



The RIVER

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

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—K. C. Rickard, an engineer of the Overland Pacific, is called to the office of President Marshall in Tucson, Ariz. "Casey" is an enigma to the office force; he wears "dude" clothes, but he had resigned a chair of engineering in the East to go on the road as a freeman and his promotion had been spectacular. While waiting for Marshall Rickard reads a report on the ravages of the Colorado, despite the efforts of Thomas Hardin of the Desert Reclamation company. This Hardin had been a student under Rickard and had married Gerty Holmes, with whom Rickard had fancied he was in love.

CHAPTER II—Marshall tells Rickard the Overland Pacific has got to step in to save the Imperial Valley and sends him to the break. Rickard declines because he does not want to supplant Hardin, but is won over. "Stop the river; drain the expense," says Marshall.

"Yes?" returned Rickard, whose liking had been captured by the speaker. The impression of distinction sharpened. The stranger wore a laundered pongee silk shirt, open at the neck but restricted by a brown silk tie; and it was trimly belted. There were but two neckties in the entire car, and they occupied, Rickard observed, the same seat.

"The beginning of the canal system." Rickard looked out upon a flat, one-toned country, marked off in rectangles by plows and scrapers. Farther south these rectangles were edged by young willows. He fancied he could see, even at that distance, the gleam of water.

It was the passing of the desert. A few miles back he had seen the desert in its primitive nakedness, which not even cactus relieved. He was passing over the land which man and horses were preparing for water. And he could see the land where water was.

"That was the way Riverside looked when I first saw it," commented the other man who wore a tie. "Come out on the rear platform. We can see better."

Rickard followed to the back of the dust-swept, stifling car. The glare on the platform was intense. He stood watching the newly made checkerboard of a country slip past him. Receding were the two lines of gleaming steel rails which connected and separated him from the world outside. He was "going in." Not in Mexico even had he such a feeling of ultimate remoteness. The mountains, converging perceptively toward the throat of the valley, looked elusive and unreal in their gauze draperies of rose and violet. The tender hour of day was clothing them with mystery, softening their sharp outlines. They contained the world beyond. Rickard felt the suspense of the next act.

It was a torpid imagination, he thought, which would not quicken over this conquest of the desert. East of the tract men and teams were preparing the newly furrowed ground for the seed. The curved land knives were breaking up the rich mold into ridges of soft soil as uncohesive and feathery as pulverized chocolate. It was the dark color of the chocolate of commerce, this silk which had been pilfered from the states through which the vagrant river wandered. The smell of the upturned earth, sweetly damp, smacked against his nostrils. Rickard fastidiously averted his nostrils; this was California territory over which his train was passing, but the earth, that dark earth those blades were crumbling, was it not the tribute of other states, of despoiling Wyoming, of ravishing Colorado and Arizona?

To the west new squares were being leveled and outlined. Shrubby rectangles were being cleared of their creosote bush and tough mesquite. Compared with other countries, the preparation for planting was the simplest. Horses were dragging over the ground a railroad rail bent into a V angle, which pulled the bushes by the roots and dragged them out of the way. Beyond, farther west, could be seen the untouched desert. The surface for many miles was cracked by water

lines, broken and drawn into irregular sand cakes; the mark of sand which has been imprisoned by water and branded by swift heat.

Close by men were putting in with care the seed that was to quicken the river silt. They were passing a square where the green tips of the grain were piercing the ground. Now they were abreast of a field of matured alfalfa over which the wind raced gratefully. Desert and grain field; death and life! The panorama embraced the whole cycle.

They went back to their seats. After a few minutes the other leaned over his shoulder, his hand waving toward the passing mountains. "Those are the Superstition mountains you can see over yonder. An unusually apt name."

"Yes?" "Why is it good, you mean? That pile of dark rock stands as a monument to an effete superstition. It is the gravestone for a gigantic mistake. Why, it was only the grossest ignorance that gave to the desert the label of 'bad lands.' The desert is a condition, not a fact. Here you see the passing of the condition, the burial of the superstition. Are you interested in irrigation?"

