

The River

When the Colorado
Burst Its Banks and
Flooded the Imperial
Valley of California

By
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CHAPTER XXIII.

A White Woman and a Brown.

For a few weeks Mrs. Hardin found the mess tent diverting. Before the Delta had expanded the capacity of the camp her soft nook had been overtaxed, her hospitality strained. The men of the reclamation service, thrown into temporary inactivity, were eager to accept the opportunity created for another. Failing that other, her zeal had flagged. Events were moving quickly at the break; Rickard was absorbed. Mrs. Hardin told herself that it was the heat she wished to escape; not to her own ear did she whisper that she was following Rickard, nor that the percolator and chafing dish, her shelves and toy kitchen were a wasted effort. She kept on good terms with herself by ignoring self-confidences.

Rickard, the discovery unfolded slowly, took his meals irregularly. His breakfast was gulped down before the women appeared; his dinners were he found them.

"No wonder!" reflected Gerty Hardin. "Ling's cooking is so bad." Small



She Waved Her Hand Gayly.

wonder the manager foraged for his men.

She worked out a mission as she lay across her bed that hot afternoon. Her duty became so clear that she could no longer be still. Immediately she must relieve her weeks of idleness; what must Rickard think of her? She buttoned herself thoughtfully into a frock of pale colored muslin, cream slipping toward canary. White was too glaring on a red-hot day like this. Pink was too hot, blue too demure, a parson of pastel green, and she looked like a sprig of fragrant mignonette.

She found the open space of the trapezium swarming with strange dark faces. So silent their coming she had not heard the arrival of the tribes. She isolated the Cocopahs, stately as bronze statues, their long hair streaming, or wound mud-caked under the brilliant headcloths. Foregathered with them were men of other tribes; these must be the Yumas and Degunos, the men needed on the river. These were the men who were to work on the rafts, weave the great mattresses. A squad of short-haired Pimas with their squaws and babies and their gaudy bundles, gaped at the fair-haired woman as she passed. The central space was filling up with Pimas and Maricopas, Papagoes, too; she knew them collectively by their short hair. These were brush cutters. This, then, meant the beginning of real activity. Tom would at last be satisfied. He would no longer sulk and rage alternately at the hold-up of the work.

Before she reached Rickard's ramada she saw that another woman was there. She caught an impassioned gesture. Her only surmise rested on Innes. Gerty saw that she was dark; she looked the halfbreed. The brown woman drew back as the white woman entered. Gerty smiled an airy reassurance. She herself would wait. She did not want to be hurried. She told Rickard that she had plenty of time.

"There is something you want to tell me?" Rickard's patience was courteous but firm. He would hear her errand first. Gerty, remembering the imploring attitude of the stranger, determined that she would not be sent away.

"Will you excuse me, senora? It will be only a minute." She was to tell her errand, and briefly! Gerty swept past the intruder.

"Sit down, Mrs. Hardin."

Resenting the injunction, she said she would stand. Her voice was a little hard, her eyes were veiled, as she told her mission. Her usual fluency dragged; she felt a lack of sympathy. In short, she proposed a commissary department, herself in charge.

"I'd like to feel I was of some use," urged Gerty. "My heart is bound up in this undertaking; if I'm allowed to stay, I'd like to help along. This is the only way I can, the woman's way."

"Aren't you taking a good deal on yourself, Mrs. Hardin?"

Then she forgave his hesitation quite, as it was of her he was thinking. "Not if it helps." Her voice was low and soft, as if this were a secret between them.

"Why, of course, anything you want, Mrs. Hardin." And, remembering her former position, he added, "The camp's yours as much as mine."

A glad smile rewarded him. She went out, reluctantly. There was a new significance in MacLean's absence from the ramada. What could that woman have to say that MacLean must not hear? For the first time the weak tenure on her old lover came to her. Not a sign had he yet given of their understanding, of the poignant situation. Themselves old sweethearts, thrown together in this wilderness. What had she built her hopes on? A word here, a translated phrase, or magnified glance. She would not harbor the new worry. Why, it would be all right. In the meantime she would show them all what a woman with executive ability could do.

"Sit down, senora," said Rickard to the brown woman, Maldonado's wife. "Don't be frightened. We won't let him hurt you." Rickard vulgarized his Castilian to the reach of her rude dialect. Familiar as was Rickard with the peons' speech in their own country, he could not keep up with her story. Lurid words ran past his ears. Out of the jumble of abuse, of shame and misery he caught a new note.

"You say Maldonado himself sells liquor to the Indians?"

