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The COUNTRY GENTLEMAN

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CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL.

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into the spring pasture season, when the hogs are again given access to the rye pasture and fattened for market.

"This furnishes a desirable system of management, which may be instituted on the farms of this section without the expense and trouble of applying limestone in order to be able to grow clover. While the final plan should include the application of limestone or marl and the successful growing of clover, the system outlined offers a shorter cut to a successful farm organization, with hogs as one of the main enterprises, and an abundance of profitable work for the winter season.

"In this connection, a slightly modified form of the system of farming described in Farmers' Bulletin No. 614 will have special application. The best plan for a general hog farm in the sandy land section, after clover can be grown, is to follow closely a five or six year rotation.

"The five-year rotation runs as follows: First year, corn, rye and vetch being sown in the corn about August first, and the corn crop hogged down when ripe; second year, soy beans or cowpeas, for seed and winter feed for hogs; third year, corn, the crop cut and rye sown in the fall; fourth year, rye, hog pastured in the fall and spring, and hogged off when the grain is ripe, clover being sown on

the rye in early spring; fifth year, clover and timothy, hog pastured and some hay cut.

"With this rotation started and all the crops running in their regular order, two litters of pigs may be raised each year, as is ordinarily done. The necessary pasturage is furnished during the early spring, until May first to tenth, by the rye crop. From May first to July fifteenth the clover and timothy is pastured. July fifteenth the feeding of corn is discontinued and the hogs are all turned on the rye.

"In six weeks, six one-hundred-pound hogs will clean up an acre of rye yielding seventeen bushels of grain.

"Timed in this manner the rye crop will have been gathered by about September first, when a part of the soy-bean field may be hogged off profitably, provided old corn is fed along with the beans. Later a part of the first-year corn, or all of it, may be hogged off.

"An early variety of soy beans, sown instead of rye and vetch in the corn at the last cultivation, will generally ripen with the corn and may be gathered by the hogs also. This plan keeps the hogs actually doing the equivalent of man labor from early spring to late fall.

"The practice of hogging down rye cannot be used to its fullest advantage until after the farm will produce clover.

Without clover the difficulties are too great in getting the hogs over the period from May first to July eighteenth."

Though the sandy land section dealt with is not a natural alfalfa region, this crop can be grown successfully if one is willing to proceed carefully and devote the necessary labor and money to the undertaking. From three to five tons to the acre of limestone or marl is necessary. August first has proved the most satisfactory time for sowing the seed, which should always be inoculated, either with soil from a sweet-clover field or an old alfalfa field where nodules are known to be present, or by artificial cultures.

Once having brought the farm to the point where sufficient crops can be grown to take care of constantly increasing numbers of livestock, the owner of such a farm will know better than anyone else what the final cropping system should be. This work, conducted by the Department, shows a practical way out of an unprofitable sandy land farm in the sections described: First by the growing of cowpeas and soy beans for cash crops and soil improvement, and then putting this improved soil to work growing a diversity of crops for livestock, which in turn continue the work of improving the soil and at the same time harvest the crops and convert them into salable meats.

WILD FIRE BY ZANE GREY

Author of "Riders of the Purple Sage," "The Lone Star Ranger," etc., etc.

XIV

ALL during May there was an idea, dark and sinister and growing, upon Bostil's mind. Fiercely at first he had rejected it as utterly unworthy of the man he was. But it returned. It would not be denied.

It was fostered by singular and unforeseen circumstances. The meetings with Creech, the strange sneaking actions of young Joel Creech, and especially the gossip of riders about the improvement in Creech's swift horse—these things appeared to loom larger and larger, and to augment in Bostil's mind that monstrous idea which he could not shake. So he became broody and gloomy.

It appeared to be an indication of his intense preoccupation of mind that he seemed not aware of Lucy's long trips down into the sage. But Bostil had observed these long before Holley and other riders had approached him with the information.

"Let her alone," he growled to his men. "I gave her orders to train the King. An' after Van got well mebbe Lucy just had a habit of ridin' down there. She can take care of herself."

To himself when alone Bostil muttered: "Wonder what the kid has looked up now? Some mischief, I'll bet!"

Nevertheless, he did not speak to her on the subject. Deep in his heart he knew he feared his keen-eyed daughter, and during these days he was glad she was not in evidence at the hours when he could not very well keep entirely to himself. Bostil was afraid Lucy might divine what he had on his mind. There was no one else he cared for. Holley, that old hawk-eyed rider, might see through him, but Bostil knew Holley would be loyal, whatever he saw.

Toward the end of the month, when Somers returned from horse hunting, Bostil put him and Shugrue to work on the big flatboat down at the crossing. Bostil himself went down, and he walked—a fact apt to be considered unusual if it had been noticed.

"Put in new planks," was his order to the men. "An' pour hot tar in the cracks. Then when the tar dries shove her in. I'll tell you when."

Every morning young Creech rowed over to see if the boat was ready to make the trip across to bring his father's horses back. The third morning of work on the boat Bostil met Joel down there. Joel seemed eager to speak to Bostil. He certainly was a wild-looking youth.

