

Youth Rides West

By Will Irwin

WNU Service

CHAPTER XI—Continued

"Ah, these proceedings are legal, then!" exclaimed the stranger, with what appeared to be an air of genuine relief. "In that case—"

"Miner's law. Best law that is. But you'll git a trial," cut in Shorty; and the captive's eyelid flickered. "That will be all from you just now. Tie his arms, boys, and bring him along." Back toward the clearing we started, led by the group conveying the captive. He had an easy, athletic walk. Everything about him, in fact—the accent, the precise speech, the cool, formal manner—suggested the gentleman. Perhaps almost too much the gentleman.

We were well out in the clearing before I looked ahead; so much did this man whom I had captured for death hold my intense attention. Out of the woods came the cowboy, leading that little black horse on which the posse had mounted the gagged and helpless Charlie Meek. The saddle was empty. I saw then that a figure lay shrunken and huddled across our path. The leading group stopped beside it. The whole frame of the captive gave a jerk and then settled back, as by effort of the will, into a pose of easy nonchalance. I hurried forward.

Charlie Meek. He was bleeding from a hole in the chest; the side of his head was all smear with another wound. The gag still stretched his jaws; over it ran a bloody foam. But his wounded torso heaved; and there was a pleading intelligence in his eyes.

"Better git that thing out of his mouth," said Shorty with a touch of softness. "Tain't needed no more." Some one untied the gag. His eyes rolled 'till they showed only the whites; the muscles of his face drew; his jaws moved as though the last instinct in him, the talkative, was for speech.

Then his throat rattled and: "He's gone," said Shorty. I looked up at the captive. And other eyes, now that the curtain had fallen on Charlie's tragedy, followed mine. He was perhaps a trifle pale; but so, I suppose, we're all.

By prearrangement, Charlie Meek was not arrested with the marshal. Marcus wanted to see what he would do. As Marcus expected, he turned on the marshal, announced his own virtue, asked to lead the posse. Letting him fire the signal, thereby putting in our hands the last piece of convincing evidence, was an afterthought, a final detail arranged between Marcus and Shorty before we started.

So far, the elaborate program had gone through with machine-like smoothness—not a break or slip. I marvel yet that in taking possession of the town and arresting so many dangerous characters the vigilantes never had to fire a shot before Charlie Meek was killed.

The horses had come. Up from the hollow, men had borne the three corpses. All, by virtue of good marksmanship, had mercifully died in their tracks. They rolled Charlie's body over, roughly composed it, laid out the others beside it. The first was that man with a short black beard whom I had seen giving orders to my captive in the Black Jack the night before. Last night—every time my mind formed that phrase, I had a kind of vague wonder to think that years and ages had not passed since the setting of yesterday's sun. He had been struck squarely in the forehead by two heavy bullets at once, and mutilated most horribly.

Shorty was bellowing orders—"Git those bodies onto horses! Tie up the prisoners and mount 'em! You, Matt, rustle back to camp and tell Mr. Hanley we're comin'—ride! Don't anybody go ahead—this job ain't over."

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the detectives and their employers rewards him for what he was—an anachronism, a back number, representative of an era from which Cottonwood camp had emerged.

Meantime Mike had plucked another gem of information from the tipsy gossip of the Silver Dollar. The "Killer," that member of the gang who had wanted to torture the Stonewall Jackson paymaster, had grown dangerous. On any big job he was likely to shoot prematurely, recklessly. The rest of the bandits had quarreled with him. What pressure they could put upon a wild man like him, unless it was knowledge of his manifold crimes, I know not. At any rate, they subdued him to their policy. The next time they went out they would leave him behind to guard the cabin and watch the approaches.

On the night of action a band of eight men, picked from the vigilance committee for nerve and marksmanship, hid in the bushes above the claim. After supper, they saw four of the inmates start through the moonlight to the little horse corral on the hillside above. A candle still burned in the cabin; by which they knew that things were going as expected. Two expert plainsmen stalked the claim—this, it seems to me yet, was the most valorous deed of that night. Luck served them; the Killer went out for a pail of water. When he returned, his right hand occupied, they rose up behind him, poked two muzzles into his ribs. Having satisfied themselves that he would not talk, the squad bound and gagged him and, disposing themselves in the cabin or in the woodpile, waited for dawn. When the bank robbers, having received the double signal for "all safe," should return to the cabin, the vigilantes intended to let them enter, to get the drop, and to capture them alive.

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CHAPTER XII

The sun had fully risen over the Pyrites, was dancing even on the westward slopes, when from a grove of dwarf pine our shoddily solemn procession emerged into the straggling litter of cabins bordering Cottonwood. Horsemen were swinging now round the line of shacks which marked the rear approaches of Main street. Behind them ran pedestrians. One man had recognized Charlie Meek. One was shaking his fist at the dead bandits . . . he would know better presently. Before and behind, riders of the posse were slipping bits of news from the corners of their mouths to friends in our fringe of camp-followers . . . my own name. Men were pointing me out . . . "And never even went to his gun." I heard . . . My captive ahead rode with his back straight, his head up . . . if he would only sag or droop . . . his spirit defied mine.

This was Main street. How the vigilance committee had grown! A cordon of armed guards stretched on both sides of the way . . . A woman looked from a cabin door, raised a hand to a pale forehead, crossed herself . . . I must not look at the crowds again . . . I might see—what matter if I did see . . .

Men crowding about me . . . congratulations on my nerve . . . Marcus repeating: "It's great, boy!" . . . Buck reassuring me that he always said I ought to have been in the game from the first . . . others . . . the touch of their hands were loathsome . . . would they ever let me alone? . . . Ah, now the committee had gone into conference . . . flashes of light on their intentions . . . "He won't take long," I heard from Shorty . . . Mayor Brown was to be judge . . .

"Well, come on! Let's get it over with!" Marcus commanded. Then his sharp, strained countenance turned my way and he seemed again aware of me.

"Coming' along to the proceedings, boy?" And that inquiry jerked me out of my thoughts.

"Mechanically I repeated, I do not know why:

"Get back from the window!" For I was Robert Gilson again; like a naked soul at the judgment seat I saw what insane jealousy had made of me what I had done to the woman I loved what a thing I had been.

And I turned, as though the motion would relieve me of my thoughts, and saw her; and thought for an instant I was seeing a vision. She stood at the jail door. One hand rested on the latch. The other clasped round her head a black shawl. Her blue eyes, swimming in anxiety which I took for reproach, seized mine, clutched them "You!" she said. "You!"

"Is this your husband?" I asked. "Yes. Quick! Have you the key?" "Yes."

"Then give it to me!" Her hand, her eyes pleaded. "You say you love me—"

"Nf," I said, "I will do it myself." And while I was saying that—so quick is thought—I had formed both a determination and a plan. All save us stood watching that drama of a passing soul, their eyes captives of horror. My fellow guards were not watching. My roan, with his trick of speed, stood at the door. I moved forward to act. She raised her hand as though to protest, dropped it as though realizing that she would waste time. I threw the reins over my saddle horn, I turned the key in the lock. It grated. I glanced involuntarily over my shoulder. McNeill and Bowles had not heard the sound. My captive was crouched on the floor, half collapsed. As I entered his eyes went wild.

"Listened," I said, "and get yourself together if you want to live! There's a horse at the door. Here is my hat. It's a different color from yours. Follow me out. Get on to the saddle horn. I turned the key in the lock. It grated. I glanced involuntarily over my shoulder. McNeill and Bowles had not heard the sound. My captive was crouched on the floor, half collapsed. As I entered his eyes went wild.

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