



The RIVER

EDNA H. AIKEN

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CHAPTER VIII.

Under the Veneer.

An hour later Innes, blinking from the sun, stepped into the tent, which had been partitioned with rough red-wood boards into a bed chamber on the right, a combination dining room and "parlor" on the left. Her glance immediately segregated the three stalks of pink geraniums in the center of the Mexican drawn-work cloth that covered the table. Gerty, herself, in a fresh pink gingham frock, was dancing around the table to the tune of forks and spoons. It was just like Gerty to dress up to her setting, even though it were only a pitiful water-starved bouquet. She had often tried to analyze her sister-in-law's hold on her brother; certainly they were not happy. Was it because she made him comfortable? Was it the little air of formality, or mystery, which she drew around her? Her rooms when Innes was allowed to enter them were always flawless; Gerty took deep pride in her house-keeping. Why was it, Innes wondered, that she could never shake off her suspicion of an underlying untidiness? There was always a closed door on Gerty's processes.

"May I help?" The sun was still yellowing the room to her.

"Hello!" Hardin looked up from the couch where he was lying. Innes suspected it of being a frequent retreat. She had found it tumbled once when she ran over early. It was then that Gerty made it understood that she liked more formality. Innes was rarely in that tent except for meals now, or during her alternating week of house chores.

"I was afraid I was late," said the girl.

"Lunch will be ready in a few minutes," announced Gerty Hardin. "Won't you sit down? There's the new Journal. Sam came to clean this morning, and I couldn't get to the lunch until an hour ago."

Innes, settling herself by the reading table, caught herself observing that it would not have taken her an hour to get a cold lunch. Still, it would never look so inviting! If Gerty's domestic machinery was complicated and private, the results always were admirable. The early tomatoes were peeled as well as sliced, and were lying on a bed of cracked ice. The ripe black olives were resting in a lake of California olive oil. A bowl of crisp lettuce had been iced and carefully dried. The bread was cut in precise triangles; the butter had been shaved into foreign-looking roses. A pitcher of the valley's favorite beverage, iced tea, stood by Hardin's plate. There was a platter of cold meats.

It came home to Innes for the hundredth time, the surprise of such a meal in that desert. A few years ago, and what had a meal been? She threw the credit of the little lunch to sulky Tom Hardin lying on the portiere-covered couch, his ugly lower lip out-thrust against an unsmiling vision. It was Tom, Tom and his brave men, the sturdy engineers, the dauntless surveyors, the Indians who had dug the canals, those were the ones who had spread that pretty table, not the buxom little woman darting about in pink gingham.

"Is it because I don't like her?" she mused, her eyes on the pictures in the style book which had just come in that morning. Certainly Gerty did have the patience of a saint with Tom's humors. If she would only lose that set look of martyrdom! It was not for an outsider to judge between a husband and wife, even if the man were her own brother. She could not put her finger on the germ of their painful



Nothing Had Been Forgotten.

scenes; she shrank from the recollection of Tom's temper; his coarse streak, the Gingg fiber, her own mother called it. Tom was rough, but she loved him. Why was it she was sure that Gerty did not love her husband? Yet there was the distrust, as fixed and as unjust perhaps as the suspicion of Gerty's little mysteries.

She said aloud: "This is your last day. My week begins tomorrow."

Mrs. Hardin adjusted a precise napkin before she spoke.

"I think I will keep the reins for a month this time." Her words were reflective, as though the thought were new. "I get my hand in just as I stop."

I will be running out for my visit in a few weeks. It will be only fair for me to do it as long as I can."

Again the girl had a sense of subtlety. Whenever Gerty put on that air of childish confidential deliberation, she hunted for the plot. This was not far to seek. Her sister-in-law was passing out the hot season to her.

"It's all ready," Gerty's glance was winging, birdlike, over the table. Nothing had been forgotten. She gave a little sigh of elastic satisfaction. Hardin misinterpreted it.

"I ought to be able to keep a servant for her." It was like him to have forgotten the Lawrence days; he was never free of the sense of obligation to the dainty little woman who was born, he felt, for the purple. There was nothing too good for Gerty. He felt her unspoken disappointments; her deprivations. "Of course, she can have no respect for me. I'm a failure."

"Doesn't this give you an appetite?" demanded Innes heartily. "And I'm to be a lady for three more weeks." The remark was thoughtless. A bright flush spread over Gerty's face. She caught an allusion to her origin.

Innes saw the blush and remembered the boarding house. She could think of nothing to say. The three relatives sat down to that most uncomfortable travesty, a social meal where sociability is lacking. Innes said it had been a pleasant morning. Gerty thought it had been hot. And then there was silence again.

