



The RIVER

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His sister's gaze rested on him with concern. He had too little to do. She guessed that his title, consulting engineer, was a mocking one, that his chief, at least, did not consult him. Was it true, what she had heard, that he had made a fluke about the machinery? He was looking seedy. He had been letting his clothes go. He looked like a man who has lost grip; who has been shelved.

She knew he was sleeping badly. Every morning now she found the couch crumpled. Not much pretense of marital congeniality. Things were going badly, there—

"Everybody has accepted," Gerty was saying. "They have been waiting for me to set the date."

"And you cater to him, let him dangle you all. I wonder why you do it, unless it's to hurt me."

"Hurt you, Tom," cried his wife, her deep blue eyes wide with dismay. "How can you say such a thing? But if it is given for him, how can I do anything else than let him arrange the day to suit himself? It would be funny for the guest of honor not to be present, wouldn't it?"

"I don't see why you want to make him a guest of honor," he retreated, covering his position.

Gently, Gerty expressed her belief that she was doing the best thing for her husband in getting up a public affair for his successor. She did think that Tom would see that it showed they had no feeling.

"I think it a fine idea," agreed Innes heartily. "I'm sure Tom will, too, when he thinks about it." But she did not give him any chance to express himself. "How are you going to manage it, Gerty? You said it was going to be progressive?"

"We shall draw for partners," said Mrs. Hardin. "And change every half a mile. The first lap will be two miles; that will give some excitement in cutting for partners." Easy, being the hostess, to withhold any slip she pleased, easy to make it seem accidental!

"When is this circus coming off?" inquired her husband.

"Mr. Rickard says he will be back on the first; that he'll be free on the second."

"For half an hour, I'll listen to Mrs. Youngberg tell me how hard it is to have to do without servants, as she's never done it in her life before. For another half-mile, Mrs. Hatfield will flirt with me, and Mrs. Middleton will tell me all about 'her dear little kiddies.' Sounds cheerful. Why didn't you choose cards? No one has to talk then."

There was an interval when his wife appeared to be balancing his suggestion. "No, I think it will have to be a drive; for I've told every one about it."

"Well," remarked her husband, "I only hope something will happen to prevent it."

"Tom!" exclaimed Gerty Hardin. "What a dreadful thing to say. That sounds like a curse. You make my blood run cold."

"Shu!" said Hardin, picking up his hat. "That was no curse. You wouldn't go if it rained, would you?"

"Oh, rain!" She shrugged at that possibility.

"Well, you wouldn't go if the wind blows!" retorted Hardin, leaving the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Dragon Takes a Hand.

The company's automobile honked outside. Hardin frowned across the table at his wife. "You're surely not going such a night as this?"

Gerty gave one of her light, elusive shrugs. No need to answer Tom when he was in one of his black moods. This was the first word he had spoken since he had entered the tent. She had warned Innes by a lifted eyebrow—they must be careful not to provoke him. Something had gone wrong at the office, of course! How much longer could she stand his humors, these ghostly silent dinners?

"The river on a rampage, and we go for a drive!" jeered Hardin.

The flood was not serious—yet! Tom loved to cry "Wolf!" No one was alarmed in town—Patton, Mrs. Youngberg, would have told her. Of course, one never knew what that dreadful river would do next, but if one had to wait always to see what the river's next prank would be, one would never get anywhere!

Innes was leaving the table. "Well, I suppose I should be lashing on my hat!" Gerty's pretty lips hardened as the girl left the tent. These Hardins always loved to spoil her enjoyment. They would like her to be a nun, a cloistered nun!

At the opening of the door, the wind tore the pictures from the piano. Gerty ran into her room, shutting

herself in against further argument. She came back into the room, powdered and heavily veiled against the wind. A heavy winter uster covered the new mull gown which she had not worn at supper, though Innes could have helped her with the hooks! But there was always so much talk about everything!

They had to face the gale as the machine swept down the wind-crazed street.

It was too bad to have a night like this! And all her work—Tom and his sister would have it go for nothing! She was made of sturdier stuff than that. Life had been dealing out mean hands to her, but she would not drop out of the game, acknowledge herself beaten—luck would turn, she would get better cards.

