



The RIVER

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CHAPTER XIX.

More Oratory.

Four men sat at a small table in a corner of the crowded hotel dining-room, in El Centro. Their names made their corner the psychological center of the room. Marshall was always a target of speculation. MacLean, straight and soldierly in his mustard-colored clothes, was, as usual, the man of distinction. Black started the whisper going that the dark stranger was General de la Vega, the Mexican commissioner.

What was he doing in that group? Babcock completed a combination which encouraged speculations and head-shakings. The room was jammed with valley men. The meeting of the ranchers and the several water companies had been called for that afternoon, the summons signed by Faraday himself. Nothing else had been talked of for a fortnight.

It was known throughout the valley that the work at the intake was not yet begun; that Rickard was waiting there for orders; that Faraday and the president of the United States were involved in correspondence as to the responsibility for the future control of the river. Faraday's eagerness to shift his burden was looked upon as suspicious. It was in the air that the officers of the Overland Pacific would demand a recall of the damage suits before they would complete the protective works at the heading. The men of long vision, members of the water companies, and Brandon, through the valley Star, were pointing out that the valley's salvation depended on the immediate control of the river; that the railroad, only, had power to effect it. These conservatives were counseling caution. Only that morning, the Star had issued an extra, a special edition pleading for co-operation. "If the river breaks out again," warned Brandon's editorial, "without immediate force to restrain it, reclamation for that valley is a dream that is done. And the only force equal to that emergency is the railroad. Why deliberately antagonize the railroad? The Desert Reclamation company. If it is well known, is bankrupt. For the instant, the railroad has assumed the responsibilities of the smaller organization. Apply the same situation to individuals. Suppose a private citizen is in straits, and another comes forward to help him. Must every creditor assume that the Samaritan should pay the crushed citizen's bills? In the present issue, self-interest should urge consideration. Better a small loss today that tomorrow may amply refund, than total ruin in the future."

Hardin, from his morose unshared table, could see the anxious curiosity setting toward the railroad group. Over glasses, heads were close together. Near him, the talk ran high. Scraps of inflammable speeches blew his way from Barton's party.

Hardin's mouth wore a set sneer. "Water company talk!" Black was haranguing his comrades. "Stand out against them. Don't let them bluff you. Marshall will try to bluff you. Stand together!" Barton's resonant organ broke through the clatter. "Marshall is not going to bluff us." Grace and Black began to talk at once. Hardin's lip grew rougher. Where had they all been if it had not been for him? Why, he'd pulled them from their little farms back East, where they were toiling—where they'd be toiling yet. They'd had the vision of sudden wealth—they hadn't the grit to work for it, to wait for it! How many years had he been struggling? He was a young man when he'd gone into this thing, and he was old now.

Coffee and cigars had been reached of the midday dinner. Babcock was nervously consulting his watch. "Shouldn't we arrange the meeting?" he asked for the third time. The social and casual air of the meeting had tressed him. What had the political situation in Mexico to do with the important session confronting them? His fussy soul had no polite salons; office rooms every one of them. MacLean looked to Tod Marshall to answer.

"I think it will arrange itself." His voice was silken. "It is to be a discussion, a conference. You can't state that."

"We could program," began Babcock, looking at his watch again.

"I don't think we'll have to," Marshall smiled across the table. "You'll find this meeting will run itself. There is not a man here who is not burning to speak. Look at them now! Drop a paper in that crowd, and see the blaze you'd get! You can open the meeting, Mr. Babcock, and I would suggest that you call on Mr. De la Vega first."

The eyes of the dining room followed the party as they filed past the buzzing tables. Faraday was not in town; Marshall represented that pow-

er. As he walked out, bowing right and left, his right hand occasionally extended in his well-known oratorical, courteous gesture. His black tie was stringing down his shirt front; his black clothes were the worse for his lunch. But no one, save the Eastern girls, saw spots or tie. The future of that valley lay in that man's hand, no matter how Black or Grace might harangue. In five minutes, the dining room was emptied.

As snow gently falling, had gathered the first damage suits of the ranchers. The last flood had precipitated a temperamental storm. Men were suing for the possible values of their farms, impossible values of crops. Not alone the companies had been blanketed with the accusing papers, but against Mexico the white drifts had piled up. Mexico! No one knew better than Hardin how absurd it was to accuse the sister country of responsibility. A pretty pickle they were in! Where was it all going to end?

