

The RIVER

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

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WITH HARDIN GONE, HIS AIDS DISORGANIZED, WHAT WILL RICKARD SAY? INNES ACTS TO SAVE HER BROTHER'S FACE.

Synopsis.—K. C. Rickard, an engineer of the Overland Pacific, is sent by President Marshall to stop the ravages of the Colorado river in the Imperial valley, a task at which Thomas Hardin, head of the Desert Reclamation company, has failed. Rickard foresees embarrassment because he knows Hardin, who was a student under him in an eastern college, married Gerty Holmes, with whom Rickard once thought himself in love. At the company offices at Calexico Rickard finds the engineers loyal to Hardin and hostile to him. He meets Mr. and Mrs. Hardin and Innes Hardin, the former's half sister. Innes is bitter against Rickard for supplanting her brother. Hardin discovers that Rickard is planning a levee to protect Calexico and puts him down as incompetent. Gerty thinks her husband jealous. Gerty invites Rickard to dinner and there plans a "progressive ride" in his honor. Rickard pushes work on the levee and is ordered by Marshall to "take a fighting chance" on the completion of Hardin's pet project, a gate to shut the break in the river. In the midst of Gerty Hardin's progressive ride, which is begun despite a terrific wind and dust storm, word comes that the river is raging and every man is wanted on the levee.

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 Mexcall. "Rickard had a bunch of Indians working for a week."

The confusion of the shy fellow did not escape Hardin. Oh, he knew what Bodefeldt was thinking, what every one was saying! They were all laughing at him. The coincidence of this extraordinary flood had upheld Rickard's wild guess, haloed his judgment. It was all a piece of his infernal luck. Slickening, that's what it was! His orders scattered. He ran up and down the levee, giving orders; recalling them when he found he was repeating Rickard's.

This new humiliation, coming on the heels of the dredge fiasco, put him in execrable temper. He shouted his orders over the noise of the night. He raved the men, bullied them. No one did anything right! Lord, what he had to put up with! The other men, the ranchers and engineers, saw in his excitement certainty of the valley's doom.

The wind and the darkness contributed to the confusion. Eager shovels were tossing up earth before anyone could tell where the danger point would be. The water was not yet high enough to determine the place of battle. Sacked sand was being brought over from Mexcall. Fifty pair of hands made short work of Rickard's "hill." Lanterns were flashing through the darkness like restless fireflies. The wind and rushing water deepened the sound of the voices. It was a battle of giants against pygmies. In the darkness, the giants threatened to conquer.

At three in the morning, a horseman rode in from Fasset's, one of the big ranches to the north, out by the New river.

"The river is cutting back," he called through the din, "cutting back toward the towns."

A turn in the gorge, a careless dump-pit had pulled the river like a mad horse back on its haunches. It was kicking back.

"They are short-handed up there. They need help."

"Dynamite," cried Silent and Hardin antiphonally. They happened to be standing near.

"We must have dynamite," bawled Hardin. "Are the wires down between here and Brawley? We must get a wire somehow to Los Angeles, to rush it down here this morning."

"It's here. There is a carload on the siding," yelled Silent.

Hardin did not need to ask by whose orders it was there. An angry scowl spoiled his face.

"Put some on the machine." He was turning away.

Silent called after him. Did Mr. Hardin think it was safe? There was no road between the towns and Fasset's. The night, the explosive—should they not wait till morning? The question threw his late chief into a rage.

"Did I ask you to take it?" It was the opening for his fury. "Safe! Will the towns be safe if the river cuts back here? The channel has got to be widened, and you talk of your own precious skin! Wait till I ask you to take it. Get out the machine. I'll take it to Fasset's myself."

Silent left the levee, smarting. He backed the machine out of the shed and sped through the darkness toward Mexcall, where the car of explosives was isolated.

Hardin, buttoned up to the ears, his soft hat pulled tight over his forehead, was waiting impatiently. Here was something to be done; he coveted the activity.

"I thought you were never coming," he grumbled.

"Let me take it!" pleaded the engineer.

"Nonsense, there is no danger," Hardin saw personal affection in the plea. He put his hand affectionately on the man's shoulder.

"You go home and catch a nap; this is my job." He was standing on the step. "Crack her."

There was nothing for Silent to do but to get out. Hardin pointed the long nose of the car into the darkness. She was off like the greyhound she suggested, missing a telegraph pole by half an inch.

"Who is in charge here?" a woman's voice was piercing the racket of wind and wave.

The dawn was breaking. Down the New river he could see the wind whip-



She Collided With a Man.

ping the water into whitecaps of fury. "Vicious," he muttered. "Those heavy waves play the Old Harry with the levee."