In the hall of the Desert hotel, the party was assembling. Mrs. Hardin's roving eye scanned the hall. Rickard was not there. Patton called her from the desk. Some one wanted her at the telephone. It was Rickard, of course, at the office; to say he had been detained. The fear which had been chilling her passed by.

It was not Rickard on the wire, but Mrs. Hatfield, loquacious and coquetish. She urged a frightful neuralgia, and hoped that she was not putting her hostess to any inconvenience at this last moment. She wanted to prolong the conversation—had the guests all come? Were they really going? Then she must be getting old, for a night like this dismayed her! Gerty felt her good-night was rudely abrupt. But was she to stand there gabbling all night, her guests waiting?

She prayed that Rickard would be there when she returned. What a travesty if the guest of honor should disappoint her! Though he was not among the different groups, her confidence in his punctiliousness reassured her. She must hold them a little longer. She flitted gaily from one standing group to another. Her eyes constantly questioned the clock.

"How long are you going to wait for Mrs. Hatfield?" Her husband came up, protesting.

"Mrs. Hatfield," she explained faintly, "is not coming. We are waiting for Mr. Rickard."

"He didn't come in on that train; he's at the Heading," Hardin added something about trouble at the intake, but Gerty did not heed. Tom had known and had not told her when there was yet time to call it off!



Gerty's Pretty Lips Hardened.

"A pretty time to tell me!" Had he been looking at her, he would have been left no illusions. Her blue eyes flashed hate.

"I did not know it until we got here. There was a message from MacLean at the desk, waiting."

MacLean was not there, either!

"We are all ready," she cried. "Mrs. Hatfield and Mr. Rickard cannot come." Not for worlds would she give in to her desire to call the whole grim affair off; let them think she was disappointed, not she. Though the world blew away, she would go.

She found herself distributing slips of mingled quotations. The white slips went to the women; the green bits of pasteboard to the men. She held a certain green card in her glove; "Leads on to fortune." Rickard might come dashing in at the last moment, the ideal man's way; a special, perhaps; it did not seem credible that he would deliberately stay away without sending her word.

In a burst of laughter, the company discovered then that the guest of honor was also absent. Mrs. Hardin hurried them out to the waiting buggies.

Dreadfully, they drove down the flying street. The wind was at their backs, but it tore at their hats, pulled at their tempers. Their eyes were full of street dust.

A flash of light as they were leaving town brightened the thick dust clouds. "What was that?" cried Gerty. She was ready for any calamity now. "Not lightning!" Again, the queer light flashed across the obscured sky. Tom roused himself to growl that he hadn't seen anything. And the dreary farce went on.

Innes' partner was young Sutcliffe, the English zanjero. He was in the quicksand of a comparison between English and American women. Innes mischievously coaxing him into deeper waters, when there was a blockade of buggies ahead of them.

"The A B C ranch," cried Innes, peering through the veil of dust at the queer unreal outlines of fences and trees. "It's our first stop."

"Oh, I say, that's too bad," began Sutcliffe. Innes was already on the road, her skirts whipped by the wind into clinging drapery.

Gerty's party found itself disorganized. Partners were trying to find or lose each other. "Get in here!" Innes heard the voice of Estrada behind her. He had a top buggy. She hailed a refuge.

"Splendid!" she cried. "What a relief!" Climbing in, she said: "I hope this isn't upsetting Gerty's arrangement."

"Arrangement! Look at them!" The women were hastening out of the dust swirl into any haven that offered. With little screams of dismay, they ran like rabbits to cover.

Gerty found herself with Blinn. At the next stop there was a block of buggies. "No use changing again!" She acknowledged herself beaten. "Let's go on. What are they stopping for?" Dismal farce it all was!

She was pushing back her disheartened curls when the beat of horses' hoofs back to her wind-chilled cheeks. "Rickard!" she thought. "He must have come in a special!" The gloom suddenly disgorged MacLean.

"Hain! Where is he?" "What's up?" yelled Blinn. "Is it the river?" MacLean's face answered him. His ranch scoured again—"God, Almighty!"