"Ssh, senor!" Someone might hear him! She looked over a terrified shoulder. That had slipped out, the selling of the liquor. She could have told her story without that; she wanted to deny it. Relentlessly Rickard made her repeat it, acknowledging the truth.

"What makes you tell me now?" Rickard hunted for the ulcer. He knew there was a personal wrong. "What has Maldonado been doing to you? Has he left you?"

The veil of fear was torn from her eyes. The trembling woman was gone, a vengeful wildcat in her place. "Left me, Maldonado? Left his home, where he traps the Indian with one coin in his pockets? No, senor. He brought her to our home, there; Lupe, the wife of Felipe, the Deguno. I told him not to fool with Felipe; the Indian was dangerous; he had hot blood. Maldonado struck me—he kicked me—he said I was jealous—and hit me again.

"Maldonado told me to get a big meal. I told him that it was for Felipe. When I said I would not cook for that treachery he cursed me, he kicked me again." She threw off the rebozo, dragging her dress loose. "Don't," frowned Rickard. He had seen a welt across her shoulder—a screaming line of pain.

She wound the rebozo around the dishonored shoulder. "I cooked his dinner! There was a lot of liquor—

Felipe was drunk; the tequila made him mad, quite mad. He seemed to know something was wrong; he fought as Maldonado dragged him to the cell, the senor remembers the cell? The next day Maldonado sent for two rurales. They started the next day for Ensenada, taking Felipe; that day Maldonado brought Lupe home. I said she could not stay and he laughed in my face, senor. He put me outside the walls. I beat that



"You Will Help Me, Senor?"

gave until my fingers bled. I remembered the kind face of the senor, and then I came here. You will help me, senor?"

Rickard shook his head. "I shall have to look into this thing. If this is true it's prison for your husband. You won't have to fear Lupe."

"When he gets out he will kill me, senor."

The terror was seizing her again. Before she could begin her pleading he called to MacLean.

"Ask Ling to find a tent for Senora Maldonado. Tell him to give her a

good meal."

He must trap the rogue. That infernal place must be closed. The woman had come in the nick of time. Those tribes were to be guarded as restless children.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Rickard Makes a New Enemy and a New Friend.

The coming of the Indians gave the impetus the work had lacked. Under the auspices of the railroad company a large force was put on the river; these, the weavers of the brush mattresses that were to line the river bed. On the banks were the brush cutters; tons of willows were to be cut to weave into the forty miles of woven wire cable waiting for the cross strands. Day by day the piles of willow branches grew higher, the brush cutters working ahead of the mattress workers in the stream. In the dense undergrowth the stolid Indians, Pimas and Maricopas and Papagoes, struggled with the fierce thorns of the mesquite and the overpowering smell of the arrowweed. As tough as the bickery handles they wielded, they fought a clearing through dense thickets in the intense tropic heat.

Down stream the Brodingtonian arm of the dredge fell into the mud of the by-pass, dropping its sily burden on the far bank. Down the long stretch of levee the "skinner" drove their mules and serapes; two pile drivers were setting in the treacherous stream the piles which were to anchor the steel-cabled mattresses to the river bed. It was a well-organized, active scene. Rickard, in his office, dictating letters and telegrams to MacLean, Jr., felt his first satisfaction. Things were beginning to show the result of months of planning. Cars were rushing in from north and east; every quarry between Los Angeles and Tucson requisitioned for their undertaking.

A shadow fell on the pine desk. Ling, in blue ticking shirt and white butcher apron, waited for the "boss" to look up. He stood wiping the perspiration from his head, hairless except for the long silk-tapered queue.

"Well, Ling?"

"I go tamale." His voice was soft as silk. "I no stay."

It was a thunderclap. There was no one to replace Ling, who was drawing down the salary of a private secretary. Lose Ling? It would be more demoralizing to the camp than to lose an engineer.

"Money all life. Bossee all life. No likee woman. Woman she stay, Ling go."

"Mrs. Hardin!" Rickard woke up. "She all time makee trouble. She crazy. She think woman vallee fine cook. She show Ling cookee plines. Teechee Ling cookee plines! I no stay that woman." Unutterable finality in the leathern face. Rickard and MacLean, Jr., exchanged glances which deepened from concern into perplexity. They could not afford to lose Ling. And offend Mrs. Hardin, the camp already Hardinesque?

Rickard grew placating. He spent a half hour wheedling. They met at the starting place. "Ling go tamale."

"Oh, Lord," groaned the manager, capitulating. "All right, Ling."