Rickard was not given to explain the degree of interest his profession involved, for the stranger drew a painful breath, and went on.

"Of course you are, if you are a western man. You are, I think?"

The engineer said he was, by choice.

"Irrigation is the creed of the West. God brought people to this country; water, scientifically applied, will keep them here. Look at Riverside. And we are at the primer stage only. We are way behind the ancients in information on that subject. I learned at school, so did you, that some of the most glorious civilizations flourished in spite of the desert which surrounded them. That was only half a truth. They were great because of it! Why did the Incas choose the desert where their strength gave them the choice of the continent of South America? Why did the Aztecs settle in the desert when they might easily have preempted the watered regions? Then there are the Carthaginians, the Toltecs, the Moors. And one never forgets Egypt!"

"For protection," Rickard gave the slightest question an interested recognition. "Was that not what we were taught at school? The forest held foes, animal and human. Those nations grew to their strength and power in the desert by virtue of its isolation." "Superstition!" retorted the man with the tie. "We are babes at the breast measured by the wisdom of the men who settled Damascus, or compared with the Toltecs, or those ancient tribes who settled in northern India. They recognized the value of aridity. They knew its threefold worth."

"An inherent value?" demanded the college-bred man, turning from the window.

"An inherent value," declared the exponent of aridity.

"Will you tell me just what you mean?"

"Not in one session! Look yonder. That's Brawley. When I came through here ten years ago I could have had my pick of this land at 25 cents an acre. They were working at this scheme then—on paper. I was not alive to the possibilities then; I had not yet lived in Utah!"

The train was slowing up by a brand new yellow-painted station. There were several dusty automobiles waiting by the track, a few faded surreys and the inevitable country hotel bus. The platform was swarming with alert, vigorous faces, distinctly of the American type.

The man in the seat beside him asked Rickard if he observed the general average of intelligence in the faces of the crowd below. Rickard acknowledged that he had been struck by that, not only here but at Imperial Junction, where he had waited for the train.

"There is a club in the valley, lately started, a university club which admits as members those who have had at least two years of college training. The list numbers three hundred already. The first meeting was held last week in an empty new store in Imperial. If it had not been for the setting we might have been at Ann Arbor or Palo Alto. The costumes were a little motley, but the talk sounded like home."

The dust blowing in through the car doors brought on another fit of strangling. Rickard turned again to the window, to the active scene which denied the presence of desert beyond.

"The doctors say it will have to be the desert always for me." The stranger tapped his chest significantly. "But it is exile no longer—not in an irrigated country. For the reason of

irrigation! It is the progressive man, the man with ideas, or the man who is willing to take them, who comes into this desert country. If he has not had education it is forced upon him. I saw it worked out in Utah. I was there several years. Irrigation means co-operation. That is, to me, the chief value of aridity."

The wind, though still blowing through the car and ruffling the train dust, was carrying less of grit and sand. To the nostrils of Rickard and his new acquaintance it brought the pleasing suggestion of grassy meadows, of willow-lined streams and fragrant fields.

"It is the accepted idea that this valley is attracting a superior class of men because of its temperance stand. It is the other way round. The valley stood for temperance because of the sort of men who had settled here, the men of the irrigation type."

The engineer's ear criticized "irrigation type." He began to suspect that he had picked up a crank.

"The desert offers a man special advantages, social, industrial and agricultural. It is no accident that you find a certain sort of man here."

"I suppose you mean that the struggle necessary to develop such a country, under such stern conditions, develops of necessity strong men?" evolved Rickard. "Oh, yes, I believe that, too."

"Oh, more than that. It is not so much the struggle as the necessity for co-operation. The mutual dependence is one of the blessings of aridity."

"One of the blessings of aridity!" echoed his listener. "You are a philosopher." He had not yet touched the other's thought at the spring.

