited Mother Howard's return, and when at last she came forth from the kitchen, he drew her into the old parlor, shadowy now in the gathering dusk, and closed the doors.

"Mrs. Howard," he began, "I—"

"Mother Howard," she corrected, "I ain't used to being called much else."

"Mother, then—although I'm not very accustomed to using the title. My own mother died—shortly after my father came back from out here."

She walked to his side then and put a hand on his shoulders. For a moment it seemed that her lips were struggling to repress something which strove to pass them, something locked behind them for years. Then the old face, dim in the half light, calmed.

"What do you want to know, Son?"

"Everything!"

"But there isn't much I can tell."

He caught her hand.

"There is! I know there is. I—"

"Son—all I can do is to make matters worse. If I knew anything that would help you—if I could give you any light on anything, Old Mother Howard would do it! Lord, didn't I help out your father when he needed it the worst way? But I'm as much in the dark as you. All that I ever knew was that your father came to this boarding house when he was a young man, the very first day that he ever struck Ohadi. He didn't have much money, but he was enthusiastic—and it wasn't long before he'd told me about his wife and baby back in Indianapolis and how he'd like to win out for their sake. As for me—well, they always called me Mother Howard, even when I was a young thing, sort of setting my cap for every good-looking young man that came along. I guess that's why I never caught one of 'em—I always insisted on darning their socks and looking after all their troubles for 'em instead of going out buggy-riding with some other fellow and making 'em jealous." She sighed ever so slightly, then chuckled. "But that ain't getting to the point, though, is it?"

"If you could tell me about my father—"

"I'm as lost as—all I know. Things were a lot different out here then

from what they were later. Everywhere around the hills and gulches you could see prospectors, with their gads and little picks, fooling around like life didn't mean anything in the world to 'em, except to grub around in those rocks.

"Your father was one of these men. 'Squint' Rodaine was another—they called him that because at some time in his life he'd tried to shoot faster than the other fellow—and didn't do it. The bullet hit right between his eyes, but it must have had poor powder behind it—all it did was to cut through the skin and go straight up his forehead. When the wound healed, the scar drew his eyes close together, like a Chinaman's. You never see Squint's eyes more than half open.

"And he's crooked, just like his eyes." Mother Howard's voice bore a touch of resentment. "I never liked him from the minute I first saw him, and I liked him less afterward. Then I got next to his game.

"Your father had been prospecting just like everybody else. He'd come on float up Kentucky gulch and was trying to follow it to the vein. Squint saw him—and what's more, he saw that float. It looked good to Squint—and late that night, I heard him and his two drinking partners, Blindeye Bozeman and Taylor Bill—they just reverse his name for the sound of it—talking in Blindeye's room. I'm a woman—" Mother Howard chuckled—"so I just leaned my head against the door and listened. Then I flew downstairs to wait for your father when he came in from sitting up half the night to get an assay on that float. Squint and them two others was figuring on jumping his claim before he could file on it and all that."

(To Be Continued.)

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Examination Grades of Teachers Are Highest In History of County

The highest average grades ever made in a Deschutes county teachers' examination resulted from the tests held recently in Bend, County Superintendent J. Alton Thompson reports. Only one teacher failed to pass out of 23 examined, and several made grades of above 90 in all but two subjects.

ENTERTAINMENT OF DOKIES ARRANGED

Arrangements for the entertainment of the D. O. K. K. team from Medford, which will be here to conduct the ceremonial on August 7, were completed by the local Knights of Pythias lodge at last week's meeting. The banquet committee will consist of H. H. De Armond, R. F. Allen and Cassie Flynn. J. S. Innes, Jay B. Noble and Louis Bennett will have charge of arrangements for using the American Legion building.

EAST LAKE RESORT TO USE ELECTRICITY

Installation of electric lights and a new sewer system at the East lake summer resort were decided on last week by stockholders in the company operating the place. Action was taken at the annual meeting at the lake. Estimated cost of the improvements outlined will be \$4,000. George O'Neil was elected to head the company. Henry Linster was

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