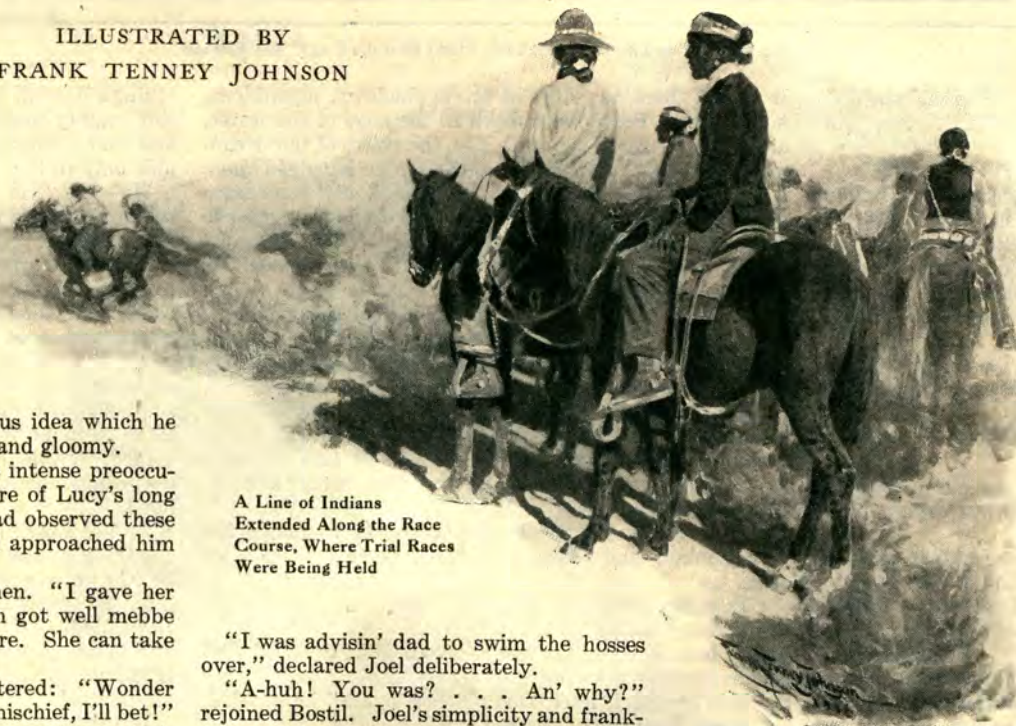
"Bostil, my ole man is losin' sleep waitin' to git the hosses over," he said frankly. "Feed's almost gone."

"That'll be all right, Joel," replied Bostil. "You see the river ain't begun to raise yet. . . . How're the hosses comin' on?"

"Grand, sir—grand!" exclaimed the simple Joel. "Peg is runnin' faster than last year, but Blue Roan is leavin' her a mile. Dad's goin' to bet all he has. The roan can't lose this year."

Bostil felt like a bull bayed by a hound. Blue Roan was a young horse, and every season he had grown bigger and faster. The King had reached the limit of his speed. That was great, Bostil knew, and enough to win over any horse in the uplands, provided the luck of the race fell even. Luck, however, was a fickle thing.

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON



A Line of Indians
Extended Along the Race
Course, Where Trial Races
Were Being Held

"I was advisin' dad to swim the hosses over," declared Joel deliberately.

"A-huh! You was? . . . An' why?" rejoined Bostil. Joel's simplicity and frankness vanished, and with them his rationality.

He looked queer. His contrasting eyes shot little malignant gleams. He muttered incoherently and moved back toward the skiff, making violent gestures, and his muttering grew to shouting, though still incoherent. He got in the boat and started to row back over the river.

"Sure he's got a screw loose," observed Somers.

Shugrue tapped his grizzled head significantly.

Bostil made no comment. He strode away from his men, down to the river shore, and finding a seat on a stone he studied the slow, eddying, red current of the river, and he listened. If any man knew the strange and remorseless Colorado that man was Bostil. He never made any mistakes in anticipating what the river was going to do.

And now he listened as if, indeed, the sullen, low roar, the murmuring, hollow gurgle, the sudden, strange splash, were spoken words meant for his ears alone. The river was low. It seemed tired out. It was a dirty red in color, and it swirled and flowed along lingeringly. At times the current was almost imperceptible; then again it moved at varying speed. It seemed a petulant, waiting, yet inevitable stream, remorseless with some certainty. It had a thousand voices, but not the one Bostil listened to hear.

He plodded gloomily up the trail, resting in the quiet, dark places of the cañon, loath to climb out into the clear light of day. And once in the village, Bostil shook himself as if to cast off an evil, ever-present, pressing spell.

The races were now only a few days off. Piutes and Navajos were camped out in the sage, and hourly the number grew with added squads. They were building cedar sunshades. Columns of blue smoke curled up here and there. And a line of Indians extended along the race course, where trial races were being held.

The village was full of riders, horse traders and hunters, and ranchers. Work on the ranges had practically stopped for the time being, and in another day or so every inhabitant of the country would be in Bostil's Ford.

Bostil walked into the village grimly conscious that the presence of the Indians and riders and horses, the near approach of the great race day—things that in former years had been the keen delight and speculation to him—had somehow lost their tang. He had changed. Something was wrong in him.