With the dignity of an oriental prince, Ling pattered out of the tent, Rickard was puckering his lips at his secretary. "I'd rather take castor oil."

A half hour later, MacLean saw his chief leave his tent. He was in fresh linens.

"I wouldn't swap places with him this minute! She'll be as mad as a wet hen!"

Mrs. Hardin, from her bed by her screen window, saw him coming. She slipped into a semineglect of alternate rows of lice and swiss constructed for such possible emergencies. She did not make the mistake of smoothing her hair; her instinct told her that the fluffy disorder bore out the use of the negligee. She was sewing in her ramada when Rickard's knock sounded on the screen door.

Despite his protests she started water boiling in her chafing dish. He had not time for tea, he declared, but she insisted on making this call of a social nature. She opened a box of sugar wafers, her zeal that of a child with a toy kitchen; she was playing doll's house.

Rickard made several openings for his errand, but her wits sped like a gopher from his labored digging. She met his mood with womanly dignity; she tutored her coquetries, withheld her archness.

He found he would have to discard diplomacy, blunt out his message; use bludgeons for this scampering agility. "My mission is a little awkward, Mrs. Hardin. I hope you will take it all right, that you will not be offended."

"Offended?" Her face showed alarm.

"It's about Ling. He's a queer fellow; they all are, you know." He was blundering like a schoolboy under the growing shadow in Gerty's blue eyes. "They resent authority—that is, from women. He is a tyrant, Ling is."

"Yes?" Ah, she would not help him. Let him flounder!

"He wants to be let alone; he doesn't appreciate your kind help, Mrs. Hardin."

"Oh!" Her eyes were hot with tears—angry tears. She could not speak or would not. She sat in her spoiled doll's house, all her pleasure in her toy dishes, her prettyinery, ruined. He could not care if he could humiliate her so. It was the most vivid moment of her life. Not even when Rickard had left her, with his zigzag still warm on her lips, had she

felt so outraged. He was treating her as though she were a servant—discharging her—because she was the wife of Hardin. Her eyes grew black with anger; she hated them both; between them, their jealousy, their rivalry, what had they made of her life? She remembered the woman she had seen in the ramada; she had heard that the Mexican was in camp, employed by Rickard. Her thoughts were like swarming hornets.

"He's an ungrateful beast, Mrs. Hardin. I told him I would not let you waste your kindness one instant longer—"

Oh, she understood! A bitter pleasure to see him so confused. Rickard, before whose superior appraisal she had so often wilted! She would not help him out, never! She rose when he paused. He thanked her for meeting him half way, and her smile was inscrutable.

"So I'm discharged?"

"You can't be discharged if you've never been employed, can you? Thank you once again, and for your tea. It was delicious. I wish Ling would give us tea like that."

Boorish, all of it, and blundering! Why wouldn't he go? When he had hurt her so! had hurt her so!

Her hand met his, but not her eyes. If he did not go quickly something would happen; he would see her crying. The angels that guard blunders got Rickard out of the tent without a suspicion of threatening tears. She threw off her negligee and the pale blue slip; the tears must wait for that. Then she flung herself on her bed and shook it with the grief of wounded vanity.

That evening the chief had a visitor. The wife of Maldonado, some of the fear pressed out of her eyes, brought in his laundered khakis, socks, darned and mended; all the missing buttons replaced.

"I haven't worn a matched sock," he told her, "for months. That's great, senora."

He wanted to get to bed, but she lingered. She wanted to talk to him about her troubles; he had cautioned her against talking about them in camp, so she overflowed to him whenever she found a chance—about Maldonado, the children, Lupe. It was getting wearying, but he could not shove the poor thing out.

Senora Maldonado gave a sharp intake of breath, an aborted scream. Rickard, too, saw a man's figure outside the screen door. The Mexican woman pressed a frightened hand to her heart. Of course it was the vengeful Maldonado—he would kill her—

"If I am intruding," it was the voice of Hardin.

"Come right in," welcomed Rickard. "Get along, senora." The Maldonado slipped out into the night, her hand still against her heart.

Hardin, a roll of maps under his arm, entered with a rough sneer on his face. A dramatic scene, that, he had interrupted! And Rickard, who did not like to have women in camp. White women!

Rickard, still sleepy, asked him to sit down.

"I wanted to speak to you about those concrete aprons. They tell me you've given an order not to have them."

Rickard resigned himself to a long argument. It was three o'clock when Hardin let him turn in.