"Where is my brother?"

"Miss Hardin!" cried Silent.

"Where is he?" demanded Innes. Her hair streamed away from her face. Her cheeks were blanched. Her yellow eyes, peering into the dusk, looked owlish. Her wind-spangled skirts clung to her limbs. To Silent she looked boyish, as though clipped and trousered. "Where is my brother?" she repeated.

Silent told her without reservations where he had gone and why. There was no feminine foolishness about that sister of Hardin's. A chip of the old block. Funny, the men all thought of her as Hardin's daughter on account of the difference of age. As to a comrade, proudly, he bragged of the taking of the dynamite over that roadless waste.

"Whom did he leave in his place?"

Silent knew, only, that he himself was not in charge! Hardin had ordered him to bed.

"Maybe Mr. Estrada?" she hazarded.

"He is not here, he went down the road to look after the track. Hardin went off in such a hurry, I guess he told nobody," chuckled the engineer, still glowing.

"Then I'm it!" cried Innes Hardin.

"Will you take my orders, Silent?"

"Sure," he chuckled again.

Through the rush of the wind and water came the whistle of a locomotive.

"A special!" cried Silent. Hardin's 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 seal 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 Salton. 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, 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 Mexcall, 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 Fasset'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," gibbled 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.

CHAPTER XVI.

Rickard in Town.

The town woke to a matter-of-fact day. The sensational aspect of the runaway river had passed with the night. The word spread that the flood waters were under control; that the men had gone home to sleep, so the women got breakfast as usual, and tidied their homes. The Colorado was always breaking out, like a naughty child from school. Never would the cry of "The river!" fail to drag the blood from their cheeks. But relief always came; and the threatened danger was always averted, and these pioneer women had acquired the habit of swift reaction.

That afternoon, Mrs. Youngberg was to entertain at the A B C ranch the ladies of the Improvement club. It was a self-glorification meeting, to celebrate the planting of trees in the streets of Calexico, and to plan the campaign of their planting. Mrs. Bilan drove into town to get Gerty Hardin. Neither woman had seen her husband since the interrupted drive the night before.

"I don't know whether I should go," Mrs. Hardin hesitated, her face turned toward the A B C ranch. "Perhaps there is something we could do."

"I have just come from the levee," Mrs. Bilan's jolly face had lost its apprehension. "The water has not risen an inch since breakfast. Most of the men have been sent home. When Howard didn't come home to lunch, I grew anxious. But Mr. Rickard says he sent him to Fasset's with more dynamite."

"There he is," thrilled Gerty. Mrs. Bilan's eye swept the street. "Where? Your husband?"

"No, Mr. Rickard. Passing the bank. There, he's stopped. I wonder if he is going in? You call him, Mrs. Bilan."

Obediently her friend hailed Rickard. He turned back to the windy street. He felt boyish; the crisis was giving him mercurial feet. He loved the modern battle. Elements to pit one's brains against, wits against force!

Gerty Hardin's face was flushing and paling. "The river," she faltered. "Should we be alarmed, Mr. Rickard?"

Smiling, he assured her she should not be alarmed; the levees would protect the towns.

"Mr. Hardin is up at Fasset's ranch, he will be coming back today. I told your husband, Mrs. Bilan, to catch a nap and then relieve Mr. Hardin."

Gerty found a significance in his words. He had said "Mr. Hardin," and "your husband, Mrs. Bilan." It was enough to weave dreams around.

"We can't do anything, Mr. Rickard, to help," urged Gerty Hardin, her voice tremulous.

"I hope we won't have to call on you at all."

There was no excuse to linger. Gerty threw a wistful little smile at parting.

CHAPTER XVII.

Opposition.

The second night of the flood, the women of the towns dragged brush and filled sacks for the men to carry. It was past midnight when Innes Hardin left the levee. While her feet and fingers had toiled, her mind had been fretting over Tom. Two nights, and no rest! It was told by men who came down the river how Hardin was heroically laboring. She yearned to go to him; perhaps he would stop for a few hours to her entreaty. But an uncertain trail across country, with the dust-laden wind in her face? She decided to wait for the dawn. A snatched sleep first, but who would call her? She would sleep for hours, so weary every muscle. Her mind fixed on Sam as the only man in town who had time to saddle a horse for a woman.

She went in search of him. She found that the long adobe office building had already taken on the look of defeat, of ruin. The casements had been torn from the partitions; the doors and windows were out. The furniture had been hauled up to high ground farther away for safety. She went hunting through the ghoully gloom for the darky, turning her lantern in every dark corner. She knew that she would find him sleeping.

