



The RIVER

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—K. C. Rickard, an engineer of the Overland Pacific, is called to the office of President Marshall in Tucson, Ariz. "Casey" is an enigma to the office force; he wears "dude" clothes, but he had resigned a chair of engineering in the East to go on the road as a freeman and his promotion had been spectacular. While waiting for Marshall Rickard reads a report on the ravages of the Colorado, despite the efforts of Thomas Hardin of the Desert Reclamation company. This Hardin had been a student under Rickard and had married Gerty Holmes, with whom Rickard had fancied he was in love.

CHAPTER II—Marshall tells Rickard the Overland Pacific has got to step in to save the Imperial Valley and sends him to the break. Rickard declines because he does not want to supplant Hardin, but is won over. "Stop the river; damn the expense," says Marshall.

CHAPTER III—Rickard journeys to Calexico, sees the irrigated desert and learns much about Hardin and his work.

CHAPTER IV.

The Desert Hotel.

He left the dusty car with relief when the twin towns were called. He had expected to see a Mexican town, or at least a Mexican influence, as the towns hugged the border, but it was as vividly American as was Imperial or Brawley. There was the yellow-painted station of the Overland Pacific lines, the water tank, the eager American crowd. Railroad sheds announced the terminal of the road. Backed toward the station was the inevitable hotel bus of the country town, a painted sign hanging over its side advertising the Desert hotel. Before he reached the step the vehicle was crowded.

"Walt, gentlemen, I'm coming back for a second load," called the darky who was holding the reins.

"If you wait for the second trip you won't get a room," suggested a friendly voice from the seat above.

Rickard threw his bag to the grinning negro and swung onto the crowded steps.

Leaving the railroad sheds he observed a building which he assumed was the hotel. It looked promising, attractive with its wide encircling veranda and the patch of green which distance gave the dignity of a lawn. But the darky whipped up his stolid horses. Rickard's eyes followed the patch of green.

The friendly voice from above told him that that was the office of the Desert Reclamation company. His next survey was more personal. He saw himself entering the play as the representative of a company that was distrusted if not indeed actively hated by the valley folk. It amused him that his entrance was so quiet as to be surreptitious. It would have been quieter had Marshall had his way. But he himself had stipulated that Hardin should be told of his coming. He had seen the telegram before it left the Tucson office. He might be assuming an unfamiliar role in this complicated drama of river and desert, but it was not to be as an eavesdropper.

The heavy bus was plowing slowly through the dust of the street. Rickard was given ample time to note the limitations of the new town. They passed two brick stores of general merchandise, lemons and woolen goods, stockings and crackers sporting fraternally in their windows. A board sign swinging from the overhanging porch of the most pretentious building announced the post office. From a small adobe hung a brass plate advising the stranger of the Bank of Calexico. The "dobe pressed close to another two-storied structure of the desert type. The upper floor, supported by posts, extended over the sidewalk. Netted wire screened away the desert mosquito and gave the overhanging gallery the grotesque appearance of a huge fencing mask. From the street could be seen rows of beds, as in hospital wards. Calexico, it was seen, slept out of doors.

"Desert hotel," bawled the darky, reining in his placid team.

"Yes, sah, I'll look out for your bar. Got your room? The hotel's mighty sure to be full. Not many women yit down this way. . . . All the men mostly lives right here at the hotel."

Rickard made a dive from a swirl of dust into the hotel. The long line he anticipated at the desk was not there. He stopped to take in a valley innovation. One end of the long counter had been converted into a soda-water bar. The high swivel stools in front of the white marbled stand, with its towering silver fixtures, were crowded with dust-parched occupants of the bus. A white-coated youth was pouring colored syrups into tall glasses; there was a clinking of ice; a sizzling of siphons.

"That's a new one on me," grinned Rickard, turning toward the desk where a complacent proprietor stood waiting to announce that there was but one room left.

"With bath?"

"Bath right across the hall. Only

room left in the house." The proprietor awarded him the valley stare. "Going to be here long?" He passed the last key on the rack to the darky staggering under a motley of bags and suitcases. Rickard recognized his, and followed.

