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CHAPTER XXVI.

Time the Umpire.

The river was low; its yellow waters bore the look of oriental duplicity. Each day was now showing its progress. The two ends of the trestle were creeping across the stream from their brush aprons. A few weeks of work, at the present rate, and the gap would be closed, Hardin's big gate in it; the by-pass ready; the trap set for the Colorado. The tensity of a last spurt was in the air.

It was inspiring activity, this pitting of man's cumulative skill against an elemental force. No Caucasian mind which did not tingle, feel the privileged thrill of it. To the stolid native this day of well-paid toil was his millennium, the fulfillment of the prophecy. His gods had so spoken. Food for his stomach, liquor for his stupefaction; the white man's money laid in a brown hand each Sunday morning was what the great gods forespoke. The completion of the work, the white man's victory, would be an end of the fat time. Hasten? Why should they, and shorten their day of opportunity?

Between the two camps oscillated Colonel, silently squatting near the whites, jabbering his primitive Esperanto to the tribes. His friendship with the white chiefs, his age and natural leadership gave him a unique position in both camps. Assiduously, Rickard cultivated the old Indian who crouched days through by the bank of the river.

The engineers felt the whip of excitement. Never a man left the camp in the morning who did not look toward that span crawling across the treacherous stream, measure that widened by-pass. Would the gate stand? The Hardin men hallooed for the gate, but looked each morning to see if it were still there. The Reclamation Service men and the engineers of the railroad were openly skeptical; Sisypus outcome at his own game! Estrada and Rickard looked furiously at the gate, with doubt at each other.

Hardin, himself, was repressed, an eager live wire. His days he spent on the river; his nights, long hours of them, open-eyed, on his back, watching the slow-wheeling, star-pricked dome of desert sky. His was the suspense of the man on trial; this was his trial; Gerry, Rickard, the valley, his judge and jury. The gate grew to be a symbol with him of restored honor, an obsession of desire. It must be all right!

Richard was all over the place. "Watching every piece of rock that's dumped in the river," complained Wooster. "Believe he narries them at night!"

They were preparing for the final rush. In a week or two, the work would be continuous, night shifts to begin when the rock-pouring commenced. Large lamps were being suspended across the channel, acetylene whose candlepower was that of an arc light. Soon there would be no night at the break. When the time for the quick coup would come, the dam must be closed without break or slip. One mat was down, dropped on the floor that had already swallowed two such gigantic mouthfuls; covered with rock; pinned down to the slippery bottom with piles. Another mat was ready to drop; rock was waiting to be poured over it; the deepest place in the channel was reduced from fifteen to seven feet. Each day the overpour, anxiously measured, increased. A third steam shovel had been added; the railroad sent in several work trains fully equipped for service; attracted by the excitement, the hoboes were commencing to come in.

It was a battle of big numbers, a duel of great force where time was the umpire. Any minute hot weather might fall on those snowy peaks up yonder, and the released waters, rushing down, would tear out the defenses as a wave breaks over a child's fort made of sand. This was a race, and all knew it. A regular train dispatch system was in force that the rushing cars might drop their burden of rock and gravel and be off after more. The Dragon was being fed rude meals, its appetite whetted by the glint of pausing rock.

Tod Marshall came down from Tucson in his car. The coming of the Palmyra and Claudia rippled the social waters at the front for days ahead. Gerry Hardin, too proud to well her astonished family that she wanted to desert the mess tent, shook herself from her injury, and "dild up" all her lingerie gowns. Mrs. Marshall was not going to patronize her, even if her husband had snubbed Tom. It was hot, broiling in her tent, the doors closed. Everything carried a sting

with hot vanity. Twice, she had openly encouraged Rickard; twice, he had flogged her. That was his kind! Men who prefer Mexicans—! She would never forgive him, never!

She followed devious channels to involve Tom's responsibility. There was a cabal against the wife of Hardin. Working like a servant! she called it necessity. Everything, every one published her for that one act of folly. Life had caught her. She saw no way, as she ironed her mull ruffles, no way out of her cage. Her spirit beat wild wings against her bars. If she could see a way out! Nothing to do but to stay with Tom!

Maddening, too, that at the mess table, she caught Rickard's eyes turning toward, resting on, Innes Hardin. The girl herself did not seem to notice—artful, subterranean, such stalking! That was why she had come running back to the heading! That the reason of her anger when she had hinted of the Maldonado. She learned to hate Innes. Bitterly she hated Rickard. "Tom," she said one day. He turned with a swift thrill of expecta-



Angry Eyes Watched Rickard.

tion, for her voice sounded kind; like the Gerry of old. "I have always heard that Mr. Marshall had terribly strict ideas. I think he ought to hear of that Mexican woman. It is demoralizing in a camp like this."

"I tell Marshall anything against his pet clerk?" The Hardin lip shot out. "He'd throw me out of the company."

The pretty scene was spoiled. To his dismay, she burst into a storm of tears, tears of self-pity. Her life lay in tatters at her feet, the pretty fabric rent, torn between the rude handling of those two men. She could not have reasoned out her injury, made it convincing, built out of dreams as it was, heartless, scheming dreams. Because she could not tell it, her sobbing was the more violent, her complaints incoherent. Tom gathered enough fragments to piece the old story. "Ashamed of him. He had dragged her down into his humiliation." His sweet moment had passed.

He spent a few futile moments trying to comfort her. "Don't come near me." It burst from her; a cry of revulsion. He stared at her, the woman meeting his eyes in flushed defiance. The hatred which he saw, her bitterness, corroded his pride, scorched his self-love. Nothing would kill his love for her; he knew that in that blackest of moments. He would never forget that look of dread, of hate. He left her tent.