Then she heard steps on the veranda. She ran toward them, expecting to see Sam. She swung her lantern full on two figures mounting the shallow steps. Rickard was with her sister-in-law.

"Oh, excuse me!" she blurted blunderingly. Of course Gerty would take a wrong intention from the stupid words!

The blue eyes met those of Innes with defiance. It was as though she had spoken: "Well, think what you will of it, you Hardins! I don't care what you think of me!"

What indeed did she think of it? Why should she feel like the culprit before these two, her words deserting her? It was Gerty's look that made her feel guilty, as though she had been spying. To meet them together, here at midnight, why should not they feel ashamed? She had done nothing wrong. And Tom down yonder fighting—and they make his absence a cover for their rendezvous.

"I'm looking for Sam!" The effort behind the words turned them into an oratorical challenge.

"So are we. I want to send him home with Mrs. Hardin. She's worn out."

"She can go home with me. I am going directly. As soon as I give a message to Sam." She instantly regretted her words, abruptly halting. It came



Rickard Was With Her Sister-in-law.

to her that Rickard would insist upon delivering her message. Of course, he would oppose her going. Some petty reason or other. She knew from the men that he was oppositional, that he liked to show his power. Not safe, he would say, or the horse was needed, or Sam too busy to wait on her!

"You cannot go home alone, you two. The town is full of strange Indians. Give me your lantern, Miss Hardin; I'll rout out that darky." Rebelliously she gave him the lan-

tern. The light turned full on her averted angry eyes.

A haughty Thusnelda followed him. Sam was discovered asleep in the only room where the windows had not yet been attacked. His head rested on a bundle of sacked trees which the ladies of the Improvement club had planned to plant the next day. Deep snores betrayed his refuge.

"Here, Sam! I want you to take these ladies home. Chase yourself. They've been working while you've slept, I thought you'd have all these windows out by now."

Gerty had to supply the courtesy for two. She told Mr. Rickard in her appealing way that he had been very kind; that she "would have been frightened to death to go home alone."

Innes had to say something! "Good-night!" The words had an insulting ring.

The wind covered a passionate silence, as the two women, followed by Sam, yawning and stretching, made their way down the shrieking street. "It was true," Innes was thinking. She had at last stumbled on the rascal, but it was not a matter of personal, but moral untidiness; not a carelessness of pins or plates, or tapes or dishes. It was far worse; a slackness of ethics. It meant more unhappiness for Tom.

Her aching muscles told her that she could not have slept four hours when the darky was back, knocking at her door.

Innes' horse loped through the silent streets.

"I'll run past the levee; perhaps Tom has come back." It occurred to her that there might be a message at the hotel. She pulled on her left rein, and swept past the deserted adobe.

As she reined in her horse, Rickard stepped out on the sidewalk. He, too, was heavy-eyed from a snatched nap.

"Were you looking for me?"

The scorn in the girl's face told him that his question was stupid. For him!

"Has my brother come back?"

He said he did not know. "You can see I have been dreaming!" She would not smile back at him, but rode off toward the levee.

Was this the river? West of the levee, a sea of muddy water spread over the land. There was yet a chance to save the towns, the town, she corrected herself, as her eye fell on the Mexican village across the ditch. For Mexcall was doomed. Some of the mud huts had already fallen; the water was running close to the station house.

She saw Wooster standing near, calculating the distance, the time, perhaps, before the new station would go. She halted Wooster. Ruin was pre- saged in the lines of his forehead.

"Pretty bad?" she cried.

He shook his head.

"Is Tom back?"

"He's over there, now. Fighting like all possessed. He'll work till he drops." Wooster was proud of that method.

"We all know Tom!" Her pride sprang up. "But he's got to stop for a while. I'm going up after him."

"Not if my name's Wooster. I'll go. He'll mind me."

She watched the flowing river, swollen with wreckage. She saw, with comprehension, a section of a fence; somebody's crop gone. There was a railway tie, another! The river was eating up Estrada's new roadbed? A cry broke from her as a mesquit on the coffee-colored tide caught on a buried snag. The current whirled dangerously around it. Instantly, the water rose toward the top of the levee. Men came running to pry away the tree. A minute later, it was dancing down the stream. They raised the bank against the pressing lapping waves. There, the tree had struck again. They ran down the levee with their long poles. Each time that happened, unless the obstruction were swiftly dislodged, she knew it meant an artificial fall somewhere, a quick scouring out of the channel. The men were working like silent parts of a big machine; the confusion of the first night was gone. From their faces one would not guess that their fortunes, their homes, hung on the subduing of that indomitable force which had not yet known defeat, which had turned back explorer and conquistador. Ah, there was the lurking fear of it! Victory still lay to its credit; the other column was blank.