"I may get you another room tomorrow," called the proprietor after him as he climbed the dusty stairs.

The signals of a new town were waving in the dining room. The majority of the citizens displayed their shirt sleeves and unblushing suspenders. One large table was surrounded by men in khaki; the desert soldiers, engineers. The full blown waitresses, elaborately pompadoured, were pushing through the swing-doors, carrying heavy trays. Coquetry appeared to be their occupation, rather than merriment, the diners accepting both varieties of attention with appreciation. The supremacy of those superior maidens was menaced only by two other women who sat at a table near the door. Rickard did not see them at first. The room was as masculine as a restaurant in a new mining town.

Rickard left his indoor view to look through the French windows opening on a side street. He noticed a slender but regular procession. All the men passing fell in the same direction.

"Cocktail route," explained one of his neighbors, his mouth full of boiled beef.

"Oyster cocktail?" smiled the newcomer.

"The real thing! Calexico's dry, like the whole valley, that is, the county. See that ditch? That is Mexico, on the other side. Those sheds you can see are in Mexicali, Calexico's twin sister. That painted adobe is the custom house. Mexicali's not dry, even in summer! You can bet your life on that. You can get all the bad whisky and stale beer you've the money to buy. We work in Calexico, and drink in Mexicali. The temperance pledge is kept better in this town than any other town in the valley. But you can see this procession every night."

The Amazon with a handkerchief apron brought Rickard his soup. He was raising his first spoonful to his mouth when he saw the face, carefully



He Saw the Face, Carefully Averted.

averted, of the girl he had met at the Marshalls' table, Innes Hardin. His eyes jumped to her companions, the man a stranger, and then, Gerty Holmes. At least, Mrs. Hardin! Somehow, it surprised him to find her pretty. She had achieved a variety of distinction, preserving, moreover, the

clear-cut babyish chin which had made its early appeal to him. There was the same fluffy hair, its ringlets a bit artificial to his more sophisticated eyes, the same well-turned nose. He had been wondering about this meeting; he found that he had been expecting some sort of shock—who said that the love of today is the jest of tomorrow? The discovery that Gerty was not a jest brought the surprised gratification which we award a letter or composition written in our youth. Were we as clever as that, so complete at eighteen or twenty-one? Could we, now, with all our experience, do any better, or indeed as well? That particular sentence with winks! Could we make it fly today as it soared yesterday? Rickard was finding that Gerty's more mature charms did not accelerate his heart-beats, but they were certainly fluttering to his early judgment. And he had expected her to be a shock!

He was staring into his plate of chilled soup. Cal-love! For he had loved her, or at least he had loved her chin, her pretty childish way of lifting it. She was prettier than he had pictured her. Queer that a man like Hardin could draw such women for sister and wife—the blood tie was the most

rimming. For when women come to marry, they make often a queer choice. It occurred to him that that might have been Hardin—he had not wanted to stare at them.

That was not Hardin's face. It held strength and power. The outline was sharp and distinct, showing the strong lines, the determined mouth of the pioneer. There was something else, something which stood for disinction—no, it couldn't be Hardin.

And then, because an outburst lip changed the entire look of the man, Rickard asked his table companions, who was the man with the two ladies, near the door.

"That, sub," his neighbor from Alabama became immediately oratorical, "that is a big man, sub. If the Imperial valley ever becomes a reality, a fixtuh, it will be because of that one man, sub. Reclamation is like a seed thrown on a rock. Will it stick? Will it take root? Will it grow? That is what we all want to know."

Rickard thought that he had wanted to know something quite different, and reminded the gentleman from Alabama that he had not told him the name.

"The father of this valley, of the reclamation of this desert, Thomas Hardin, sub."

Rickard tried to reset, without attracting their attention, the group of his impressions of the man whose personality had been so obnoxious to him in the old Lawrence days. The Hardin he had known had also large features, but of the faded irritating order. He summoned a picture of Hardin as he had shuffled into his own classroom, or up to the long table where Gerty had always questioned it among her mother's boarders. He could see the rough unpolished boots that had always offended him as a betrayal of the man's inner consciousness; the badly fitting coat, the long awkward arms, and the satisfied, loud-speaking mouth. These features were more definite. Could time bring those changes? Had he changed, like that? Had they seen him? Would Gerty, would Hardin remember him? Wasn't it his place to make himself known; save the flag of old friendship over an awkward situation?