In the lobby, Hardin ran up against Brandon, who was following a news agent. Through the valley it was being rumored that subscriptions were to be asked for the completion of the work. If this were the intention, there would be a hot meeting.

"You are going on the platform?" assumed the newspaper man. "No? Then will you sit with me?"

"If you will sit upstairs," scowled Hardin, "I don't want to be dragged onto the platform."

Down in the orchestra, Black from the Wistaria was haranguing a group of gesticulating ranchers. Phrases climbed to the men on the balcony seats. "Keep their pledges. Promise makers. Let them look at our crops!"

"If Marshall expects to coerce those men, I lose my guess. Then he's no judge of men," cried Hardin. "Look at those faces." The floor was a sea of impassioned features.

"Something's going to drop," echoed Brandon.

From the wings, Babcock's inquisitive glasses were seen to sweep the house. Hardin could catch the summings of an excited forefinger to the group unseen. There was a minute or so delay. Then Babcock's nervous toe carried him onto the stage.

De la Vega followed Babcock. There was a hush of curiosity. The house did not know who he was. Behind him, soldierly, stiff, stalked MacLean. Marshall's entrance released the tongues. There was an interval of confusion on the stage. Babcock, like a restless terrier, was snapping at the heels of the party. At last, they were all fustily seated. De la Vega was given the place of honor. Marshall, Babcock put on his left, MacLean on the right.

Babcock raised his staccato gavel. A hush fell on the house. His words were clipped and sharp.

"You have left your plowing to come here. You are anxious to hear what we have to say to you. You cannot afford to be indifferent to it. You acknowledge, by your presence, a dependence, a correlation which you would like to deny. Irrigation means co-operation, suffering together, struggling together, succeeding together. You prefer the old individual way, each man for himself. I tell you it won't do. You belong in other countries, the countries of old-fashioned rain. You want to hear what we have to say to you, the company who saved the valley, the company you are suing. But you have also suits against Mexico. There is a gentleman here who has a message from Mexico about those suits. I have the honor, gentlemen, to introduce, Senor de la Vega."

"Ladies," bowed the Mexican. "Gentlemen, Mr. Chairman. It is with an appreciation of the honor that I accepted for today the invitation of Mr. Marshall to speak before you, to speak to you; I must tell you first my thought as I sat there and looked at you, the youth, the flower of the American people. A few years ago, we were calling this the great Colorado desert; now, the world calls it the hot-house of America. This theater is built over the bones of gold-seekers, who dared death in this dreaded desert to find what was buried in those mountains beyond. The man, I say, who crossed this desert, took the hazard of death. It was a countryman of mine who piloted, fifteen years ago, a little band of men, across the desert. Perhaps he camped on this very spot. It is not impossible! It is here, perhaps, that he got his inspiration. He saw a wonderful territory; he dreamed to quicken it with the useless waters of the Colorado. You will all agree that it was Guillermo Estrada who dreamed the dream that has come true; that it was through him that some of your countrymen secured their privilege to reclaim this land. Later, when one of your countrymen found he could not fulfill

his promise to you, the promised to deliver water to your ranches, he came to my nation and got permission to cut into the river on our territory. Most gladly did Porfirio Diaz grant that privilege. For that, today, you are suing him. This, I am told, is your complaint."

His abrupt pause betrayed a confused murmur of voices. De la Vega's polite ear tried to differentiate the phrases. There was a jumble of sound. De la Vega looked inquiringly at Babcock, who waved him on.

"It has nothing to do with the history, but I would like to say in passing that so assured were your people of our friendly feeling toward you that they did not wait to receive permission from Mexico to make the cut. Your people were in a hurry. Your crops were in danger. First the lack of water, then too much water damaged your valley. A few acres—"

A voice from the crowd cried out, "A few acres? Thousands of acres." Instantly others were on their feet. "Thousands of acres. Ruin." One man was shouting himself apoplectic.

Babcock's gavel sounded a sharp staccato on the table.

"Thousands of acres," De la Vega was affronted. "And more than that. The valley, it must be remembered, does not stop at the line. Mexican lands, too, have been scoured by the action, the result of the action of your irrigation company. It was a outrage," he paused, and a quaint word came to his mind. "A mutual benevolence. It did not occur to us to accuse you of our troubles. Your damage suits pained and astonished us. But they gave us also a suggestion."