She saw Wooster coming toward her. His snapping black eyes shot out sparks of anger.

"He won't let me go."

"Who won't let you?" But she knew.

"Casey. Says he'll send some one else. I said as nobody else'd make Hardin stop. He said as that was up to Hardin."

Of course, he wouldn't let Wooster go!

"Orders me to bed," spat Wooster. "Wonder why he didn't order gravel, too. It's spite, antagonism to Hardin, that's what it is!" She believed that, too. Tom was right. Rickard did take advantage of his authority.

She did not see Rickard until he stood by her side.

"I'm sorry not to spare Wooster, Miss Hardin. But there's stiff work ahead. He's got to be ready for a call. If Hardin insists on spoiling one good soldier, that's his affair. I can't let him spoil two."

Wooster shrugged, and left them. "Spitting good soldiers!"

"I've taken Bodefeldt off duty. I told him to relieve Hardin."

Bodefeldt who blushed when anyone looked at him! He would be about as persuasive to Tom as a veil to a desert wind! She turned away, but not before Rickard saw again that transforming anger. Her eyes shone like topazes in sunlight. She would not trust herself to speak. Wooster was

waiting for her. Rickard could hear the man repeat. "I'm sorry, Miss Hardin. It's an outrage. That's what it is."

Queer, they couldn't see that it was Hardin's fault; Hardin who was up the river fighting like a melodramatic hero; fighting without caution or reserve, demoralizing discipline; he couldn't help admiring the bulldog energy, himself. That was what all these men adored. He'd clenched the girl's antagonism, now, for sure! How her eyes had flashed at him!

Hello! There was a tree floating down toward the station house. . . . "Bring your poles!" he yelled.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Passing of the Waters.

Babeock came rushing down from Los Angeles that morning to see what in thunder it was all about. He asked every one he met why some one didn't get busy and stop the cutting back of that river? There was no one at the offices of the company to report to



"Orders Me to Bed."

him! Why, the building was deserted. Ogilvie's letters had prophesied ruin. It all looked wrong to him. Going on to the levee, he met MacLean, Jr., who was coming away. The boy told him vaguely that he would find Rickard around there, somewhere.

"I'll hunt him up for you."

"Why, they are letting it get ahead of them!" Babeock's manner suggested that he was aggrieved that such carelessness to his revered company should go unpunished. Something, he told MacLean, might have been done before the situation got as bad as this!

His excited stride carried him across the dividing ditch, which now was carrying no water, into Mexcall. MacLean had to lengthen his step to keep pace with him. The havoc done to the Mexican village excited Babeock still more.

Estrada, just in from his submerged tracks, was lounging against an adobe wall. His pensive gaze was turned up-stream. The posture of exhaustion suggested laziness to Babeock, who was on the hunt for responsibility. He was more than ever convinced that the right thing was not being done.

"Estrada!"

Estrada took his eyes from the river. Babeock looked like a snapping terrier taking the ditch at a bound. MacLean, Jr., a lithe greyhound, followed.

"What the devil are you doing to stop this?" A nervous hand indicated the Mexican station gleaming in its fresh coat of paint; to the muddy water undermining its foundation.

Estrada drew a cigarette out of his pocket; lighted it before answering.

"Not a thing. What do you suggest?"

A big wave struck the bank. The car on the siding trembled.

"Another wave like that and that car'll go over," cried Babeock, jumping mad. "Why don't you do something? Why don't you hustle—all of you?" He would report this incompetency.

Down the stream came a mass of debris, broken timbers, ravaged brush, a wrenched fence post, a chicken coop. A red hen, clinging to its swaying ship, took the rapids.

"Hustle—what?" murmured Estrada.

Babeock glared at him, then at the river. His eye caught the approaching wreckage. Men came running with their poles. The caving bank was too far gone. The instant the drifting mass struck it, there was a shudder of falling earth, the car toppled toward the flood waters, the waves breaking into clouds of spray.

Human responsibility fell to a cipher. The river's might was magnificent. Even Babeock, come to carp, caught the excitement. "Come, MacLean," he cried. "Watch this! The station's going!" He joined Estrada by the adobe wall.

"Have a cigarette?" murmured Eduardo.

What will the valley do? Facing tremendous losses if it does not push the damage suits filed against the railroad, it faces utter ruin if the railroad abandons the fight against the river. Marshall puts the issue squarely up to the ranchers, but is he bluffing? Go on with the story in the next issue of this paper.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)