But he must go among these visitors and welcome them as of old; he who had always been the life of these racing days must be outwardly the same. The task was all the harder because of the pleasure old friends among the Indians and the riders evinced at meeting him. Bostil knew he had been a cunning horse trader, but he had likewise been a good friend. Many were the riders and Indians who owed much to him. So everywhere he was hailed and besieged, until finally the old excitement of betting and bantering took hold of him, and he forgot his brooding.

Brackton's place, as always, was headquarters for all visitors.

Macomber had just come in, full of enthusiasm and pride over the horse he had entered, and he had money to wager. Two Navajo chiefs, called by white men Old Horse and Silver, were there for the first time in years. They were ready to gamble horse against horse. Cal Blinn and his riders of Durango had arrived; likewise Colson, Sticks and Burthwait, old friends and rivals of Bostil's.

For a while Brackton's was merry. There was some drinking and much betting. It was characteristic of Bostil that he would give any odds asked on the King in a race; furthermore, he would take any end of wagers on other horses. As far as his own horses were concerned he bet shrewdly, but in races where his horses did not figure he seemed to have fun in the betting, whether or not he won.

The fact stood, however, that there were only two wagers against the King and both were put up by Indians. Macomber was betting on second or third place for his horse in the big race. No odds of Bostil's tempted him.

"Say, where's Wetherby?" rolled out Bostil. "He'll back his hoss."

"Wetherby's ridin' over tomorrow," replied Macomber. "But you gotta bet him two to one."

"See hyar, Bostil," spoke up old Cal Blinn, "you jest wait till I git an eye on the King's runnin'. Mebbe I'll go you even money."

"An' as fer me, Bostil," said Colson, "I ain't set up yit which hoss I'll race."

Burthwait, an old rider, came forward to Brackton's desk and entered a wager against the field that made all the men gasp.

"By George, pard, you ain't a-limpin' along!" ejaculated Bostil admiringly, and he put a hand on the other's shoulder.

"Bostil, I've a grand hoss," replied Burthwait. "He's four years old, I guess, fer he was born wild, an' you never seen him."

"Wild hoss? . . . Huh!" growled Bostil. "You must think he can run."

"Why, Bostil, a streak of lightnin' ain't anywheres with him."

"Wal, I'm glad to hear it," said Bostil gruffly. "Brack, how many hosses entered now for the big race?"

The lean, gray Brackton bent earnestly over his soiled ledger, while the riders and horsemen round him grew silent to listen.

"Thar's the Sage King, by Bostil," replied Brackton; "Blue Roan an' Peg, by Creech; Whitefoot, by Macomber; Rocks, by Holley; Hoss-shoes, by Blinn; Bay Charley, by Burthwait. Then thar's the two mustangs entered by Old Hoss an' Silver, an' last—Wildfire, by Lucy Bostil."

"What's thet last?" queried Bostil.

"Wildfire, by Lucy Bostil," repeated Brackton.

"Has the girl gone an' entered a hoss?"

"She sure has. She came in today, regular an' businesslike, writ her name an' her hoss's an' put up the entrance money."

Bostil was astonished and pleased. "She said she'd do it. But I didn't take no stock in her talk. . . . An' the hoss's name?"

"Wildfire."

"Huh! . . . Wildfire. Mebbe thet girl can't think of names for hosses! What's this hoss she calls Wildfire?"

"She sure didn't say," replied Brackton. "Holley an' Van, an' some more of the boys was here. They joked her a little. You oughter seen the look Lucy give them. But fer once she seemed mum. She jest walked away, mysterious like."

"Lucy's got a pony off some Indian, I reckon," returned Bostil, and he laughed. "Then thet makes ten hosses entered so far?"

"Right. An' there's sure to be one more. I guess the track's wide enough for twelve."

"Wal, Brack, there'll likely be one hoss out in front an' some stretched out behind," replied Bostil dryly. "The track's sure wide enough."

"Won't thet be a grand race!" exclaimed an enthusiastic rider. "Wisht I had about a million to bet!"

"Bostil, I most forgot," went on Brackton. "Cordts sent word by the Piutes who come today thet he'd be here sure."

Bostil's face subtly changed. The light seemed to leave it. He did not reply to Brackton—did not show that he heard the comments on all sides. Opinion had settled against Bostil's permission to allow Cordts and his horse thieves to attend the races. Bostil appeared grave, regretful. Yet it was known by all that in the strangeness and perversity of his rider's nature he wanted Cordts to see the King win that race. It was his rider's vanity and defiance in the teeth of a great horse thief. But no good would come of Cordts' presence—that much was manifest.

There was a moment of silence. All these men, if they did not fear Bostil, were sometimes uneasy when near him. Some who were more reckless than discreet liked to irritate him. That, too, was a rider's weakness.

"When's Creech's hosses comin' over?" asked Colson with sudden interest.

"Wal, I reckon soon," replied Bostil constrainedly, and he turned away.

By the time he got home all the excitement of the past hour had left him, and gloom again abode in his mind. He avoided his daughter and forgot the fact of her entering a horse in the race. He ate supper alone, without speaking to his sister. Then in the dusk he went out to the corrals and called the King to the fence. There was love between master and horse. Bostil talked low, like a woman, to Sage King. And the hard, old rider's heart was full and a lump swelled in his throat, for contact with the King reminded him that other men loved other horses.

