The Land of Broken Promises

By DAN COOLIDGE
Author of
"The Fighting Fool," "Hidden Waters," "The Texican," etc.
Illustrations by DON J. LAVIN

(Previously Continued)

CHAPTER XXIII.

There are two things, according to the saying, which cannot be recalled—the sped arrow and the spoken word. Whether spoken in anger or in jest, our winged thoughts will not come back to us and, where there is no balm for the wound we have caused, there is nothing to do but let it heal.

Bud Hooker was a man of few words, and slow to speak ill of anyone, but some unfamiliar devil had loosened his tongue and he had told the worst about Phil. Certainly if a man were the bravest of the brave, certainly if he loved his girl more than life itself—he would not be content to hide above the line and pour out his soul on note-paper. But to tell it to the girl—that was an unpardonable sin!

Still, now that the damage was done, there was no use of vain repining, and after cursing himself whole-heartedly Bud turned in for the night. Other days were coming; there were favors he might do; and perhaps, as the yesterdays went by, Gracia would forgive him for his plain speaking. Even tomorrow, if the rebels came back for more, he might square himself in action and prove that he was not a coward. A coward!

It had been a long time since anyone had used that word to him, but after the way he had knifed "dear Phil" he had to admit he was it. But "dear Phil!" It was that which had set him off.

If she knew how many other girls—but Bud put a sudden quietus on that particular line of thought. As long as the world stood and Gracia was in his sight he swore never to speak ill of De Lancey again, and then he went to sleep.

The men who guarded the casa grande slept uneasily on the porch, lying down like dogs on empty sugar-sacks that the women might not lack bedding inside. Even at that they were better off, for the house was close and feverish, with the crying of babies and the babbling of dreamers, and mothers moving to and fro.

It was a hectic night, but Bud slept it out, and at dawn, after the custom of his kind, he arose and stamped on his boots. The moist coolness of the morning brought the odor of wet greasewood and tropic blossoms to his nostrils as he stepped out to speak with the guards, and as he stood there waiting for the full daylight the master mechanic joined him.

He was a full-blooded, round-headed little man with determined views on life, and he began the day, as usual, with his private opinion of Mexicans. They were the same uncomplimentary remarks to which he had given voice on the day before, for the rebels had captured one of his engines and he knew it would come to some harm.

"A fine bunch of hombres, yes," he ended, "and may the devil fly away with them! They took No. 9 at the summit yesterday and I've been listening over since. Her pans are all burned out and we've been feeding her bran like a cow to keep her from leaking steam. If some ignorant Mex gets hold of her you'll hear a big noise—that'll be the last of No. 9—her boiler will burst like a wet bag.

"If I was running this road there'd be no more bran—not since what I saw over at Aguascalientes on the Central. One of those bum, renegade engine drivers had burned out No. 743, but the rebels had ditched four of our best and we had to send her out. Day after day the boys had been feeding her bran until she smelled like a distillery. The mash was oozing out of her as Ben Tyrrell pulled up to the station, and a friend of his that had come down from the north took one sniff and swung up into the cab.

"Ben came down at the word he whispered—for they'd two of 'em blowed up in the north—and they sent out another man. Hadn't got up the hill when the engine exploded and blew the poor devil to hell! I asked Tyrrell what his friend had told him, but he kept it to himself until he could get his time. It's the fumes, boy—they blow up like brandy—and old No. 9 is sour!

"She'll likely blow up, too. But how can we fix her with these ignorant Mexican mechanics? You should have been over at Aguas the day they fired the Americans.

"'No more Americanos,' says Madero, 'let 'em all out and hire Mexicans! The national railroads of Mexico must not be in the hands of foreigners.'

"So they fired us all in a day and put a Mexican wood-passer up in the cab of old No. 313. He started to pull a string of empties down the track, threw on the air by mistake, and stopped her on a dead center. Pulled out the throttle and she wouldn't go, so he gave it up and quit.

"Called in the master mechanic then—a Mexican. He tinkered with her for an hour, right there on the track, until she went dead on their hands. Then they ran down a switch engine and took back the cars and called on the roadmaster—a Mex. He cracked the nut—built a shoo-fly around No. 313 and they left her right there on the main track. Two days later an American hobo came by and set down and laughed at 'em. Then he throws off the brakes, gives No. 313 a boost past the center with a crowbar, and runs her to the roundhouse by gravity. When we left Aguas on a handcar that hobo was running the road.

"Ignorantest hombres in the world—these Mexicans. Shooting a gun or running an engine, it's all the same—they've got nothing above the eyebrows."

"That's right," agreed Bud, who had been craning his neck; "but what's that noise up the track?"

The master mechanic listened, and when his ears, dulled by the clangor of the shops, caught the distant roar he turned and ran for the house.

"Git up, Ed!" he called to the roadmaster, "they're sending a wild car down the canyon—and she may be loaded with dynamite!"

"Dynamite or not," mumbled the grizzled roadmaster, as he roused up from his couch, "there's a derailer I put in up at kilometer seventy the first thing yesterday morning. That'll send her into the ditch!"

Nevertheless he listened intently, cocking his head to guess by the sound when it came to kilometer seventy.

"Now she strikes it!" he announced, as the rumble turned into a roar; but the roar grew louder, there was a crash as the trucks struck a curve, and then a great metal ore-car swung round the point, rode up high as it hit the reverse and, speeding by as if shot from a catapult, swept through the yard; smashed into a freight car, and leaped, car and all, into the creek.

"They've sneaked my derailer!" said the roadmaster, starting on a run for the shops. "Who'll go with me to put in another one? Or we'll loosen a rail on the curve—that'll call for no more than a clawbar and a wrench!"

