

Youth Rides West

By Will Irwin

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THE STORY SO FAR

On their way to the new Cottonwood gold diggings, Coltrane, the lawyer, Seaventus, Robert Gilson, easterner, and his partner, Buck Hayden, a veteran miner, witness the hold-up of a stage coach, from which the express box is stolen before the bandits are scared off, leaving the two women as Mrs. Constance Deane, and Mrs. Barnaby, who intends to open a restaurant in Cottonwood. Gilson meets Marcus Handy, editor, on his way to start the Cottonwood Courier. Arriving in town, Gilson and Handy together witness a mining claim, a threatened lynching is averted by the bravery of Chris McGrath, town marshal. Gilson becomes disgusted with gold digging, what with its unending labor and small rewards, and so the sudden appearance of Shorthy, old-time partner of Buck, is not altogether disconcerting to him. Gilson takes a job on the Courier and arranges to sell his share in the claim to Shorthy. His acquaintance with Mrs. Deane ripens. As the Courier, growing in power a civic spirit is awakened.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

When "Judge" Collyver—we all granted him that title—took the floor, he drew almost as well as the variety shows. A little before this climax, he always went out for another drink. The tradition of Daniel Webster still lay strong upon the West. The oratorical lawyer, most brilliant when half-seas over, held the imagination alike of courtroom and of jury. Brushing back his mop of black hair, Collyver would work himself up like a camp-meeting preacher to an oratorical frenzy. Always he harped on two points. The victim was armed, for that matter. But as Collyver brought out this point, you forgot that. And always some witness for the defense testified to a "quick motion toward the hip." There you were. Self-defense, absolute and proved. Judge Cowan closed the affair with a pompous charge full of bad Latin, wherein mercy stood better vindicated than justice. The jurors scarcely left their seats.

The pickpocket whose escape from lynching I had witnessed during my first night in camp, got a quick trial and short shrift. Judge Cowan, with special emphasis on the meanness of his crime, sentenced him to ten years. Of minor cases, such as settled communities usually try in police courts, there were none. Under the tolerant rule of Marshal Chris McGrath, plain drunkenness constituted no offense whatever. If an inhabitant was drunk and disorderly, the marshal arrested him, put him in the log jail for the night, and released him in the morning.

My prying and searchings about camp led me constantly to that jail. Built with a double log wall, provided with a real door reinforced by sheet iron and with a substantially barred window, it had as yet no separate cells. Murderer and transient drunkard alike slept on straw pallets about the stove of the common room. Four deputies, by turns jailer and policeman, stood double guard with rifle and revolver.

Over these janizaries to Marshal McGrath ruled as chief, as grand vizier, one Charlie Meek. He it was who, when the marshal stopped the lynching at the Black Jack, had snapped the handcuffs on the pickpocket. Long a mere supernumerary in the drama of Cottonwood camp, he was to step forth for a day a leading actor.

Jim Huffaker's restaurant had the contract for feeding the prisoners. The waiters, bringing over dinner or supper, removed the soiled dishes of the last meal. Consequently, the continuous game of seven-up on the floor proceeded always amidst a most untidy fringe. The sanitary arrangement I shall not attempt to describe; and the eternal scratchings of the prisoners proved that bunks and clothing alike were hunting-grounds for forms of lower life.

Marshal McGrath had nominally an office—a boarded tent on Main street where proceeded the important business of registering mining claims. But seldom if ever did I find him in those, his official quarters. His hours of leisure he spent at the jail; of fine afternoons he sat in a rocking-chair by its door, smoking a black cigar and holding forth. Usually he had an audience, squatted about him on its heels. Once, on a morning when the "Hold-up Record" at the bottom of our last column, front page, included eight items, I asked him what he was doing about footpads. "Not a thing until they give me a detective," he replied. "I've applied twice."

"Or when we get a municipal government," I put in, repeating parrot-like a political observation of Marcus Handy. Marshal McGrath did not take this simple remark seriously. His eyes crinkled up, but not with a smile. The lines of his face went hard, as they did when he stepped upon the table of the Black Jack to stop the lynching.

"Tell your editor to keep off that!" he jerked out. "If you don't like the way the county government's run, there'll be an election in November, won't there?" But as though his case needed apology, he went on: "What do they expect, those reformers? A mining camp ain't a Sunday school. We haven't had a lynching yet!" That record, it appeared, was the marshal's special pride.

Cottonwood continued to boom and grow; daily the Courier reported strikes or "fine prospects" in the mines working on Liverpool hill, where the last inch of ground had long been staked out and developed, and in those gulches and crevasses of the mountains where experienced prospectors were sinking shafts with bucket and winch. The stages arrived brimful; every night the public corral overflowed with the wheeled errand, now arrivals. Under my eye, this

crude settlement was transforming itself into a town, a city.

In a gulch above the river valley, a brickyard began operations. Its kilns were scarcely formed before it had orders six months ahead. Father Cassidy signed the first order. Already the Ladies' sodality was advertising in the Courier its fair for the building fund. Mr. Slippe, the Presbyterian, was clearing ground for his new wooden church. The Methodists under the fiery Mr. Orcutt got along with their gospel tent, saved souls mightily, and let the Lord take care of the future. Doctor Howells, Episcopalian clergyman, was clearing ground for his new wooden church. The incident arrived which cut the wolf loose.

CHAPTER VII

Returning from supper to write up my sheaf of miscellaneous information gathered during the afternoon, I found Marcus Handy in close conversation with a stranger. I surveyed him casually as I pushed through the door, and set him down in the tenderfoot class. Then he turned, revealing a stark, small-featured American countenance, now veiled in deep gloom. One would have said, indeed, that he had been crying. Marcus looked up.