The rustling and the murmurs suddenly ceased. A prescient lurch sudden on De la Vega. "You have been advised to sue us. To sue us for giving you that concession. Therefore, the only answer is for us to withdraw that concession! You accuse us, for giving it to you. That concession is valuable. What else can we do? Before your damage suits were filed, we were approached by others for the same privilege. If you do not withdraw your suits, my nation sends word to you that you may not take water from the Colorado river through Mexican soil. You will not be without water probably long; I have said that concession is valuable! Other arrangements will probably be made so that the valley will be given water. I would like to take your answer to my government."

It was several seconds before the house got its breath. The import of the diplomat's words was astounding. Barton got to his feet, yelling with his great bass voice, "Betrayed!" His shrunken finger indicated a youth with "R. S." in black letters on his collar. "The valley has been betrayed."

In the balcony, the uproar was deafening. Around Hardin and Brandon words were thudding like bullets. "Reclamation Service." "That's their game." "The concession!" "They won't get it." "Betrayed. We are betrayed."

Downstairs, Babcock's gavel rapped sharply. Behind the excited figure rattling the stick, sat Marshall, his unreadable, sweet smile on his face. His eyes were on Babcock, who was vainly clamoring for order. "Program that meeting."

Hollister was trying to make himself heard to Barton over two rows of seats, but his voice was like a child's on an ocean beach. Barton was surrounded by eager anxious men. The audience had split into circles of haranguing centers. It was impossible to get attention. Hardin could see Marshall pull Babcock by the tails of his coat. Unwillingly, he could see Babcock allow the crowd five minutes by his consulted watch. Then again, the gavel danced on the table. Marshall was still smiling. Babcock's shrill voice split the din. "Order." The ocean of voices swallowed him again.

"We won't let them in," Grace was bellowing, "the valley won't stand for it."

"Take your medicine," thundered the big organ of Barton. "I warned you, Imperial valley."

"Betrayal," groaned the crowd.

Down in the orchestra, Barton was holding a hurry-up meeting of the water companies. De la Vega had stepped back and was consulting with Tod Marshall.

Babcock pulled out his watch, his gavel calling for attention. This time he was heard.

De la Vega approached the footlights, a questioning look on his face.

"We ask for a little time," began Barton. Instantly the house was on its feet. "Withdraw the suits. Give him your answer. Give him our answer. We don't want the Service. The valley don't want the Service. Withdraw the suits."

Barton's moon face looked troubled. "We can't answer for all the ranchers."

"Yes, you can," screamed Grace, jumping up and down like a baboon. "If you don't, I'll answer for them. Don't you see, it's a trick? It's a trick. I see the hand of the O. P. in this." Friendly hands pulled him down into his seat.

The audience was chanting. "Withdraw the suits. Take your medicine. Don't lose the concession.—Lord, the Service!—Give them the answer now."

Barton held up a withered hand. The undeveloped body was dignified by the splendid head. "Don't withdraw your concession. I think I can say that Mexico will not be sued."

Again, the shout went up. "Answer like a man. Think! Good Lord! Say we withdraw the suits!"

"We withdraw the claims against Mexico," Barton sat down to a sudden hush. The first blood had been

let.

Once more Babcock's glasses swept the house. He rapped the table.

"That's not all. We've got more to say to you. Gentlemen, Mr. Marshall."

Marshall stepped forward to a silence which was a variety of tribute.

He bowed. "I will be brief, Mr. Faraday has asked me to take his place here this afternoon. It's only fair. If it were not for my interference, he would not be involved in this situation. I think you will grant that it is Mr. Faraday's company which can save the valley?"

"To save its own tracks!" yelled a voice from the balcony.

Marshall sent a soft smile heavenward. "Incidentally. And its tracks. Why don't you say it? We don't deny that. The Overland Pacific's no altruist."

There was a jeer which rose into a chorus. "Altruist! Octopus. That's what it is."

Marshall's hand went up. "If you want to hear me?" He waved away Babcock's descending gavel. "I was told it would cost two hundred thousand dollars to close that break of yours. Do you want the actual figures? It has eaten already a million, and the work is not yet done. You know the history of the undertaking. The Desert Reclamation company was in straits. Faraday promised his help on the condition that the affairs of Desert Reclamation company would be controlled by his company. He took the control. He inherited—what? Not good will. Threats, damage suits. Do you think that knowledge of complaints is going to encourage him to go on? This is what I came here to talk to you about. You ranchers don't want to cut your own throats. Now, there's a good deal going on about which you are in the dark. Faraday's got a right to feel he's shouldered an old man of the sea. He's been trying to dislodge it. He's appealed to the president. Ever since we came into this, the cry from Wash-

ington has been, 'Do this the way we like, or we'll not take it off your hands.' A murmur of angry voices started somewhere, swelling toward the balcony.

