



The RIVER

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CHAPTER X.

A Desert Dinner.

Innes Hardin was completing her simple toilet. Not even to please Gerty would she "dress up" for the dinner. It would have been easy for her sister-in-law to postpone it. How could she expect Tom to go through with it! She couldn't understand Gerty!

An hour ago, hearing distinctly the whirl and splash of egg-beating, she had run over to the neighboring tent. The clinking of the cake tins had suddenly silenced. "Excuse me, won't you?" Gerty's voice had come from the lean-to, the little kitchen shed. "I'm lying down."

"Lying, yes!" grimaced the Hardin mouth to its reflection in the mirror. How many times that week had she been repulsed by a locked door, a sudden curtain of silence or a "Run away for a while. I'm trying to catch a nap." Easy now to see why Gerty had wanted to "hold the reins" that week!

She didn't need to pierce those canvas walls to know that there had been feverish activity for this dinner. A new gown would appear tonight, made secretly. An exquisite meal, and no one must comment on its elaboration. Twice Tom and she had been asked to take their lunch at the hotel. "Because of a headache!" A headache!

Tom's wife could not even shop openly! Bundles had always the air of mystery, never opened before Tom or herself. She must have yards of stuff laid away, kept for sudden emergencies.

"She can't help it. It's her disposition. She can't help being secretive. Look at your face, Innes Hardin!" What was it to her, the pettiness of a woman whom an accident of life had swept upon the beach beside her? Gerty was not her kind, not the sort she would pick out for a friend. She was an oriental, one of the harem women, whose business it is in life to please one man, to keep his home soft, his comforts ready, keep him convinced, moreover, that it is the desire of his life to support her. Herself dissatisfied, often rebellious, staying by him for self-interest, not for love—that was her impeachment. "Not loving!"

Soberly she covered her plain brassiere with a white waist of cotton ducking. A red leather belt and crimson tie she added self-consciously. "Where is my bloodstone pin?"

Hadn't she spent an hour at least, matching that particular leather belt? But he was a man, in battle. The headgate held up; it was too bad. Silent, Bodefeldt, Wooster, Grant, all of them fighting mad because of the deadlock at the heading. All up in arms, at last, against Marshall, because of this cruel cut to their hero, Hardin. Her eyes glowed like yellow lamps as she recalled their fervid partisanship.

"Only one man who can save the valley, and that's Tom Hardin." Wooster had said that; but they all believed it. The loyalty of the force made her ashamed of her soft woman fears. For there were times when she questioned her brother's ability. He had a large, loose way of handling things. He was too optimistic. But those men, those engineers must know. It was probably the man's way of sweeping ahead, ignoring detail. The verdict of those field-tried men told her that the other, the careful, planning way, was the office method. Rickard, as a dinner neighbor, she had found interesting; but for great undertakings a man who would let a Gerty Holmes jilt him, ruin his life for him! The whole story sprang at last clear from the dropped innuendo.

She adjusted a barrette in her smoothly brushed hair. Slowly she walked over to the neighboring tent. Gerty frowned at the white duck. "You might at least have worn your blue!"

"You're elegant enough for the two of us. Isn't that something new?" Gerty said carelessly that she had had it for a long time. For she had had the material a long time! It wasn't necessary to explain to her husband's sister that it had been made up that week. She hoped that she didn't look "fussed up." Would Mr. Rickard think she was attaching any importance to the simple little visit? For it was nothing to him, of course. A man of his standing, whom the great Tod Marshall ranked so high, probably dined out several times each week, with white-capped maids and candelabra! If Tom had only made the most of his opportunities. What a gamble, life to a woman!

She made a trip into her bedroom and took a reassuring survey in her mirror. The lingerie frock would look simple to a man who would never

suspect it of hand-made duplicity. Her glass declared the hand-whipped medallions casual and elegant. And a long time ago, a lifetime ago, Rickard had told her that she always should wear blue, because of her eyes. Innes from the next room could hear Gerty teasing Tom to wear his Tuxedo.

"Isn't one dude enough for you?" growled her surly lord. Innes recognized the mood and shrank from the ordeal ahead. It was the mood of the Hardin in the rough, the son of his frontier mother, the fruit of old Jasper Gingg, whose smithy had been the rendezvous for the wildest roughs, the fiercest cattlemen in Missouri.

"I'd let him see you knew what's what, even if we do live like gypsies." The answer to that was another growl. Innes could hear him dragging out the process, grumbling over each detail. That confounded laundry had torn his shirt. He hadn't a decent collar to his name. Where was his black string tie? If Gert would keep his things in the lowest drawer! Hang that button! Gerty emerged from the encounter, her face very red. Innes could see her biting her lips to keep the tears back as she put the last touches to the table.

"She's tired out," thought the sister



Gerty frowned at the white duck of Tom Hardin. "She's probably fussed herself to death over this dinner."