Bostil returned to the house, to his room, and sat thinking in the dark. By and by all was quiet. Then, seemingly with a wrench, he bestirred himself, and did what for him was a strange action. Removing his boots he put on a pair of moccasins. He slipped out of the house; he kept to the flagstones of the walk; he took to the sage till out of the village; and then he sheered round to the river trail. With the step and sureness and the eyes of an Indian he went down through that pitch-black cañon to the river and the ford.

The river seemed absolutely the same as during the day. He peered through the dark opaqueness of gloom.



"Dad, I'll Bet You Two Hundred, Even, That I Beat the King!" She Flashed

It moved there, the river he knew, shadowy, mysterious, murmuring. Bostil went down to the edge of the water, and sitting there he listened. Yes, the voices of the stream were the same. But after a long time he imagined there was among them an infinitely low voice, as if from some great distance. He imagined this; he doubted; he made sure; and then all seemed fancy again. His mind held only one idea and was riveted round it. He strained his hearing so long, so intently, that at last he knew he had heard what he was longing for. Then in the gloom he took to the trail, and returned home as he had left, stealthily, like an Indian.

But Bostil did not sleep nor rest.

Next morning early he rode down to the river. Somers and Shugrue had finished the boat and were waiting. Other men were there, curious and eager. Joel Creech, barefooted and ragged, with hollow eyes and strange actions, paced the sands.

The boat was lying bottom up. Bostil examined the new planking and the seams. Then he straightened his form.

"Turn her over," he ordered. "Shove her in. An' let her soak up today."

The men seemed glad and relieved. Joel Creech heard and he came near to Bostil.

"You'll—you'll fetch Dad's hosses over?" he queried.

"Sure. Tomorrow," replied Bostil cheerily.

Joel smiled, and that smile showed what might have been possible for him under kinder conditions of life.

"Now, Bostil, I'm sorry fer what I said," blurted Joel.

"Shut up. Go tell your old man."

Joel ran down to his skiff, and leaping in began to row vigorously across. Bostil watched while the workmen turned the boat over and slid it off the sand bar and tied it securely to the mooring. Bostil observed that not a man there saw anything unusual about the river.

But for that matter there was nothing to see. The river was the same.

That night, when all was quiet in and round the village, Bostil emerged from his house and took to his stealthy stalk down toward the river.

The moment he got out into the night oppression left him. How interminable the hours had been! Suspense, doubt, anxiety, fear were as if he had not been burdened under them. The night was dark, with only a few stars, and the air was cool. A soft wind blew across his heated face. A neighbor's dog, baying dismally, startled Bostil. He halted to listen, then stole on under the cottonwoods, through the sage, down the trail, into the jet-black cañon. Yet he found his way as if it had been light. In the darkness of his room he had been a prisoner to his indecision; now in the darkness of the looming cliffs he was free, resolved, immutable.

The distance seemed short. He passed out of the narrow cañon, rimmed the gorge over the river, hurried down into the shadowy amphitheater under the looming walls.

The boat lay at the mooring, one end resting lightly on the sand bar. With strong, nervous clutch Bostil felt the knots of the cables. Then he peered into the opaque gloom of that strange and huge V-shaped split between the great cañon walls. Bostil's mind had begun to unclasp from the single idea. Was he alone? Except for the low murmur of the river there was dead silence—a silence like no

other, that which seemed held under imprisoning walls. Yet Bostil peered long into the shadows.

Then he looked up. The ragged ramparts far above frowned bold and black at a few cold stars, and the blue of sky was without the usual velvety brightness. How far it was up to that corrugated rim! All of a sudden Bostil hated this vast ebony pit.

He strode down to the water, and sitting upon the stone he had occupied so often he listened. Up stream he turned his ear, then down stream, and to the side, and again up stream, to hold that posture. He listened and listened.

The river seemed the same.

It was slow, heavy, listless, eddying, lingering, moving—the same apparently as for days past. It splashed very softly and murmured low and gurgled faintly. It gave forth fitful little swishes and musical tinkles and lapping sounds. It was flowing water, yet the proof was there of tardiness. Almost it was still and then again it moved on. A mysterious river that was

telling a lie with its low music! As Bostil listened all those soft, watery sounds merged into what seemed a moaning, and that moaning held a roar so low as to be distinguishable only to the ear trained by years.

No—the river was not the same. For the voice of its soft moan called to Bostil its meaning. It called from the far north—of great ice-clad peaks beginning to glisten under the nearing sun; of vast snow-filled cañons dripping and melting; of crystal brooks suddenly colored and roiled and filled bankful along the mountain meadows; of many brooks plunging down and down, rolling the rocks, to pour their volume into the growing dirty streams on the slopes; of all that widely separated water spilled suddenly with magic and immense power into the desert river to make it a mighty, thundering torrent, red and defiled, terrible in its increasing onslaught into the cañon, deep, impondering, swift and booming—the Colorado in flood.

And as Bostil heard that voice he trembled. What was the thing he meant to do? A thousand thoughts assailed him in answer and none was clear. A chill passed over him. Suddenly he felt that the cold stole up from his feet. Both his boots were in the water. He pulled them out, and bending down watched the dim, dark line of water. It moved up and up, inch by inch, swiftly. The river was on the rise!