"You might as well call me a socialist because I praise irrigation in that it stands for the small farm unit," retorted the valley man. "That is one of its flats; the small unit. It is the small farm that pays. That fact brings many advantages. What is the charm of Riverside? It comes to me always like the unreal dream of the socialist come true. It is a city of farms, of small farms, where a man may make his living off his ten acres of oranges or lemons; and with all the comforts and conveniences of a city within reach, his neighbors not ten miles off! A farmer in Riverside or in any irrigated community does not have to postpone living for himself or his family until he can sell the farm! He can go to church, can walk there; the trolley car which passes his door takes him to a public library or the opera house. His children ride to school. His wife does not need to be a drudge. The bread wagon and the steam laundry wagon stop at her door."

Rickard observed that perhaps he did not know anything about irrigation after all! He had not thought of it before in its sociological relation but merely as it touched his profession.

"Not going into soil values, for that is a long story," began the older man, "irrigation is the answer which science gives to the agriculturist who is impatient of haphazard methods. Irrigation is not a compromise, as so many believe who know nothing about it. It is a distinct advantage over the old-fashioned methods."

"I am one of those who always thought it a compromise," admitted the engineer.

"Better call rain a compromise," retorted the irrigationist. "The man who irrigates gives water to the tree which needs it; rain nourishes one tree and drowns out another. Irrigation is an insurance policy against drought, a guarantee against floods. The farmer who has once operated an irrigated farm would be as impatient were he again subjected to the caprice of rain as a housewife would be were she compelled to wait for rain to fill her wash tub. There is no irregularity or caprice about irrigation."

"Wonder how the old fellow picked it all up?" mused Rickard with disrespect. Aloud he said, "You were speaking of the value of the soil?"

"Look at the earth those plows are turning over. See how rich and friable it is, how it crumbles? You can dig for hundreds of feet and still find that sort of soil, eight hundred feet down! It is disintegrated rock and leaf mold brought in here in the making of a delta. Heavy rainfalls are rare here, though we have had them, in spite of popular opinion. Were we to have frequent rains the chemical properties which rain farmers must buy to enrich their worn-out soils would be leached out, drained from the soil. I can't make this comprehensive, but I've a monograph on desert soil. If you are interested I'll send it to you."

"I should like it—immensely," assented the engineer, still amused.

"It explains the choice of the Aztecs, of the Incas, of Carthaginians, the Moors," observed the stranger. "They chose the desert, not in spite of the soil but because of it. I doubt if they were awake to the social advantages of the system, but it was their co-

operative brotherhood that helped them to their glory. We are centuries behind them. I'm getting out here—Imperial. If you come up to Imperial look me up. Brandon's my name. I've no card these days!"

"There are several things I want to hear from you," answered Rickard, following brown necktie and pointed beard to the platform. "I'll be sure to look you up. Mine's Rickard."

The breeze which was now entering the car windows had blown over the clover-leaved fields. Its message was sweet and fresh. Rickard could see the canals leading off like silver threads to the homes and farms of the future; "the socialists' dream come true!" Willows of two or three years' growth outlined the banks. Here and

there were up a protest against the hard conditions of the land it was invading. Rickard leaned out of the window and looked back up the valley which was dominated by the range now wrapping around itself gauzy, iridescent draperies.

"The monument to an effete superstition!" he repeated. "That wasn't a bad idea."

CHAPTER IV.

The Desert Hotel.

He left the dusty car with relief when the twin towns were called. He had expected to see a Mexican town, or at least a Mexican influence, as the towns hugged the border, but it was as vividly American as was Imperial or Brawley. There was the yellow-painted station of the Overland Pacific lines, the water tank, the eager American crowd. Railroad sheds announced the terminal of the road. Backed toward the station was the inevitable hotel bus of the country town, a painted sign hanging over its side advertising the Desert hotel. Before he reached the step the vehicle was crowded.

"Wait, gentlemen, I'm coming back for a second load," called the darky who was holding the reins.