"I'll go!" volunteered Bud and the man who stood guard, and as startled sleepers roused up on every side and ran toward the scene of the wreck they dashed down the hill together and threw a handcar on the track.

Then, with what tools they could get together, and a spare derailer on the front, they pumped madly up the canyon, holding their breaths at every curve for fear of what they might see. If there was one runaway car there was another, for the rebels were beginning an attack.

Already on the ridges above them they could hear the crack of rifles, and a jet or two of dust made it evident that they were the mark. But with three strong men at the handles they made the handcar jump. The low hills fled behind them. They rounded a point and the open track lay before them, with something—

"Jump!" shouted the roadmaster, and as they tumbled down the bank they heard a crash behind them and their handcar was knocked into kindling wood.

It was a close call for all three men, and there had been but an instant between them and death, a death by the most approved fighting methods of the revolutionists, methods which kept the fighters out of harm's way.

"Now up to the track!" the roadmaster panted, as the destroyer swept on down the line. "Find some tools—we'll take out a rail!"

With frantic eagerness he toiled up the fill and attacked a fish-plate, and Bud and the young guard searched the hillside for tools to help with the work. They fell to with sledge and clawbar, tapping off nuts, jerking out spikes, and heaving to loosen the rail—and then once more that swift-moving something loomed up suddenly on the track.

"Up the hill!" commanded the roadmaster, and as they scrambled into a gulch a wild locomotive, belching smoke and steam like a fire engine, went rushing past them, struck the loose rail, and leaped into the creek bed. A moment later, as it crashed its way down to the water, there was an explosion that shook the hills. They crouched behind the cut bank, and the trees above them bowed suddenly to the slash of an iron hail.

"Dynamite!" cried the roadmaster, grinning triumphantly as he looked up after the shock; and when the fall of fragments had ceased, and they had fled as if by instinct from the place, they struck hands on their narrow escape. But back at the big house, with everybody giving thanks for their delivery from the powder train, the master mechanic raised a single voice of protest. He knew the sound. He knew that dynamite had not been responsible for the crash that smote the ears of the anxious listeners.

"'Twas not dynamite!" he yelled. "Powder train be damned! It was No. 9! She was sour as a distillery! She blowed up, I tell ye—she blowed up when she hit the creek!"

And even after a shower of bullets from the ridge had driven them all to cover he still rushed to those who would listen and clamored that it was the bran.

But there was scant time to hold a post-mortem on No. 9, for on the summit of a near-by ridge, and overlooking the black tank, the rebels had thrown up a wall in the night, and from the security of this shelter they were industriously shooting up the town.

The smash of the first wild car had been their signal for attack, and as the explosion threw the defenders into confusion they made a rush to take the tank. Here, as on the day before, was stationed the federal garrison, a scant twenty or thirty men in charge of a boy lieutenant.

Being practically out of ammunition he did not stand on the order of his going, but as his peones pelted past the superintendent's house the reorganized miners, their belts stuffed with cartridges from their own private stock, came charging up from the town and rallied them in the rear.

Trained by American leaders they were the only real fighting force to be depended upon unless the Americans themselves should take a hand in the game, and that they could not do without the possibility of serious international consequences, a chance they could not take except as a last resort to save the women and children and themselves.

In a solid, shouting mass they swept up the hill together, dropped down behind the defenses, and checked the astounded rebels with a volley. Then there was another long-range battle, with every sign of war but the dead,

Every Sign of War But the Dead.

until at last, as the firing slackened from the lack of cartridges, a white flag showed on the ridge above, and the leaders went out for a parley—one of those parleys so characteristic of Mexican revolutions, and which in reality mean so little, for both sides know that the words uttered are meaningless, and should one of them ever result in a surrender the terms of that surrender would not be regarded, once the victims were in the hands of the victors.

Properly speaking, Del Rey was in command of the town, but neither the federals nor the miners would recognize his authority and the leadership went by default. While they waited to hear the rebel demands the Americans took advantage of the truce to bring up hot food from the hotel, where Don Juan de Dios stood heroically at his post. Let bullets come and go, Don Juan kept his cooks about him, and to those who had doubted his valor his coffee was answer enough.

"Why, my gracious, Mr. Hooker," he railed, as Bud refreshed himself between trips, "ain't you going to take any up to those women? Don't drink so much coffee now, but give it to the men who fight!"

"Ump-um," grunted Bud with a grin; "they got a skinful of mescal already! What they need is another carload of ammunition to help 'em shoot their first rebel."

"I thought you said they wouldn't fight!" twitted Don Juan. "This is the battle of Fortuna that I was telling you about last week."

"Sure!" answered Bud, "and over there is the dead!"

He pointed to a riot of mescal bottles that marked the scene of the night's potations, and Don Juan gave him up as hopeless.

"A pile of bottles usually represents the casualty list in a Mexican fight," added Bud as Don Juan moved away.

But, jest as he would, Bud saw that the situation was serious, for the foolhardy Sonorans had already emptied their cartridge-belts, and their guns were no better than clubs. Unless the rebels had been equally reckless with their ammunition they had the town at their mercy, and the first thing that they would demand would be the refugees in the big house.

Before that could be permitted the Americans would probably take a hand in the fight; for, while the great majority of the women in the house were Mexican, there were a few Americans, and they would be protected regardless of international complications. But Gracia Aragon was not an American, and she could not claim the protection of these countrymen of his.

The possession of the town; the arms of the defenders; food, clothing and horses to ride—none of these would satisfy them. They would demand the rich Spanish landowners to be held for ransom, the women first of all. And of all those women huddled up in the casa grande not one would bring a bigger ransom than Gra-

(To be Continued.)