He found himself standing in front of their table, encountering first, the eyes of Hardin's sister. There was no surprise, no welcome there for him. He felt at once the hostility of the camp. His face was uncomfortably warm. Then the childish profile turned on him. A look of bewilderment, flushing into greeting—the years had been kind to Gerty Holmes!

"Do you remember me, Rickard?" If Hardin recognized a difficult situation, he did not betray it. It was a man Rickard did not know who shook him warmly by the hand, and said that indeed he had not forgotten him.

"I've been expecting you. My wife, Mr. Rickard, and my sister."

"Why, what are you thinking of, Tom? To introduce Mr. Rickard? I introduced you to each other, years ago!" Gerty's cheeks were red. Her bright eyes were darting from one to the other. "You knew he was coming, and did not tell me?"

"You were at the Improvement club when the telegram came," put in Innes Hardin, without looking at Rickard. No trace of the Tucson cordiality in that proud little face! No acknowledgment that they had met at the Marshalls'!

"Oh, you telegraphed to us?" The blond arch smile had not aged. "That was friendly and nice."

Rickard had not been self-conscious for many a year. He did not know what to say. He turned from her upturned face to the others. Innes Hardin was staring out of the window, over the heads of several crowded tables; Hardin was gazing at his plate. Rickard decided that he would get out of this before Gerty discovered that it was neither "friendly nor nice."

"If I had known that you were here, I would have insisted on your dining with us, in our tent. For it's terrible, here, isn't it?" She flashed at him the look he remembered so vividly, the childish coquettish appeal. "We dine at home, till it becomes tiresome, and then we come foraging for variety. But you must come to us, say Thursday. Is that right for you? We should love it."

Still those two averted faces. Rickard said Thursday, as he was bidden, and got back to his table, wondering why in thunder he had let Marshall persuade him to take this job.

Hardin waited a scant minute to protest: "What possessed you to ask him to dinner?"

"Why shouldn't I? He is an old friend." Gerty caught a glance of appeal from sister to brother. "Jealous?" she pouted charmingly at her lord.

"Jealous, no!" bluffed Hardin. He thought then that she knew, that Innes had told her. The Lawrence episode held no sting to him. Once, it had enchanted him that he had carried off the boarding-house belle, whom even that bookman had found desirable—bookman! A superior dude! He had always had those grand airs. As if it were not more to a man's credit to struggle for his education, even if he were older than his class, or his teacher, than to accept it off silver plates, handed by lackeys? Rickard had always acted as if it had been something to be ashamed of. It made him sick.

"They've done it this time. It's a fool choice."

Again, that look of pleading from Innes. Gerty had a shiver of intuition. "Fool choice?" Her voice was ominously calm.

Hardin shook off Innes' eyes. Better be done with it! "He's the new general manager."

"He's the general manager?"

"I'm to take orders from him."

Gerty's silence was of the stunned variety. The Hardins watched her crumbling bread on the tablecloth,

thinking, fearfully, that she was going to cry.

"Didn't I tell you?" Her voice, repressed, carried the threat of tears. "Didn't I tell you how it would be? Didn't I say that you'd be sorry if you called the railroad in?"

"Must we go over this again?" asked her husband.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me make a goose of myself?" She was remembering that there had been no protest, no surprise from Innes. She knew! A family secret! She shrugged. "I'm glad, on the whole, that you planned it as a surprise. For I carried it off as if we'd not been insulted, disgraced."

"Gerty!" expostulated Hardin. "Gerty!" implored Innes.

"And we are in for a nice friendly dinner!"

"Are you quite finished?" Hardin got up.

As the three passed out of the dining room, Rickard caught their several expressions: Hardin's stiff, indifferent; Gerty's brilliant but hard, as she flashed a fainshed, brave little smile in his direction. The sister's bow was distinctly haughty.