That night, the cot under the stars had no tenant. Hardin had it out with himself down the levee. That valley might fulfill Estrada's vision and his labor; might yield the harvest of happy homes; but his was not there. He had been the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Walk Home.

Claudia Marshall sat at the head of her stately table in the Palmyra, mute as a statue but for the burning eyes which followed her Tod. To Innes, her guest, it was a tragic presence, of brooding solitude.

Late hours, excitement, might abridge the life she so passionately policed; but she would not demand the sacrifice of his cigar.

Marshall's cigar followed the coffee. Tony, the white-capped Italian cook of the Palmyra, was removing the cups. Innes was carrying her double interest, listening to Tod Marshall's broad sweep, getting a new viewpoint as he minimized the local scheme—feeling that silent presence at the head of the table.

Then something drove Claudia from her mind. What Mr. Marshall had said swept a disturbing calcism on Tom. What if, truly, the river basin could be traced to that overzealous hand? To Tom, this undertaking blotted out the rest of related big endeavor; but that was not the way her host was looking at it. He was too courteous to give her discomfort; he had not said it directly. But always it met her, rose up to smite her, wherever she was. Was it not egotism, personal pride, that was making her cover her eyes, like any simple ostrich? Her brother—assume him anybody else's brother! The dredge basin—the wild night at the levee—no isolated accidents those, Hardin's luck!

A flush of miserable shame came to her. How they had all been trying to

slip out. "She would not interrupt their evening; Mr. Marshall had business to discuss—"

Mrs. Marshall would not hear of it. She said that Mr. Marshall would never forgive her if she let Miss Hardin go home alone. Her opposition was softly implacable.

Innes went back to the sitting room of the car angrily coerced. Rickard was still closeted, conversationally, with his superior.

At last, desperately, she rose to go. Of course, he must insist upon going with her. Of course!

"I was going back early, anyway. I'm to be up at dawn tomorrow."

The good-bys were said. She found herself walking rebelliously, by his side. "No, thank you!" to the offer of his arm.

The night was bright with stars. "Bright as day, isn't it?" Because her voice was curt, and she had not used his name, the rising infection helped a little! Hatred, to stumble over a rut in the road! Of course, he'd make her take his arm! Of course!

Rickard grasped her elbow. She walked along, her head high, her cheeks flaming, anger surging through her at his touch.

Stupid to press this companionship, this awkward silence on her. If he thought she was going to entertain him, as Gerry did, with her swift chatter, he'd be surprised! Any other two people would fall into easy give-and-take, but what could she, Innes Hardin, find to chatter about with this man stalking along, grimly grasping her arm? Close as they were, his touch reminding her every minute, between them walked her brother and her brother's wife—and there was the Mexican—hateful memory! Of course she could not be casual. And she would not force it. He had brought this about. Let him talk, then!

Oppressive that silence. Then it came to her that she would ask him the question that his coming had aborted. A glance at his face found him smiling. He found it amusing? Not for worlds, then, would she speak. And they strolled along. Unconsciously she had pulled herself away from him. He took her hand and put it in the crotch of his arm. "That's better," he said. She wondered if he were still smiling.

Their path led by his tent. Neither of them noticed a subdued light through the canvas walls. As they reached the place a figure darted from the door.

"Oh, senior, I thought you would never come." It was the wife of Maldonado. Her expression was lost on Innes. The face was quivering with terror.

"Mr. Rickard, Innes' words like icicles, 'I will leave you here. It is quite unnecessary to come farther.' Quite unvelled her meaning!

It came so quickly that he was not ready; nor indeed had Gerry's innuendoes yet speared him. But the situation was uncomfortable. He turned sharply to the Mexican.

"Come in," he took her roughly by the arm. She would wake up the camp with her crying. He put her in a chair. "Now tell your story." The woman had got to be a nuisance. He couldn't have her coming around like this. He had seen that look in the girl's eyes—"Murdered? Who did you say was murdered?"

She lifted a face, frightened into haggardness. "Maldonado and the girl."

The night was stripped to the bleak sky. "You found them?" Her face was lifted imploringly to him. "Oh, senior, it was not I. My Mother of Christ, it was not I."

Rickard was not sure. Her fear made him suspect her. "Who was it, you think?"

"Felipe," she gasped. "He got away from the rurales—he came back. He went home—there was no one there. Some one told him where she had gone. He came to Maldonado's, Juarez, the eldest, opened the gate. He was terrible, she said. He rushed past her. And when he came out his hands were red. The children heard cries. They were afraid to go in. I got there last night. I went in. They were not quite cold—I was afraid to stay. It would look like me, senior. Will they take me, senior?" She was a wreck of terror.

"Not if what you tell me is true. Now, get to bed. I'll give you something that will make you sleep." He hustled her out and prepared the draught.

He wondered as he got into bed as to the truth of her story. Disgusting, such animal terror! Awkward noise, that. Fate seemed possessed to queer him with those Hardins!

"Can I talk shop for a while?" asked Rickard.

They withdrew to a cushioned window seat. Innes had found her chance. She asked to be shown over the car. Innes complied her plan. She wanted

to slip out. "She would not interrupt their evening; Mr. Marshall had business to discuss—"

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to Mack Bennett. There are con-

gressmen who ought to be writing subtitles for two-reel screams.

Commissioner Haas informs The Times-Herald that he has recently received a telegram from the State Highway Commission in which it is stated that the Burns-Lawen project will be advertised for bids at the July 8 meeting of the commission.

Everything around home has become too high for belief. Now hotel rates have gone up, and many a man

has lost his last refuge from home-

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