A few minutes later Rickard arrived in a sack suit of tweeds. Gerty's greeting was a little abstracted. How could she make Innes understand to tell Tom to change his coat? The duty of a host, she suddenly remembered, was to dress down rather than up to the chances of his guest. She regretted bitterly her insistence. Was ever anyone so obtuse as Innes? Mr. Rickard would see that they thought it a big event. She was watching the curtain where Tom would emerge. And his coat was a style of several seasons ago and absurdly tight! She made an unintelligible excuse and darted behind the portiere.

Tom's face was apoplectic. He was wrestling with a pussed tie; the collar showed a desperate struggle. Gerty made wild signals for him to change his clothes. She waved a hand indicating Rickard; she pointed to Tom's sack suit lying on the floor where he had walked out of it.

"What is it all about?" "Ssh," whispered his wife. Again the wild gestures.

"Well, aren't you satisfied? Don't I look like a guy?" He could be heard distinctly in the next room. Gerty gave it up in despair. She dabbed some more powder on her nose and went out looking like a martyr—a very pretty martyr!

Rickard praised the miracles of the tent. Gerty's soft flush reminded Innes of their old relation. "Exit Innes," she was thinking, when Tom, red and perspiring, brought another element of discomfort into the room.

Gerty ushered them immediately to the table. She covered the first minutes which might be awkward with her small chatter. Somewhere she had read that it was not well to make apologies for lack of maid or fare. Besides Mr. Rickard remembered Lawrence! That dreadful dining room, the ever-set table! How she had hated it, though she had not known how fearful it was until she had escaped.

"We are simple folk here, Mr. Rickard," she announced, as they took their places around the pretty table. That was her only allusion to deficiencies, but it covered her noiseless movements around the board between courses, filled up the gaps when she made necessary dives into kitchen or primitive ice chest, and set the key for the homeliness of the meal itself.

The dinner was a triumph of apparent simplicity. Only Innes could guess the time consumed in the perfection of detail, details dear to the hostess' heart. The almonds she had blanched, of course, herself; had dipped and salted them. The cheese straws were her own. She did not make the mistake of stringing out endless courses. An improvised buffet near at hand made the serving a triumph.

Rickard praised each dish; openly he was admiring her achievement. Innes, remembering the story Gerty had told her in dots and dashes, the story of the old rivalry, glanced covertly at Tom sulking at the head of his own table.

"Poor sulky Achilles," she thought. "Dear, honest old bear!"

"Innes!" cried Mrs. Hardin. She turned to find that the guest was staring at her. She had not heard his effort to include her in the conversation.

"Mr. Rickard asked you if you like it here?"

"Thank you—why, of course!" Her answer sounded pert to herself.

Her sister-in-law hastened to add that Miss Hardin was very lonely, was really all alone in the world; that they insisted on her making her home with them.

Innes had with difficulty restrained a denial. After all, what other home had she? Still the truth had been deflected. She recalled the sacrifice it had been to cut her college course in order to make a home in the desert for the brother who had always so gently fathered her, who had helped her invest her small capital that it might spell a small income. She recalled his resistance when she had called in a mortgage; who could watch that mad scapogon of a river playing pranks with desert homes and not yearn to help? Not a Hardin. She still gloried in remembering that she had at least driven one pile into that rebellious stream, even if when she left the valley it would be as a bread-winner. She was prepared. She was a good draftsman; she would go as an apprentice in an architect's office. She had already settled on the architect!

"Are you going to Los Angeles soon?" She heard the new manager address his host.

"I'm taking orders!"

There was another awkward moment when Hardin pushed back his plate declaring he had reached his limit; it was too big a spread for him! It was the stupid rudeness of the small bad boy; even Innes flushed for her sister-in-law.

With resolution Gerty assumed control of the conversation. Her role sounded casual; no one could have suspected it of frequent rehearsal. They must not talk of the river; that was taboo. Railroad matters were also excluded. Equally difficult would be reminiscences of Lawrence days. So she began brightly with a current book. The theater proved a safe topic, and by that natural route they reached New York. Innes, who had never been farther east than Chicago, was grateful to play audience. Hardin, who knew his New York perhaps better than either, refused to be drawn into the gentle stream.

Things must be kept sprightly. Had Mr. Rickard met many of the valley people? And it was then that she threw her bomb toward the listening, silent Hardins. She would like Mr. Rickard to meet some of their friends.

He said that he would be delighted, but that he was planning to leave shortly for the heading.

"Of course." She did not give her husband time to speak. She meant afterward! She was planning to give something a bit novel in his honor. She refused to see the glare from the angry man in his outgrown dinner coat. She did not glance toward the sister. What did Mr. Rickard think about a progressive ride?

"It sounds very entertaining, but what do you do?"