In the hall, Gerty's laugh rippled out. It was the laugh Rickard remembered, the light frivolous cadence which recalled the flamboyant pattern of the Holmes' parlor carpet, the long, crowded dining table where Gerty had reigned. It told him that she was indifferent to his coming, as she meant it should. And it turned him back to a dark corner in the honeysuckle-draped porch where he had spent so many evenings with her, where once he had held her hand, where he told her that he loved her. For he had loved her, or at least he thought he had! And had run away from her expectant eyes. A cad, was he, because he had brought that waiting look into her eyes, and had run from it?

Should a man ask a woman to give her life into his keeping until he is quite sure that he wants it? He was revamping his worn defense. Should he live up to a minute of surrender, of tenderness, if the next instant brings sanity, and disillusionment? He could bury now forever self-reproach. He could laugh at his own vanity. Gerty Hardin, it was easy to see, had forgotten what he had whispered to Gerty Holmes. They met as sober old friends. That ghost was laid.

CHAPTER V.

A Game of Checkers.

The uneasy mood of the desert, the wind-blown sand, drove people indoors the next morning. Rickard was served a substantial, indifferently cooked breakfast in the dining room of the Desert hotel, whose limitations were as conspicuous to the newcomer as they were nonexistent to the other men. They were finding it a soft contrast to sand-blown tents, to life in the open.

Later he wandered through the group of staring idlers in the office, past the popular soda stand and the few chair-lifters on the sidewalk, going on, as if without purpose, to the railroad sheds, and then on, down to the offices of the Desert Reclamation company. He discovered it to be the one engaging spot in the hastily thrown-together town. There were oleanders, rose and white, blooming in the patch of purple blooming alfalfa that stood for a lawn. Morning-glories clambered over the supports of the veranda, and on over the roof. Rickard's deductions led him to the Hardins.

What school of experience had so changed the awkward country fellow? He had resented his rivalry, not that he was a rival, but that he was a boor. His kisses still warm on her lips, and she had turned to welcome, to coquet with Tom Hardin! The woman who was to be his wife must be staidier than that! It had cooled his fever. Not for him the aspen who could shake and bend her pretty boughs to each rough breeze that blew!

Men tossed into a desert, fighting to keep a foothold, do not garland their offices with morning-glories! Was it the gracious quiet influence of a wife, a Gerty Hardin? The festive building he was approaching was as unexpected—as Captain Brandon! Rickard walked on, smiling.

He was fairly blown into the outer room, the door banging behind him. Every one looked up at the noisy interruption. There were several men in the long room. Among them two alert, clean-faced youths, college graduates, or students out on furlough, the kind

of stuff in his class at Lawrence. Three of the seasoned, road-coached type were leaning their chairs against the cool thick walls. One was puffing at a cigar. The other, a big, shy giant, was drawing clouds of comfort from a pipe. There was a telegraph operator at work in one end of the room, her instrument rapidly clicking. In an opposite corner was a telephone exchange. A girl with a metal band around her forehead was punching connections between the valley towns. Rickard lost the feeling of having gone into a remote and isolated region. The twin towns were on the map.

One of the older men returned his nod. The young men returned their hastily withdrawn attention to their game of checkers. The other smoker was watching with cross-eyed absorption the rings his cigar was sending into the air. Rickard might not have been there.

One of the checker players looked up.

"Anything I can do for you? Do you want to see anyone in particular?"

"No," it was admitted. "No one in particular. I was just looking round."

"It's the show place of Calexico, I'll take you around. It is the only place in town that is comfortable when it's



"I'll Take You Around."

hot, or when the wind blows, and that's the program all summer. Take my place, Pete."

Pete, the young giant, with the face of his infancy enlarged rather than matured, slipped into the vacant chair. He had been the first to discover the stranger, but he had evaded the responsibility. The game immediately absorbed him.

"It's nice here," repeated the young fellow, leading the way. They were followed by a few idle glances.