"If you wait for the second trip you won't get a room," suggested a friendly voice from the seat above.

Rickard threw his bag to the grinning negro and swung onto the crowded steps.

Leaving the railroad sheds he observed a building which he assumed was the hotel. It looked promising, attractive with its wide encircling veranda and the patch of green which distance gave the dignity of a lawn. But the darky whipped up his stolid horses. Rickard's eyes followed the patch of green.

The friendly voice from above told him that that was the office of the Desert Reclamation company. His next survey was more personal. He saw himself entering the play as the representative of a company that was distrusted if not indeed actively hated by the valley folk. It amused him that his entrance was so quiet as to be unrepentant. It would have been quieter had Marshall had his way. But he himself had stipulated that Hardin should be told of his coming. He had seen the telegram before it left the Tucson office. He might be assuming an unfamiliar role in this complicated drama of river and desert, but it was not to be as an eavesdropper.

The heavy bus was plowing slowly through the dust of the street. Rickard was given ample time to note the limitations of the new town. They passed two brick stores of general merchandise, lemons and woolen goods, stockings and crackers disporting fraternally in their windows. A board sign swinging from the overhanging porch of the most pretentious building announced the post office. From a small adobe hung a brass plate advising the stranger of the Bank of Calexico. The "dobe pressed close to another two-storied structure of the desert type. The upper floor, supported by posts, extended over the sidewalk. Netted wire screened away the desert mosquito and gave the overhanging gallery the grotesque appearance of a huge fencing mask. From the street could be seen rows of beds, as in hospital wards. Calexico, it was seen, slept out of doors.

"Desert hotel," bawled the darky, relining in his placid team.

"Yes, sah, I'll look out for your bag. Got your room? The hotel's mighty sure to be full. Not many women yet down this a-way. . . . All the men mostly lives right heah at the hotel."

Rickard made a dive from a swirl of dust into the hotel. The long line he anticipated at the desk was not there. He stopped to take in a valley innovation. One end of the long counter had been converted into a soda-water bar. The high swivel stools in front of the white marbled stand, with its towering silver fixtures, were crowded with dust-colored youths was pouring colored sirups into tall glasses; there was a clinking of ice; a sizzling of siphons.

"That's a new one on me," grinned Rickard, turning toward the desk where a complacent proprietor stood waiting to announce that there was but one room left.

"With bath?" "Bath right across the hall. Only room left in the house." The proprietor awarded him the valley stare. "Going to be here long?" He passed the last key on the rack to the darky staggering under a motley of bags and suitcases. Rickard recognized his, and followed.

"I may get you another room tomorrow," called the proprietor after him as he climbed the dusty stairs.

The signals of a new town were waving in the dining room. The majority of the citizens displayed their shirt sleeves and unblushing suspenders. One large table was surrounded by men in khaki; the desert soldiers, engineers. The full blown waitresses, elaborately pompadoured, were pushing through the swing-doors, carrying heavy trays. Coquetry appeared to be their occupation, rather than meal-serving, the diners accepting both varieties of attention with appreciation. The supremacy of those superior maidens was menaced only by two other women who sat at a table near the door. Rickard did not see them at first. The room was as masculine as a restaurant in a new mining town.

Rickard left his indoor view to look through the French windows opening on a side street. He noticed a slender but regular procession. All the men passing fell in the same direction.

"Cocktail route," explained one of

his neighbors, his mouth full of beef.

"Oyster cocktail?" smiled the newcomer.

"The real thing! Calexico's dry, like the whole valley, that is, the county. See that ditch? That is Mexico, on the other side. Those sheds you can see are in Mexicali, Calexico's twin sister. That painted adobe is the custom house. Mexicali's not dry, even in summer! You can bet your life on that. You can get all the bad whisky and stale beer you've the money to buy. We work in Calexico, and drink in Mexicali. The temperance pledge is kept better in this town than any other town in the valley. But you can see this procession every night."