"Come here, kid; shake hands with Mr. Curtis," he said. "I want you to listen to this."

With conscientious precision, Mr. Curtis told his story. He had arrived only three days before, bringing ten thousand dollars, receipts from the sale of his grocery business and his house in Cairo, Illinois; this money he deposited in the Bank of Cottonwood while he saw the town and looked for an opening. In the bar of the Black Jack he met a stranger, also from Illinois, who knew some of his people. Precisely at this moment, I anticipated the whole story. The proceeding, as Mr. Curtis told it in his dead, grief-stricken voice, was typical, orthodox. The meeting with two other strangers—the deal in mines by which he invested nothing and could not lose—the necessity, just when the deal stood at completion, for proving that he had funds—the trip to the bank for his ten thousand dollars—the display of the money in the back room of the Black Jack—the discovery, when he returned to the bank, that he held only a packet of waste paper. Mr. Curtis offered no excuses for his innocence and guiltiness; he was past vanity. Only when he told us that he had left his family in the East and had expected to send for them did his voice choke and break. This was the second lesson to my slow imagination in the essential, invariable cruelty of crime.

The story varied, grew more interesting—and especially to Marcus—when Mr. Curtis touched on the aftermath. He had thought over, swallowed his pride, and reported the matter to Chris McGrath. Chris had promised to look into the matter. "Didn't seem much interested," added Mr. Curtis. And he did nothing. At this point, Marcus Handy and I exchanged furtive, significant glances. It was part of an unwritten agreement that Chris McGrath should inform me of all crimes. Concerning this, the most sensational confidence operation which had happened as yet in Cottonwood, he had dropped not even a hint.

Mr. Curtis resumed his narrative. Getting no further with the town marshal, he had addressed himself next to Si Conway, head-man, presumably chief stockholder, in that syndicate of gamblers which conducted the Black Jack. "He seemed real astonished that such things could happen in his house," said Mr. Curtis. "But while he was talking—it was in the bar—I saw one of the fellows that robbed me come out of the back room. That's him," says I, and started to grab him. And the bartender started too. But he got stuck in the door in front of me, and before I could shove past him my man was gone. You did that a-purpose?" says I, and hit him. But they pulled me off him and threw me out. So I come to you. I want to know if there is any justice in this town!" Here Mr. Curtis raised his subdued voice for the first time, struck a clenched fist into the palm of the other hand.

Marcus Handy spoke, his voice unwordedly low.

"Kid," he said, "you've heard this story, haven't you? I want you to go straight over to Chris McGrath and put this up to him. Put it strong. Ask him why we haven't heard about this little affair, and what he's done. And on your way home, see Si Conway and touch him up similar. Then come back, and tell me what they have to say." He turned to Mr. Curtis.

As I approached Chris McGrath, sitting in his rocking chair, chewing his cigar, I felt that I was not going to relish this job. However, the plain recital of Mr. Curtis had warmed my own indignation; I let some of my feelings into my voice. I suppose when I retold the story. And as I talked, the smile-wrinkles smoothed out from about the marshal's eyes; they grew hard.

"Come to your paper!" he interrupted. "Who does he think runs this camp—the county government, or your little two-by-four sheet?"

"I suppose he felt he had to come," I said, unwilling to put the already troubled Mr. Curtis into a false position, "because he thought the authorities were doing nothing."

"Nothing!" snorted Chris McGrath. "And how am I going to do anything until I git a detective or two?"

"But Mr. Curtis says he saw one of the men who robbed him today," I argued weakly.

"He did, huh?" inquired Marshal McGrath sardonically. "Then why don't he come to me with the news instead of to your paper? It's a triflin' matter to be botherin' me about anyhow."

"It involves ten thousand dollars," said I.

"Do you think," said Marshal McGrath, "that we're supposed to be wet nurses for every tenderfoot there?"

Just how much trouble this was to make, neither Handy nor Gilson knew. Wait till the next installment.

comes into camp? What was he doin' anyhow? Tryin' to work a swindle according to his own admission—tryin' to cook up a dirty deal. The other fellow gets ahead of him. And he squeals. How do I even know it happened? I've got nobody's word for it but his. No, boy—and here the tones of the marshal's voice, usually so pleasant, vibrant and cordial, took on a jarring note of arrogance, "no boy, a couple of tenderfoots can't come into a camp and tell the old-timers how to run it." He rose abruptly, fished out from his trousers pocket a huge key, unlocked the door, disappeared inside the jail. But he turned at the last moment, and jerked out:

"Tell your editor I know exactly what he's tryin' to do." The door clanged.

I noticed, as I turned away, that Charlie Meek stood in the shadows by the corner of the jail, on guard with his Winchester. Doubtless, I reflected hazily, he must have heard the conversation.

I found Si Conway in the gambling room of the Black Jack, watching the faro tables as they warmed up to their night's run of business. Hitherto, I had not spoken with Si Conway; but I knew him as a personage about camp. Those who knew him pronounced him a good fellow; which I readily understood when I drew him to the one unfeasted corner of the Black Jack and, as tactfully as I could, began my inquisition. For he took it all very simply; and his low voice had an agreeable quality; it seemed oiled with affability.

"I'm right sorry," he said, "if my house has been used for a skin game. It's a public place after all, you know, kid. And anybody will tell you that my games are straight."

"But Mr. Curtis says he saw one of the men that robbed him here this afternoon—and again I recited the story of that episode.

"I was here when he came in, makin' a disturbance," said Si Conway.

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