Innes began to tell them of her Tucson visit, when Gerty laid down her fork. "I've meant to ask you a hundred times. Did you attend to my commission in Los Angeles?"

"I forgot to tell you. I raked the town, really I did, Gerty." For there was a cloud on Gerty's pretty brow. "I could have got you the other kind, but you said you did not want it."

"I should think not." The childish chin was lifted. "Those complicated things are always getting out of order. Besides, if I had an adjustable form, everybody'd be borrowing it."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Tom, waking up. "Who'd borrow your what, Gert?"

"Please don't call me Gert, Tom," besought his wife plaintively. "A figure. I wanted Innes to try to get one for me in Los Angeles."

"I did try," began Innes.

"Yours is good enough for anyone. Why should you get another?" He was openly admiring the ample bust swelling under the pink gingham.

"Don't, Tom."

Innes tried to explain the sincerity of her search. She had visited every store "which might be suspected of having a figure." She could not bring a smile to her sister's face. "There was none your size. They offered to order one from Chicago. They have to be made to order, if they are special sizes. You are not stock size, did you know that?"

"I should think not," cried Gerty, bridling. "My waist is absurdly small for the size of my hips and shoulders." Innes wondered if it would be safe to agree with her.

passion. "Surely, your old friend. He served a subpoena on me at the station."

"Oh," cried Gerty. "Surely, he did not do that, Tom!"

"Sure he did," Hardin's face was black with his evil mood. "I'm only an underling, a disgraced underling. He's my boss. He's going to make me remember it."

"You mustn't say such things," pointed his wife. "If it does not hurt you, if you do not care, think how I must feel—"

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Hardin. The veneer was rubbed down to the rough wood. Innes saw the coarseness her mother had complained of, the Gingg fiber.

"I suppose you think I like to take orders, to jump at the snap of the whip?" He was deliberately bending up his anger into a froth. "Oh, sure, I do. That's a Hardin, through and through."

Again the angry flood flooded his wife's cheeks. He, too, was throwing the boarding house at her.

"You did it yourself," Gerty with difficulty was withholding the angry tears. "I told you how it would be. You would do it."

"Oh, hell!" cried Tom, pushing back his plate.

His sister looked decorously out the wire-screamed door. Her view was a dusty street. Hardin got up, scraping his chair over the board floor.

"And to keep it from me, circulated the wife. "To let me ask him to dinner—"

"Does that Alamo! Jeeze, how to go on?" demanded Hardin, leaning back to the table. "You'll have to have it without me, then. I'll not stay and make a fool of myself. Ask him to dinner. Me! I'll see myself."

Innes wished she was in the neighboring tent. Tom was lashing himself into a course fury.

To her dismay, Gerty burst into tears. It was killing her, the disgrace, she could stand it there; she had not the courage to go to Los Angeles, where her friends would pity her. It was crushing her. She was not a Hardin; she was sensitive; she could not justify everything a Hardin did as right, no matter what the consequences. The pretty eyes obscured, she rushed, a streaming Niobe, from the room.

The brother and sister avoided each other's eyes. Innes rose and cleared the table of the dishes. She made a loud noise with the running water in the shed, racketing the pans to drown the insistence of Gerty's sobbing.

She kept listening for Tom's step. She wanted to go with him when he left; he must not reach the office in the blackness of that mood. She wished he would not betray his feelings; yet she knew it was not he who was to blame.

When she heard the screen door slam, she flushed out the back way.

"Going?" she called after him. "Wait for me." She dashed into her tent for her hat. She had to run to catch up with him.

CHAPTER IX.

The Rivals.

From the window of the adobe office building of the company, Hardin saw Rickard jump from the rear platform of the train as it slowed into the station. He noticed that the new manager carried no bag.

"Wonder what he's decided to do about the headgate. He didn't waste much time out there," Hardin was fidgeting in his seat, his eyes on the approaching figure.

Rickard passed through the room, nodding to his office force. The door of the inner office shut behind him. Hardin stared at the blank surface. He moved restlessly in his swivel chair. Did the fellow think a big thing like that could hang on while he unpacked his trunks and settled his bureau drawers? He picked up a pencil, jabbing at the paper of his report. He covered the sheet with figures—three hundred—six hundred. Six hundred feet. Whose fault that the intake had widened, doubling its width, trebling its problem? Whose but Marshall's, who had sent down one of his office clerks to see what Hardin was doing? Wouldn't any man in his senses know that the way Maitland would distinguish himself would be by discrediting Hardin, by throwing bouquets to Marshall; praising his plan? They all go at it the same sickening way! Office clerks, bah! Sure, Maitland had advised against the completion of the gate. Said it would cost more in time and money than Hardin's estimates. "Thanks to Maitland it did," growled Hardin, scrawling figures over the page. "By the time Maitland finished monkeying with that toy dam of his the river had widened the break from three hundred to six hundred feet. For that, they throw mud at me. Oh, it makes me sick." Hardin flung his broken pencil out of the window.