Rickard looked with approval at the tan slim figure which was assuming the courtesy of the towns. The fine handsome face was almost too girlish, the muscles of the mouth too sensitive yet for manly beauty, but he liked the type. Like as a young desert-reared Indian, his manner and carriage told of a careful home and rigid school discipline.

He was ushered into a large cool room. The furnishings he inventoried: a few stiff chairs, a long table and a typewriter desk, closed for the Sabbath.

"The stenographer's room," announced the lad superfluously.

"Whose stenographer?"

"General property now. Everyone has a right to use her time. She used to be Hardin's, the general manager's. She is his still, in a way. But Ogilvie keeps her busy most of the time."

Rickard had not heard of Ogilvie. He made a mental register.

"When did Hardin go out?" He knew the date himself. He expected the answer would trail wisps of other information. He had a very active curiosity about Hardin. The man's failures had been spectacular.

The young fellow was thinking aloud. "The dam went November 29th. Hardin was given a decent interval to resign. Of course he was fired. It was an outrage—" He remembered that he was speaking to a stranger and broke off suddenly. Rickard did not question him. He made another note. Why was it an outrage or why did it appear so? In perspective, from the Mexican barranca, where he had been at the time, the failure of that dam had been another bar sinister against Hardin.

"I see that you are from the University of California?" Rickard said, and nodded at the pin of gold and blue enamel.

"Out for a year," glowed the lad. "Dad wanted me to get some real stuff

in my head. He said the Colorado would give me more lessons—more real knowledge in a year than I'd get in six at college. I kicked up an awful row—"

The older man smiled. "Of course, you don't want to go back now?"

"The boy made a wry face. "He expects me to go back in August. Says I must."

"You did not tell me your name," was suggested.

"MacLean, George MacLean," said the young man rather consciously. It was a good deal to live up to. He always felt the appraisal which followed that admission. George MacLean, elder, was known among the railroad circles to be a man of iron, one of the strongest of the heads of the Overland Pacific system. He was not the sort of man a son could speak lightly of disobeying.

"Of course everyone calls me Junior."

"I guess you'll go back if he wants you to," smiled Rickard.

"Oh, but what a rotten trick it would be!" exclaimed the son of the man of iron. "To throw me out of college—I was duffy to finish with my class, and to get me here, to get me interested—and then after I've lost my place to pull me back. Why, there are things happening every day that are a liberal education. They are only just beginning to understand what they are backing up against. The Colorado's an unknown quantity; even old engineers are right up against it. There are new problems coming up every day. The Indians call her a yellow dragon, but she's a tricky woman, she's an eel; she's giving us sums to break our teeth on."

"Who has the next room?"

"Used to be the general manager's. Ogilvie uses it now."

"And who did you say was Ogilvie?" They turned back into the room.

"You can go in. He's not here. He is the new auditor, an expert accountant from Los Angeles. Put in by the O. P. when it assumed control last year. He used to come down once a month. After Hardin went out he came down to stay."

"Whose say-so?"

"I don't know. The accounts were rotten, that's no office secret. The world knows that. Hardin is blamed for it. It isn't fair. Look at Sather's stone palace in Los Angeles. Look at Hardin's tent, his shabby clothes."

"I'd like to meet Ogilvie," observed the general manager.

"Oh, he's not much to meet. A pale, white-livered vegetarian, a theologian. You've seen 'em. Los Angeles is full of 'em. He was here when Hardin was fired. You could see him see his opportunity. His chest swelled up. He looked as if he had tasted meat for the first time. He thought that he could wuzzle into the empty place! He went back to Los Angeles, convinced them that the auditor should be here, protect the company's interests. It sounded mysterious, sleuthlike, as if he had discovered something, so they let him bring the books down here. He is supposed to be ferreting. But he's 'woozling.' He used to be in the outer office. Said the noise made his head ache, so he moved in here. All the committee meetings are held here, and occasionally the directors' meetings. Water companies, too. Ogilvie's taking notes—wants to be the next general manager; it sticks out all over him."

"What's the derivation of wuzzle?" this with deep gravity.

"Wait till you see Ogilvie!" laughed his entertainer. Then as an afterthought, "This is all public gossip. He's fair game."

(To be continued next week.)

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