"We don't want the government—" began the rising voices. Marshall's voice rang out:

"But the government wants—you! Unless you will help save your own homes, the government will have to, in time. It's got to. Up there at Laguna, have you seen it? There's nothing going on. They're watching us. That's a useless toy if our works are washed out. Faraday says this to you—" Not a sound in the stilled house. "Unless you withdraw your damage suits, he won't advance another damned cent."

Sharply he sat down before the audience realized that his message was finished. The house had not found its voice, when Babcock's gavel was pounding again for attention. The question, he felt, had not been put to them completely. Perhaps, they did not gather the full import of Mr. Marshall's message. Mr. MacLean would follow Mr. Marshall.

MacLean's superb figure rose from a tree-paneled background.

"He should sing 'Brown October Ale,'" suggested Brandon to Hardin humorously.

Hardin's eyes were on MacLean. What did he know about it? What could he tell those men that they did not know? MacLean was a figurehead in the reorganized irrigation company. Why hadn't they called on him, Hardin? He knew more about the involved history of the two companies than the whole bunch on the stage down yonder. He could have told them, he could have called on their justice, their memory—

MacLean was speaking.

"Mr. Marshall has likened the river project to the old man of the sea. He has it on his back, while it is busily kicking him in the shins!

"Mr. Marshall has given you Mr. Faraday's message. He has asked you to dismiss your damage suits. I ask you to do more than that. Put your hands in your pockets! Come out and help us. You don't want the government. I am told that is the sentiment of the valley. When you called to them, they wouldn't help you; they wouldn't give you an adequate price. Congress will soon be adjourning. What is Mr. Faraday to say to Washington? Is he going to close that break? That depends on you. Withdraw your suits. Do more. Stop fighting against us. Fight with us—"

The audience stirred ominously,

angrily. Before MacLean was done, a voice screamed from the balcony. "You can't quit. That's a threat. You're in too deep. You can't fool us. You've got to save yourself. You've got to go on. Tell Faraday to tell that to Washington."

The uproar was released. Black, from the Wistaria, jumped on his chair. "I am speaking for the valley. We can't help. You know it. We've stripped. We're ruined. You think to threaten us with the government—if we wait for the government to decide, the valley is gone—and the railroad's money with it. I tell you, your bluff won't go. We want justice. We are going to have justice."

"Justice!" came from the surging ranchers.

"Fair play," yelled Black. "You can't trick us. We were not born yesterday. We have rights. The company brought us here. What did we give our money for? Desert land? What good is this land without water? We bought water. Give us back the money we've put in—that's what we're asking for. We won't be scared out of our rights."

There was a growling accompaniment from the back rows, herding together.

"Order," cried Babcock, thumping his gavel. "Let Mr. Black have the floor."

Black had not stopped. Wildly his hands cut the air. His speech, though high-pitched, had a prepared sound; it worked toward a climax. He gave individual instances of ruin. "Grace, Willard Grace, his crop gone, his place cut in two. Hollister and Wilson of the Palo Verde, the ranch a screaming horror. Scores of others." He would not mention his own case; and then he itemized his misfortunes. Parrish, his place scoured beyond all future usefulness. What had they come into the valley for? Who had urged them? There were pledges of the D. R. water pledges. That was all those ruined men were pleading, the redemption of their pledges. Individual ruin, what did it mean? A curtailing of indulgence, of personal indulgence. "I tell you, it means food, bread, potatoes, milk for the babies; or starvation."

Black had touched the deep note. This was the answer. This was what they wanted to say.

"You ask us to help you, us, who are taxed already to our breaking point. You say your company won't go any farther. What does that help mean to you? Poverty? A few thousands, a million to the O. P., a corporation, what does a loss mean to them? Poverty? I tell you, no. A smaller dividend, maybe, to whom? Yes, to whom? To the men who live in Fifth avenue, whose wives are dragged about in limousines. Withdraw their suits? Help Faraday, and ruin men like Parrish? Men of the valley, what is your answer to Faraday?"

The crowd was on its feet, swaying and pushing. The air was fetid with breaths. Wilson's crowd had forgotten its forlornness. "No," yelled the ranchers. "We say, no."

A boy made his way from the wings, a yellow envelope in his hand.

(To be continued next week.)

If Germany were in a position to fight anything she would probably fight the peace treaty.



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