There was a loud guffaw from Tom. With deepened color Gerty told her idea. A drive, changing partners, so he could meet all the guests.

"I think it will surprise you to find so many nice people in here; it certainly did me. One doesn't expect to find congenial people in a new country like this."

Rickard remembered that he had to get back to his hotel. He had letters to write. It had been a splendid dinner! And what a wonderful home she had made out of a sand-baked lot, out of a tent! He spoke of the roses and the morning glories. His eyes fell on the open piano, the reading table with the current magazines. Now he couldn't understand why they ever went to that hotel!

Gerty's eyes were shining as deep pools of water on which the sun plays. She looked almost infantile as she stood by the two tall men, her head perched birdlike. "Good-by! and I hope you'll come again!"

"Of course he'd come again!" "And you will let me know when you return, so that I may set the date for my party?"

Innes did not get his answer. She had been observing that he was not taller than her brother. He looked taller. He was lean, and Tom was growing stocky. She wished he would not slouch so, his hands in his pockets! In Tucson, before she knew that she must dislike Rickard, she had had an impression of virile distinction, of grace, a suggestion of mastered muscles. He had known that it was her brother he was supplanting—did he get any satisfaction from the fact that it was the husband of the woman who had jilted him? Anyway, she did not like him. She could never forgive a hurt that was done to her own. She was a Hardin.

"Innes! Mr. Rickard said good

night!" She gave him the tips of her cool, browned fingers. Her eyes did not



Her Eyes Did Not Meet His.

meet his; she would not meet that laughing scrutiny.

"Good night, Mr. Rickard."

CHAPTER XI.

The Fighting Chance.

"Casey's back, spying!" announced Wooster at mess one evening. By that time the feeling against "Marshall's man" was actively hostile. There had been a smudge of slumbering fires before Rickard had left the town. Fanned by much talk during his absence, it had burst into active blaze. They were ready to show their resentment against the man who had supplanted Hardin, their Napoleon, if it cost them their places. By this time the cause of the desert was as compelling to these hardy soldiers as were the lily banners of France to the followers of the Little Corporal.

Rickard was not expected. He had been gone less than a week. The effect of his return was that of a person who returns suddenly into a room, hushing an active babel of tongues. He knew what he would find, ample reasons why! He was not given the satisfaction of locating any particular act of disobedience. The men presented a blank wall of politeness, reasonable and ineffectual. Silent explained briefly that he had not been able to collect enough men. Most of the force was busy in the No. 6 district, trying to push the shattered Wistaria through by a new route before that year's crops were entirely ruined. A gang was at Grant's heading; the floor needed bracing. Another squad, Irish's, was in the Volcano Lake region, where they were excavating for the new headgate.

"No hurry for that." Rickard was glad to pick a flaw in such a perfect pattern. "You might have withdrawn those men and put them to work on the levee."

"I was given no authority to do that."

The chief pretended to accept the reason; else it were a case of changing horses in midstream. What he had seen at the heading, his peep at the exposed valley, his gleaning of the river's history had convinced him that in haste and concentration lay the valley's only chance. He must refuse to see the insubordination of the engineers, the seasoned desert soldiers. He needed them, must win their confidence if he could. If not, they must save the valley anyway! The imperturbable front of Silent, his bland, big stare, exasperated him; easier to control the snapping terrier of a Wooster. He had told Silent distinctly to gather his men and rush the levee. A good soldier had made a better guess than his, and had stopped the casual work at Black Butte, or had found Indians! Thoughtfully Rickard followed that last suggestion across the ditch into Mexicali.

He gathered all the recruits he needed that morning. The Indians, lazy Cocopahs, crept out of their huts to earn a few of the silver dollars held out to them by the new white boss. A few Mexican laborers were bribed to toss up earth to the west of the town. Estrada, at his request, put a squad of his road force at the service of the manager. He could not spare many men.

The railroad had already started the line projected by Hardin to Marshall the year before, a spur across the desert, dipping into Mexico between the lean, restless sandhills, from Calexico to Yuma. The Mexican government had agreed to pay five thousand dollars a mile were the road completed at a certain period. Estrada was keeping his men on the jump to fill the contract, to make his nation pay the price. The completion of the road meant help to the valley; supplies, men, could be rushed through to the break.

In spite of his haunting sense of ultimate failure the growing belief in the omnipotence of the Great Yellow Dragon as the Cocopahs visualized it, Estrada's work was as intense as though he were hastening a sure victory. The dauntless spirit of the elder Estrada pushed the track over the hot sands where he must dance at times to keep his feet from burning. Many of the rails they laid at night.

"Rickard's gone hog-wild," Hardin told his family the next morning. "Building a levee between the towns! The man's off his head."

"There isn't any danger?" Gerty's anxiety made the deep blue eyes look black.

(To be continued next week.)

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