The Amazon with a handkerchief apron brought Rickard his soup. He was raising his first spoonful to his mouth when he saw the face, carefully



He Saw the Face, Carefully Averted.

averted, of the girl he had met at the Marshalls' table, Innes Hardin. His eyes jumped to her companions, the man a stranger, and then, Gerty Holmes. At least, Mrs. Hardin! Somehow, it surprised him to find her pretty. She had achieved a variety of distinction, preserving, moreover, the clear-cut babyish chin which had made its early appeal to him. There was the same duffy hair, its ringlets a bit artificial to his more sophisticated eyes, the same well-turned nose. He had been wondering about this meeting; he found that he had been expecting some sort of shock—who said that the love of today is the jest of tomorrow? The discovery that Gerty was not a jest brought the surprised gratification which we award a letter or composition written in our youth. Were we as clever as that, so complete at eighteen or twenty-one? Could we, now, with all our experience, do any better, or indeed as well? That particular sentence with wings! Could we make it fly today as it soared yesterday? Rickard was finding that Gerty's more mature charms did not accelerate his heart-beats, but they were certainly flattering to his early judgment. And he had expected her to be a shock!

He was staring into his plate of chilled soup. Cal-love! For he had loved her, or at least he had loved her chin, her pretty childish way of lifting it. She was prettier than he had pictured her. Queer that a man like Hardin could draw such women for sister and wife—the blood tie was the most amazing. For when women come to marry, they make often a queer choice. It occurred to him that that might have been Hardin—he had not wanted to stare at them.

That was not Hardin's face. It held strength and power. The outline was sharp and distinct, showing the strong lines, the determined mouth of the pioneer. There was something else, something which stood for distinction—no, it couldn't be Hardin.

And then, because an outtruss lip changed the entire look of the man, Rickard asked his table companions, who was the man with the two ladies, near the door.

"That, sah," his neighbor from Alabama became immediately oratorical, "that is a big man, sah. If the Imperial valley ever becomes a reality, a fixtuh, it will be because of that one man, sah. Reclamation is like a seed thrown on a rock. Will it stick? Will it take root? Will it grow? That is what we all want to know."

Rickard thought that he had wanted to know something quite different, and reminded the gentleman from Alabama that he had not told him the name.

"The father of this valley, of the reclamation of this desert, Thomas Hardin, sah."

Rickard tried to reset, without attracting their attention, the group of his impressions of the man whose personality had been so obnoxious to him in the old Lawrence days. The Hardin he had known had also large features, but of the flaccid irritating order. He summoned a picture of Hardin as he had shuffled into his own classroom, or up to the long table where Gerty had always queened it among her mother's boarders. He could see the rough unpolished boots that had always offended him as a betrayal of the man's inner coarseness; the badly fitting coat, the long awkward arms, and the satisfied, loud-speaking mouth. These features were more definite. Could time bring these changes? Had he changed, like that? Had they seen him? Would Gerty, would Hardin remember him? Wasn't it his place to make himself known; wave the flag of old friendship over an awkward situation?

He found himself standing in front of their table, encountering first, the eyes of Hardin's sister. There was no

surprise, no welcome there for him, as felt at once the hostility of the camp. His face was uncomfortably warm. Then the childish profile turned on him. A look of bewilderment, flushing into greeting—the years had been kind to Gerty Holmes!

"Do you remember me, Rickard?" If Hardin recognized a difficult situation, he did not betray it. It was a man Rickard did not know who shook him warmly by the hand, and said that indeed he had not forgotten him.

"I've been expecting you. My wife, Mr. Rickard, and my sister."

"Why, what are you thinking of, Tom? To introduce Mr. Rickard! I introduced you to each other, years ago!" Gerty's cheeks were red. Her bright eyes were darting from one to the other. "You knew he was coming, and did not tell me?"