Rickard re-entered the room. The question leaped from Hardin.

"The headgate—are you going on with it?"

Rickard looked curiously at the flushed antagonistic face of the man he had supplanted. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Hardin had taken to drinking. It made his answer curt.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I have no report to make, Mr. Hardin, until I see the gate."

"And you went to the Crossing without going down to the headgate?" Hardin did not try to conceal his disgust.

"I did not go to the Crossing." "Didn't go—" Hardin's mouth was agape. Then he rudely swivoted his chair. The door slammed behind Rickard.

Hadn't been to the Crossing? Then where in Hades did he go? He halted MacLean who was passing him.

"Are you going to the Crossing tomorrow?" Hardin knew he should be too proud to betray his eagerness, but the words ran away with him.

"Not tomorrow. Mr. Rickard just told me he might not be able to get off until next week."

Hardin's anger spattered. "Next week!"



"Are You Going On With It?"

week. Why does he rush so? Why doesn't he go next year? The Colorado's so gentle, it'd wait for him, I'm sure. Next week! It's a put-up job, that's what it is. Oh, I can see through a fence with a knothole as big as your head. He doesn't want to finish the headgate. He wants to put off going until it's too late to go on with it; I know him. He'd risk the whole thing, and all the money the O. P. has chucked into it, just to start with a clean slate; to get the glory of stopping the river himself. It turns my stomach; it's a plot." The lower lip shot out.

MacLean's attention was deferential. He had always liked Hardin; all the fellows did. But he was jumping off wrong this time. He'd brought it all on himself.

"He said something about a levee for the towns, he's got to investigate that before he goes to the front."

"A levee? Well, wouldn't that jar you?" Hardin addressed the stenographer in the transparent shirtwaist. "Does he think we're going to have another flood this season? Thinks it's going to reach the hotel and wet his clothes? Take the starch out of his shirts? He flung out of his chair, throwing the papers back into the drawer."

He stamped out of the office, mad clear through. To this crisis they had sent down a dandy, a bookman who wanted to build a levee. Oh, hell!

"They'll come crawling after me to help them after this fellow's buried himself under river mud, come calling to me as they did after Maitland failed. 'Please, Mr. Hardin, won't you come back and finish your gate!' I'll see them dead first. No, I'll be fool enough to do it. I can't help myself. I'm a Hardin. I have to finish what I've begun."

It was not because this was a pet enterprise, the great work of his life, that he must eagerly eat humble pie, take the buffets, the falls, and come whining back when they whistled to him. He told himself it was because of his debt to the valley, to the ranchers. The colonists were about desperate. Who could blame them? The last year's floods had worked havoc with their crops; this year had been a horror. The district they called No. 6 was a screaming irony of ruin. The last debacle of the river had made great gashes through the ranches, had scoured deep gorges which had undermined the canals on which the water supply for No. 6 depended. The suits were piling up against the D. R., damage suits, and they hold up his gate, while he gets the curses of the valley. And Mr. Rickard thinks he'll build a levee!

He flung himself on the couch in the tent. Gerty was laying a careful cloth for supper. A brave, determined smile was arranged on her lips. The noon storm had passed. She hummed a gay little tune. If there was anything Hardin hated it was humming.

"You'll have your dude to dinner all right," her husband announced. "He's in town."

"Yes, I know," rejoined his spouse. "I had a letter from him yesterday. From Imperial."

Tom sat up glaring. "He wrote to you from Imperial?"

His wife mislaid the accent. She misunderstood Tom's scowl. It was the old story over again. Whenever those two men came together the old feeling of jealousy must be revived again! It was unpleasant, of course, very unpleasant, to have men care like that, but it made life exciting. Life had been getting a little stale lately—like a book of obvious, even plot. Rickard's entrance into the story gave a new interest, a new twist. She hummed an air from a new opera that had set the world waiting.

Hardin's thoughts did not touch her at the hem. He was at the headgate, his gate. What the deuce had Rickard gone to Imperial for? If he wasn't the damnest ass! Imperial! And the gate hung up!

"For God's sake stop that buzzing!" The happy little noise was quenched. Innes, entering at that moment, heard the rough order. She looked imploringly at her sister-in-law.

"Supper's on the table," cried Gerty, the fixed, determined smile still on her lips.

(To be continued next week.)

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