"The river!" screamed the women. The men were surrounding MacLean, whose horse was prancing as if with the importance of having carried a Revere. "The levee!" called MacLean. "Where's Hardin?" He spurred his mare toward Hardin, who was blacker than Napoleon at Austerlitz.

"You're needed. They're all needed." The other voices broke in, the men pressing up. This threatened them all. Blinn's ranch lay in the ravaged sixth district. Nothing would save him. Youngberg belonged to water company number one; their ditches would go. Hollister and Wilson of the Palo Verde saw ruin ahead of them. Each man was visualizing the mad onward sweep of that destroying power. Like ghosts, the women huddled in the dust-blown road.

"Where is it now?" demanded Blinn. "It's here, right on us. You're all needed at the levee," bawled MacLean.

The levee! There was a dash for buggies, a scraping of wheels, the whinnying of frightened horses. Some one recalled the flashes of light they had seen on leaving town. "What were those lights—signals?"

"From the water-tower," MacLean's voice split the wind. "The wires are all down between the Crossing and the towns. Coronel was on the tower—he got the signal from the Heading—he's been there each night for a week!" This was a great night—for his chief, Rickard!

Gerty Hardin caught the thrill of his hero-worship. How splendid, how triumphant!

Innes found herself in her brother's buggy. His horse, under the whip, dashed forward. Suddenly he pulled it back on its haunches, narrowly averting a jam. "Where's MacLean?"

The boy rode back. "Who's calling me?"

"Give me your horse," demanded Hardin. "You take my sister home."

Gerty Hardin's party was torn like a bow of useless finery. Facing the wind now, no one could talk; no one wanted to talk. Each was thrashing out his own thoughts; personal ruin stared them in the face. Every man was remembering that reckless exposed cut of Hardin's; pinning their hope to that ridiculed levee. The horses broke into a reckless gallop, the buggies lurching wildly as they dodged one another. The axes creaked and strained. The wind tore away the hats of the women, rent their pretty chiffon veils.

The dusty road was peopled with dark formless shapes. The signals had spread the alarm; the desert world was flocking to the gorge of the New River, to the levee.

The women were dumped without ceremony on the sidewalk, under the screened bird cage of the Desert hotel. Shivering, her pretty teeth chattering, Gerty Hardin ushered them into the deserted hall. The Chinese cook snored away his vigil in an armchair by the open fire. The men had rushed away to the levee.

"Women must wait," Gerty's laugh was hysterical. "We can do no good down there." She threw herself, conscious of heroineship, into the ordeal of her spool entertainment.

It was always an incoherent dream to Innes Hardin, that wild ride homeward, the lurching scraping buggies, the apprehensive silence, this huddling of women like scared rabbits around a

table that had also been gay. The women's teeth shivered over the levee. Their faces looked ghastly by the light shed by Gerty's green shades. She wished she were at the levee. She simply must go to the levee. "I'm going to get a wrap," she threw to Gerty as she passed. "I left it in the hall."

She stole through the deserted office, past the white and silver soda fountain, and out into the speeding blur of the night. Formless shapes, soft-footed, passed her. As she sped past the French windows of the dining room she could get a view of the shattered party.

Innes made a dive into the darkness. There was a dim outline of hastening



Innes Made a Dive Into the Darkness.

figures in front of her. She could hear some one breathing heavily by her side. They kept a pace, stumbling, occasionally, the moving gloom betraying their feet. A man came running back toward the town. "It's cutting back!" He cried. "Nothing but the levee will save the towns!"

The levee! The harsh breathing followed her. As they passed the wretched hut of a Mexican gambler, a sputtering light shone out. Innes looked back. She saw the wrinkled face of Coronel, who had left his water tower. His black coarse hair was streaming in the wind, his mouth, ajar, was expressionless, though the fulfillment of the Great Prophecy was at hand. Beneath the cheek-patches of green and red paint rested a curious dignity. The Indian was to come again into his own.

What was his own, she questioned, as her feet stumbled over loosened boarding, a ditch crossing she had not seen. More corn, perhaps more fiery stuff to wash down the corn! More white man's money in the brown man's pocket—that, his happiness. Why should he not thank the gods? His gods were speaking! For when the waters of the great river ran back to the desert, the long ago outraged gods were no longer angry. The towns might go, but the great Indian gods were showing their good will!