Bostil leaped up. He seemed possessed of devils. A rippling hot gush of blood fired his every vein, and tremor after tremor shook him.

"I had it right—she's risin'!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He stared in fascinated certainty at the river. All about it and pertaining to it had changed. The murmur and moan wore out to a low, sullen roar. The music was gone. The current chafed at its rock-bound confines. An uneasy, tormented, driven river! The light from the stars shone on dark, glancing, restless waters, uneven and strange. And while Bostil watched, whether it was short time or long, the remorseless, destructive nature of the river came out.

Bostil began to pace the sands. He thought of those beautiful race horses across the river.

"It's not too late!" he muttered aloud. "I can get the boat over an' back—yet!"

He knew that on the morrow the Colorado in flood would bar those horses, imprison them in a barren cañon, shut them in to starve.

"Bostil, you can't do it. You ain't thet kind of a man! . . . Bostil poison a water hole where horses loved to drink, or burn over grass? . . . What would Lucy think of you? . . . No, Bostil, you've let spite rule bad. Hurry now, an' save them hosses!"

He strode down to the boat. It swung clear now and there was water between it and the shore. Bostil laid hold of the cables.

As he did so he thought of Creech, and a blackness enfolded him. He forgot Creech's horses. Something gripped him, burned him—some hard and bitter feeling he thought was hate of Creech. Again the wave of fire ran over him and his huge hands strained on the cables. The fiend of that fiendish river had entered his soul. He meant ruin to a man. He meant more than ruin. He meant to destroy what his enemy, his rival, loved.

The darkness all about him, the gloom and sinister shadow of the cañon, the sullen, increasing roar of the river—these lent their harmony to the deed, encouraged him, drove

him onward, fought and strangled the resistance in his heart. All about him, all about the motive, became augmented, growing like that remorseless river.

Had not his enemy's son shot at him from ambush? Was not his very life at stake? A terrible blow must be dealt Creech, one that would crush him or else lend him manhood enough to come forth with a gun. Bostil, in his torment, divined that Creech would know who had ruined him. They would meet, then, as Bostil had tried more than once to bring about a meeting.

Bostil saw into his soul and it was a gulf like this cañon pit, where the dark and sullen river raged. He shrank at what he saw, but the furies of passion held him fast. His hands tore at the cables. Then he fell to pacing to and fro in the gloom.

Every moment the river changed its voice. In an hour the flood would be down. Too late, then! Bostil again remembered the sleek, slim, racy thoroughbreds—Blue Roan, a wild horse he had longed to own, and Peg, a mare that had no equal in the uplands. Where did Bostil's hate of a man stand in comparison with his love of a horse? He began to sweat and the sweat burned him.

"How soon'll Creech hear the river an' know what's comin'?" muttered Bostil darkly. And that question showed him how he was lost. All this strife of doubt and fear and horror were of no use. He meant to doom Creech's horses. The thing had been unalterable from the inception of the insidious, hateful idea. It was irresistible. He grew strong, hard, fierce and implacable. He found himself. He strode back to the cables. The knots, having dragged in the water, were soaking wet and swollen. He could not untie them. Then he cut one strand after another. The boat swung out beyond his reach.

Instinctively Bostil reached to pull it back.

"It's goin'," he whispered. "What have I done?"

He, Bostil, who had made this Crossing of the Fathers more famous as Bostil's Ford, he—to cut the boat adrift! The thing was inconceivable!

The roar of the river rose weird and mournful and incessant, with few breaks, and these were marked by strange rippling and splashing sounds made as the bulges of water broke on the surface. Twenty feet out the boat floated, turning a little as it drifted. It seemed loath to leave. It held to the shore eddy. Hungrily, spitefully the little, heavy waves lapped it.

Bostil watched it with dilating eyes. There! the current caught one end and the water rose in a hollow splash over the corner. An invisible hand, like a mighty giant's, seemed to swing the boat out. It had been dark; now it was opaque—now shadowy—now dim. How swift this cursed river! Was there any way in which Bostil could recover his boat? The river answered him with hollow, deep mockery. Despair seized upon him. And the vague shape of the boat, spectral and instinct with meaning, passed from Bostil's strained gaze.

"So help me, I've done it!" he groaned hoarsely. And he staggered back and sat down.

Mind and heart and soul were suddenly and exquisitely acute to the shame of his act. Remorse seized upon his vitals. He suffered physical agony, as if a wolf gnawed him internally.

"Where do I come in as a man?" he whispered. And he sat there, arms tight round his knees, locked both mentally and physically into inaction.

The rising water broke the spell and drove him back. The river was creeping no longer. It swelled. And the roar likewise swelled. Bostil hurried across the flat to get to the rocky trail before he was cut off, and the last few rods he waded in water up to his knees.

"I'll leave no trail there," he muttered with a hard laugh. It sounded ghastly to him, like the laugh of the river.

There at the foot of the rocky trail he halted to watch and listen. The old memorable boom came to his ears. The flood was coming. For twenty-three years he had heard the vanguard boom of the Colorado in flood. But never like this, for in the sound he heard the strife and passion of his blood, and realized himself a human counterpart of that remorseless river.