"You were at the Improvement club when the telegram came," put in Innes Hardin, without looking at Rickard. No trace of the Tucson cordiality in that proud little face! No acknowledgment that they had met at the Marshalls'!

"Oh, you telegraphed to us?" The blond arch smile had not aged. "That was friendly and nice."

Rickard had not been self-conscious for many a year. He did not know what to say. He turned from her upturned face to the others. Innes Hardin was staring out of the window, over the heads of several crowded tables; Hardin was gazing at his plate. Rickard decided that he would get out of this before Gerty discovered that it was neither "friendly nor nice."

"If I had known that you were here, I would have insisted on your dining with us, in our tent. For it's terrible, here, isn't it?" She flashed at him the look he remembered so vividly, the childish coquettish appeal. "We dine at home, till it becomes tiresome, and then we come foraging for variety. But you must come to us, say Thursday. Is that right for you? We should love it."

Still those two averted faces. Rickard said Thursday, as he was bidden, and got back to his table, wondering why in thunder he had let Marshall persuade him to take this job.

Hardin waited a scant minute to protest: "What possessed you to ask him to dinner?"

"Why shouldn't I? He is an old friend." Gerty caught a glance of appeal, from sister to brother. "Jealous?" she pouted charmingly at her lord. "Jealous, no!" bluffed Hardin.

He thought then that she knew, that Innes had told her. The Lawrence episode held no sting to him. Once, it had enchanted him that he had carried off the boarding-house belle, whom even that bookman had found desirable—bookman! A superior dude! He had always had those grand airs. As if it were not more to a man's credit to struggle for his education, even if he were older than his class, or his teacher, than to accept it off silver plates, handed by lackeys? Rickard had always acted as if it had been something to be ashamed of. It made him sick.

"They've done it this time. It's a fool choice."

Again, that look of pleading from Innes. Gerty had a shiver of intuition.

"Fool choice?" Her voice was ominously calm.

Hardin shook off Innes's eyes. Better be done with it! "He's the new general manager."

"He's the general manager?" "I'm to take orders from him."

Gerty's silence was of the stunned variety. The Hardins watched her crumbling bread on the tablecloth, thinking, fearfully, that she was going to cry.

"Didn't I tell you?" Her voice, repressed, carried the threat of tears. "Didn't I tell you how it would be? Didn't I say that you'd be sorry if you called the railroad in?"

"Must we go over this again?" asked her husband.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me make a goose of myself?" She was remembering that there had been no protest, no surprise from Innes. She knew! A family secret! She shrugged. "I'm glad, on the whole, that you planned it as a surprise. For I carried it off as if we'd not been insulted, disgraced."

"Gerty!" expostulated Hardin. "Gerty!" implored Innes.

"And we are in for a nice friendly dinner!"

"Are you quite finished?" Hardin got up.

As the three passed out of the dining room, Rickard caught their several expressions: Hardin's stiff, indifferent; Gerty's brilliant but hard, as she flashed a finished, brave little smile in his direction. The sister's bow was distinctly haughty.

In the hall, Gerty's laugh ripped out. It was the laugh Rickard remembered, the light frivolous cadence which recalled the flamboyant pattern of the Holmes' parlor carpet, the long, crowded dining table where Gerty had reigned. It told him that she was indifferent to his coming, as she meant it should. And it turned him back to a dark corner in the honeysuckle-draped porch where he had spent so many evenings with her, where once he had held her hand, where he told her that he loved her. For he had loved her, or at least he thought he had! And had run away from her expectant eyes. A cad, was he, because he had brought that waiting look into her eyes, and had run from it?

Should a man ask a woman to give her life into his keeping until he is quite sure that he wants it? He was revamping his worn defense. Should he live up to a minute of surrender, of tenderness, if the next instant brings sanity, and disillusionment? He could bury now forever self-reproach. He could laugh at his own vanity. Gerty Hardin, it was easy to see, had forgotten what he had whispered to Gerty Holmes. They met as sober old friends. That ghost was laid.

(To be continued.)