When he was getting ready for bed he remembered the melodramatic

scene Hardin had entered upon. He stared comprehendingly at the screen door—seeing with understanding Hardin's coarse sneer—the Maldonado, breathing fast, her hand over her heart. "Of course he'll think—good lord, these people will make me into an old woman! I don't care what the whole caboodle of them think!"

Five minutes after blowing out his candle he was deeply sleeping.

CHAPTER XXV.

Smudge.

From her tent, where she was writing a letter that lagged somehow, Innes Hardin had seen Rickard go to her sister's tent. She did not need to analyze the sickness of sight that watched the dancing step acknowledge its intention. It meant wretchedness, for Tom. At a time when he most needed gentleness and sympathy rased as he was by his humiliations and disappointments—how could any woman be so cruel? As for Rickard, he was beneath contempt—if it were true, Gerty's story, told in shrugs and dashes. She had flitted him for Tom; and this his revenge? She had not known that she had such feeling as the thought roused in her. It proved what the blood tie is, this tigerish passion sweeping through her, as her eyes watched that closed tent—it was for love for Tom, pity for Tom. Sex honor—why, Gerty did not know the meaning of the words!

How long would it be before Tom would see what every one else was seeing? What would he do when he knew? Hating Rickard already, bitter as he was—

She was not so biased as he. She could see why Marshall had had to reorganize. Estrada had shown her; and MacLean. Her sense of justice had done the rest. Rickard had proved his efficiency; the levee, the camp, the military discipline all showed the general. Whether he were anything of an engineer, time would tell that. It was a long call he was making! Suppose Tom were to come back? She must watch for him—make some excuse to pelt him in if he should come back before that other went—Hateful, such eavesdropping! A prisoner to that man's gallivanting!

For an instant she did not recognize the figure outside Gerty's tent. Her

ears saw Tom. She reached the screen door in time to see Rickard lift his hat to a disappearing flurry of ruffles. Angry eyes watched Rickard's step swing him away.

From the levee that day, she had a glimpse of the Mexican woman on her knees by the river, rubbing clothes against a smooth stone. A pile of tight-wring socks lay on the bank. Innes stood and watched her.

"I must remember to speak of her to Gerty," she determined. "She probably does not know that there is a washerwoman in camp."

It was a week later before she remembered to speak of the Mexican woman "who could wash." The two women were on their way to their tents from the mess breakfast. Senora Maldonado was leaving MacLean's tent with a large bundle of used clothes under her arm.

"She washes for the men. I'm going to ask her to do my khakis for me. Perhaps this woman would be willing to do all our laundry?"

Gerty had been wondering what she would say to Innes. The speech which needed only an introduction was jarred into the open.

"You must not," her voice trembled with anger. "You must not ask that woman. She is not to be spoken to."

The girl asked her bluntly what she meant.

"You must not give her your washing—must not speak to her, I've not mentioned it before. I—I hoped it would not be necessary. Tom told me not to speak of it."

"Tom told you not to speak of it? Not to speak of what?"

"You must have observed—Mr. Rickard?"

The girl's ear did not catch the short pause. "Observed Mr. Rickard?"

"The coolness between us. I scarcely speak to him. I don't wish to speak to him."

When had all this happened, Innes demanded of herself? Had she been asleep, throwing pity from outraged dreams?

"I won't countenance a common affair like that." Her eyes, sparkling with anger, suggested jealous wrath to Innes, who had her first hint of the

story. She had learned never to tell the face value of her sister's verdict; it was only a symbol of value; it stood for something else.

The yellow eyes were on the dredge bucket as it swung across the channel but they did not register. She was angry, outraged; she did not know with whom. With Gerty for telling her with Rickard, with life that lets such things be. She jumped up. "Oh, stop it!" She rushed out of the tent, followed by a strange bitter smile that brought age to the face of Gerty Hardin.

In her own tent, Innes found excuse for her lack of self-control. She did not like the color of scandal; she hated smudge. Gerty had said the whole camp knew it; knew why the Mexican woman was in camp! She did not trust Gerty in anything she why should she trust her in that? She would forget Gerty's gossip.

But she remembered it vividly week as she washed her own khakis as she bent over the ironing board! Gerty's sweltering "kitchenette." She thought of it as she returned Rickard's bow in the mess tent the next morning; each time they met she thought of it. And it was in her mind when she met Senora Maldonado by the river one day, and made a sudden wide curve to avoid having to speak to her.

(To be continued next week.)

The world is now probably safe for democracy, but it remains to be seen how safe it may be for Bolshevism.

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