She joined a group at the levee, winding her veil over mouth and forehead. Dark shapes swayed near her. The wind was making havoc of the mad waters rushing down from the channel. The noise of wind and waters was appalling. Strange loud voices came through the din, of Indians, Mexicans; guttural sounds. Men ran past her, carrying shovels, pulling sacks of sand; lanterns, blown dim, flashed their pale light on her chilled cheeks.

Not even the levee, she knew then, would save the towns. This was the end.

CHAPTER XV.

On the Levee.

Hardin did not go home that night. He was feeling to the quick the irony of his position; his duty now to protect the levee he'd ridiculed; now the only hope of the towns! The integrity of the man never faltered, though his thoughts ran wild. Like the relentless hounds of Actaeon, they pursued him, barking at his vanity.

He started the anxious ranchers at sacking sand. Bodefeldt ran up to tell him that there was a hill of filled sacks over in Mexicali. "Rickard had a bunch of Indians working for a week."

The confusion of the shy fellow did not escape Hardin. Oh, he knew what sister and his friend looked at each other, the same thought in mind; Rickard, in from the Heading!

On her face Silent saw the same spectacular impulse which had flashed over Hardin's features a short time before.

She put her hand on his arm. "Silent, you're his friend. Straighten this out. We can't have him come back—spying—and find this." She waved her hand toward the disorganized groups. "I'd take more orders," suggested the engineer.

"Then send a third of them home, tell them to come back tonight at six. Send away the other third, tell them to come back at noon. Keep the other shift. Say you'll have coffee sent from the hotel, tell them Hardin says to stop wasting stuff. Tell them, oh, tell them anything you can think of, Silent, before he comes." Her breakdown was girlish.

She could hear the signal of the locomotive; coming closer. Then she could hear the pant of the engine as it worked up the grade. It was a steady gentle climb all the way from the junction, two hundred feet below sea-level, to the towns resting at the level of the sea. It quickened her thought of the power of the river.

Nothing between it and the tracks at Sulton. Nothing to stop its flow into that spectacular new sea whose basin did not need a drop of the precious misguided flow. She could hear the bells; now the train was coming into the station; she would not wait for Silent. She did not want to meet Rickard.

No one saw her as she left the levee. She passed Silent, who was issuing orders. She heard him say, "The boss says so."

She took the road by the railroad sheds, to avoid the dismissed shifts.



She Collided With a Man.

moving toward. At full speed, she collided with a man, rounding the sheds' corner. It was Rickard. Her veil had slipped to her shoulders and he saw her face.

"Miss Hardin!" he exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"I was looking for my brother." "You ought not to be out at night alone here."

"It's morning!" "With every Indian in the country coming in, I'll send Parrish with you."

She recognized Parrish behind him. She tried to tell him that she knew every Indian in Mexicali, every Mexican in the twin towns, but he would not listen to her. "I'm not going to let you go home alone."

She blinked rebellion at the supplanter of her brother. But she found herself following Parrish. She took a deep pride in her independence, her fearlessness. Tom let her go where she liked. She had an impulse to dismiss Parrish; every man was needed, but he would obey Rickard's orders. MacLean had told her that! "They don't like him, but they mind him!"

Rickard made his way down to the levee. "Where is Hardin?" he asked of every one he met. Silent came up to explain that Hardin had gone up to Fassett's just a few minutes ago to carry dynamite. The river was cutting back there. "Good," cried Rickard. "That's bully!"

"He left me in charge," glibly lied the friend of Hardin. "Any orders, sir?"

"Things are going all right?" began the manager. He stopped. From above came a dull roar.

"Dynamite!" cried Rickard. The friend of Hardin had nothing to say. "I thought you said he went only a few minutes ago?" demanded his chief.

There was another detonation. Down the river came the booming of the second charge.

"That's dynamite for sure," evaded Silent.

"Not a minute too soon!" declared Rickard, going back to his inspection.

(To be continued next week.)

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