The moments passed and each one saw a swelling of the volume of sound. The sullen roar just below him was gradually lost in a distant roar. A steady wind now blew through the cañon. The great walls seemed to gape wider to prepare for

the torrent. Bostil backed slowly up the trail as foot by foot the water rose. The floor of the amphitheater was now a lake of choppy, angry waves. The willows bent and seethed in the edge of the current. Beyond ran an uneven, bulging mass that resembled some gray, heavy, moving monster.

In the gloom Bostil could see how the river ran round a corner of wall and slanted away from it toward the center where it rose higher. Black objects that must have been driftwood appeared on this crest. They showed an instant, then flashed out of sight. The boom grew steadier, closer, louder, and the reverberations, like low thunder, were less noticeable because all sounds were being swallowed up.

A harder breeze puffed into Bostil's face. It brought a tremendous thunder, as if all the colossal walls were falling in an avalanche. Bostil knew the crest of the flood had turned the corner above and would soon reach him. He watched. He listened, but sound had ceased. His ears seemed ringing and they hurt. All his body felt cold and he backed up and up, with dead feet.

The shadows of the cañon lightened. A river-wide froth, like a curtain, moved down, spreading mushroom-wise before it, a rolling, coalescing, strange, heaving maelstrom. Bostil ran to escape the great wave that surged into the amphitheater, up and up the rocky trail. When he turned again he seemed to look down into hell. Murky depths, streaked by pale gleams, and black, sinister, changing forms yawned beneath him. He watched with fixed eyes until once more the feeling of filled ears left him, and an awful, thundering boom assured him of actualities. It was only the Colorado in flood.

XV

BOSTIL slept that night, but his sleep was troubled, and a strange, dreadful roar seemed to run through it like a mournful wind over a dark desert. He was awakened early by a voice at his window. He listened. There came a rap on the wood.

"Bostil! . . . Bostil!" It was Holley's voice.

Bostil rolled off the bed. He had slept without removing any apparel except his boots.

"Wal, Hawk, what d'ye mean wakin' a man at this unholy hour?" growled Bostil.

Holley's face appeared above the rude sill. It was pale and grave, with the hawk eyes like gleams.

"It ain't so awful early," he said. "Listen, Boss."

Bostil halted in the act of pulling on a boot. He looked at his man while he listened. The still air outside seemed filled with low boom, like thunder at a distance. Bostil tried to look astounded.

"It's the Colorado! She's boommin'!"

"That's bad for Creech," replied Holley. "Boss, why didn't you fetch them hosses over?"

Bostil's face darkened. He was a bad man to oppose—to question—at times.

"Holley, you're sure powerful anxious about Creech. Are you his friend?"

"Naw! I've little use fer Creech," replied Holley. "An' you know thet. But I hold for his hosses as I would any man's."

"A-huh! An' what's your kick?"

"Nothin' except you could have fetched them over before the flood come down. Thet's all."

The old horse trader and his right-hand rider looked at each other for a moment in silence. They understood each other. Then Bostil returned to the task of pulling on wet boots and Holley went away.

Bostil opened his door and stepped outside. The eastern ramparts of the desert were bright red with the rising sun. With the night behind him and the morning cool and bright and beautiful Bostil did not suffer a pang nor feel a regret. He walked round under the cottonwoods where the mocking birds were singing. The shrill, screeching bray of a burro split the morning stillness, and with that the sounds of the awakening village drowned that sullen, dreadful boom of the river. Bostil went in to breakfast.

He encountered Lucy in the kitchen, and he did not avoid her. He could tell from the smiling greeting she gave him that he was his old self again. Lucy had her sleeves rolled up showing round, strong brown arms. Somehow to Bostil she seemed different. She had been pretty, but now she was more than that. She was radiant. Her blue eyes danced. She looked excited. She had been telling her aunt something and that worthy woman appeared at once shocked and delighted. But Bostil's entrance had caused a mysterious break in whatever had been going on, except the preparation of the morning meal.

"Now I rode in on some confab or other, that's sure," said Bostil good-naturedly.

"You sure did, dad," replied Lucy with a bright smile.

"Wal, let me sit in the game," he rejoined.

"Dad, you can't even ante," said Lucy.

"Jane, what's this kid up to?" asked Bostil, turning to his sister.

"The good Lord only knows!" replied Aunt Jane with a sigh.

"Kid? See here, dad, I'm eighteen long ago. I'm grown up. I can do as I please—go where I like—and anything. . . . Why, dad, I could get—married."

"Haw! Haw!" laughed Bostil. "Jane, hear the girl!"

"I hear her, Bostil," sighed Aunt Jane.

"Wal, Lucy, I'd just like to see you fetch some fool, lovesick rider round when I'm feelin' good," said Bostil.

Lucy laughed, but there was a roguish, daring flash in her eyes.

"Dad, you do seem to have all the young fellows scared. Some day maybe one will ride along—a rider like you used to be—that nobody could bluff. . . . And he can have me!"

"A-huh! . . . Lucy, are you in fun?"

Lucy tossed her bright head, but did not answer.

"Jane, what's got into her?" asked Bostil, appealing to his sister.

"Bostil, she's in fun, of course," declared Aunt Jane. "Still, at that, there's sense in what she says. Come to your breakfast now."

Bostil took his seat at the table, glad that he could once more be amiable with his womenfolk.

"Lucy, tomorrow'll be the biggest day Bostil's Ford ever seen," he said.

"It sure will be, dad. The biggest surprising day the Ford ever had," replied Lucy.

"Surprisin'?"

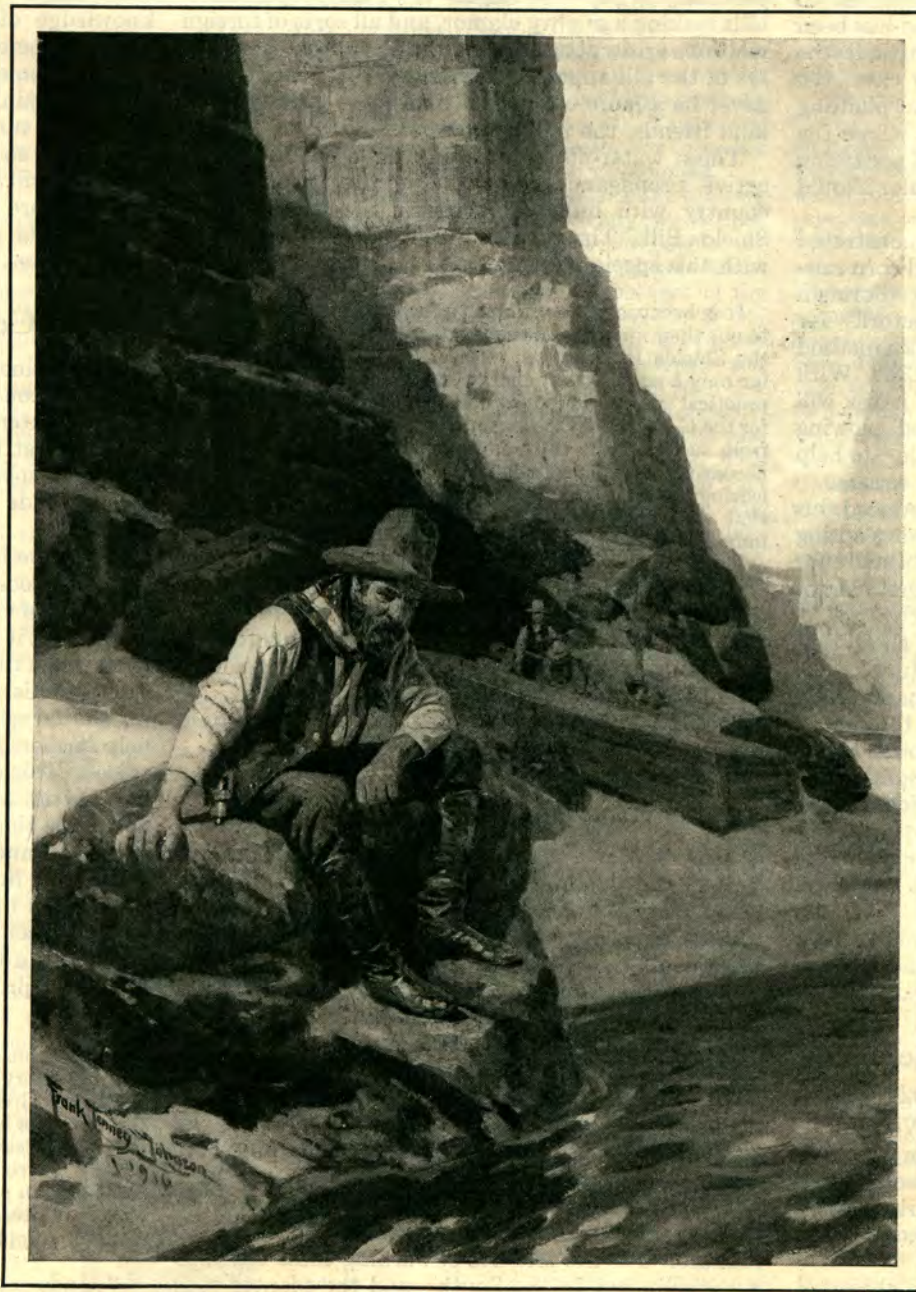
"Yes, dad."

"Who's goin' to get surprised?"

"Everybody."

Bostil said to himself that he had been used to Lucy's banter, but during his

(Continued on Page 1140)



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WILDFIRE

(Continued from Page 1111)

moody spell of days past he had forgotten how to take her, or else she was different.

"Brackton tells me you've entered a hoss against the field."

"It's an open race, isn't it?"

"Open as the desert, Lucy," he replied.

"What's this hoss Wildfire you've entered?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"If he's as good as his name you might be in at the finish. . . . But, Lucy, my dear, talkin' good sense now—you ain't a-goin' to go up on some unbroken mustang in this big race?"

"Dad, I'm going to ride a horse."

"But, Lucy, ain't it a risk you'll be takin'—all for fun?"

"Fun! . . . I'm in dead earnest."

Bostil liked the look of her then.

"Wal, I ain't afraid of your handlin' of a hoss," he said soberly. "An' as long as you're in earnest I won't stop you. But, Lucy, no bettin'. I won't let you gamble."

"Not even with you?" she coaxed.

Bostil stared at the girl.

"What'll you bet?" he queried.

"Dad, I'll go you a hundred dollars in gold that I finish one—two—three."

Bostil threw back his head to laugh.

What a chip of the old block she was!

"Child, there's some fast hosses thet'll be back of the King. You'd be throwin' away money."

Blue fire shone in his daughter's eyes. She meant business all right and Bostil thrilled with pride in her.

"Dad, I'll bet you two hundred, even, that I beat the King!" she flashed.

"Wal, of all the nerve!" ejaculated Bostil. "No, I won't take you up. Reckon I never before turned down an even bet."

Understand, Lucy, ridin' in the race is enough for you."

"All right, dad," replied Lucy.

Bostil suddenly shoved back his plate and turned his face to the open door.

"Don't I hear a runnin' hoss?"

Lucy darted to the door. "It's the King with Van up," she said. "Dad, Van's jumped off—he's coming in. He's running. Something has happened. . . . There are other hosses coming—riders—Indians."

Bostil knew what was coming and prepared himself. Rapid footsteps sounded.

"Hello, Miss Lucy. Where's Bostil?"

A lean, supple rider appeared before the door. It was Van, greatly excited.

"Come in, boy," said Bostil. "What're you flustered about?"

Van strode in, spurs jingling.

"Boss, there's—a sixty-foot raise—in the river!" Van panted.

"Oh!" cried Lucy.

"Wal, Van, I reckon I knowed thet," replied Bostil. "Mebbe I'm gettin' old, but I can still hear. . . . Listen."

"Highest flood we—ever seen," said Van.

"You've been down?" queried Bostil.

"Not to the river," replied Van. "I went as far as—where the gulch opens—on the bluff. There was a string of Navajos goin' down. An' some comin' up. I stayed there watchin' the flood—an' pretty soon Somers come up the trail with Blakesley an' Brack an' some riders. . . . An' Somers hollered out 'The boat's gone!'"

"Gone!" exclaimed Bostil in loud voice of consternation.

"Oh, dad! Oh! Van!" cried Lucy.

"Sure—she's gone. An' the whole place down there—where the willows was an' the sand bar—it was deep under water."

"Oh, dad! Oh! Van!" cried Lucy.

"Sure—she's gone. An' the whole place down there—where the willows was an' the sand bar—it was deep under water."

"What will become of Creech's horses?" asked Lucy breathlessly.

"Ain't it a shame!" went on Bostil, and he could have laughed aloud at his hypocrisy. He felt Lucy's blue eyes riveted upon his face.

"Thet's what we-all was sayin'," went on Van. "While we was watchin' the awful flood an' listenin' to the deep bum—bum—bum of rollin' rocks someone seen Creech an' two Piutes leadin' the hosses up the trail where the slide was. We counted the hosses—nine. An' we saw the roan shine blue in the sunlight."

"Piutes with Creech!" exclaimed Bostil, the deep gloom in his eyes lighting. "By all thet's lucky! Mebbe them Indians can climb the hosses out of thet hole an' find water an' grass enough."

"Mebbe," replied Van doubtfully. "Sure them Piutes could if there's a chance. But there ain't any grass."

"Oh, dad—why, why didn't you hurry Creech's hosses over?" said Lucy.

Something tight within Bostil's breast seemed to ease and lessen.

"Why didn't I? . . . Wal, Lucy, I reckon I wasn't in no hurry to oblige Creech. I'm sorry now."

"It won't be so terrible if he doesn't lose the hosses," murmured Lucy.

"Where's young Joel Creech?" asked Bostil.

"He stayed on this side last night," replied Van. "Fact is, Joel's the one who first knew the flood was on. Someone said he slept in the cañon last night. Anyway, he's ravin' crazy now. An' if he doesn't do harm to someone or hisself I'll miss my guess."

Bostil fondled his daughter a moment, the first time in many a day, and then he turned to his rider at the door.

"Van, how's the King?"

"Wild to run, Bostil, jest plumb wild. There won't be any hoss with the ghost of a show tomorrow."

Lucy raised her drooping head.

"Is that so, Van Sickle? . . . Listen here: If you and Sage King don't get more wild running tomorrow than you ever had I'll never ride again!"

With this retort Lucy left the room. Van stared at the door and then at Bostil.

"What'd I say, Bostil?" he asked plaintively. "I'm always rilin' her."

"Cheer up, Van. You didn't say much. Lucy is fiery these days. She's got a hoss somewhere an' she's goin' to ride him in the race. She offered to bet on him—against the King! It certainly beat me all hollow."

"But see here, Van: I've a hunch there's a dark hoss goin' to show up in this race. So don't underdate Lucy an' her mount—whatever he is. She calls him Wildfire. Ever seen him?"

"I sure haven't. Fact is, I haven't seen Lucy for days an' days. As for the hunch you gave, I'll say I was figurin' Lucy for some real race. Bostil, she doesn't make a hoss run. He'll run jest to please her. An' Lucy's lighter'n a feather. Why, Bostil, if she happened to ride out on Blue Roan, or some other hoss as fast, I'd jest wilt."

Bostil uttered a laugh full of pride in his daughter.

"Wal, she won't show up on Blue Roan," he replied with grim gruffness. "Thet's sure as death. . . . Come on out now. I want a look at the King."

"I want a look at the King."

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