

THE HEALING SPRINGS

Continued from page 4

anything else. People don't usually have to pretend to like me."

"You know what I'm driving at?"

"Oh, yes, I know, and whatever he is you've said that you will save him. I'm straight—you know that. Somehow what I felt from his preaching—well, everything got sort of mixed up with him, and he was—was different. It was like the long dream of Walt and the baby, and he a part of it. I don't know what I felt, or what I might have felt for him. I'm a woman—I can't understand. But I know what I feel now. I never want to see him again on earth—or in heaven. It needn't be necessary even in heaven, but what happened between God and me through him—stays, Tim; and so you must help him get away safe. It's in your hands—you say they're left to you."

"I don't trust that too much." Suddenly he pointed out of the window toward the town. "See, I'm right! There they are, a dozen of 'em, mounted. They're off to run him down."

Her face paled. She glanced toward the Hill of Healing. "He's got an hour's start," she said, "he'll get into the mountains and be safe."

"If they don't catch him before that?"

"Or if you don't get to him first," she said with nervous insistence.

He turned to her with a hard look, then as he met her soft, fearless, beautiful eyes, his own grew gentle. "It takes a lot of doing. Yet I'll do it for you, Laura," he said. "But it's hard on the pioneers."

Once more her humor flared, and it seemed to him that "getting religion" was not so depressing after all—wouldn't be, anyhow, when the "nasty job" was over.

"The pioneers will get over it, Tim," she replied. "They've swallowed a lot in their time. Heaven's gate will have to be pretty wide to let in a real pioneer," she added. "He takes up so much room, ah, Timothy Denton!" she added with an outburst of whimsical humor.

"It hasn't spoiled you, being converted, has it?" he said, and gave a quick little laugh which somehow did more for his ancient cause with her than all he had ever said or done. Then he stepped outside and swung into his saddle.

It had been a hard and anxious ride; but Tim had won, and was keeping his promise. The night had fallen before he got to the mountains, which he and the pioneers had seen the Faith Healer enter. They had four miles start of Tim, and had ridden fiercely, and they entered the gulch into which the refugee had disappeared, till two miles ahead. They had seen Tim coming; but had determined to make a sure thing of it, and would themselves do what was necessary with the impostor and take no chances. So they pressed their horses, and he saw them swallowed by the trees, as darkness gathered.

Changing his course, he entered the familiar hills which he knew better than any pioneer of Jansen, and rode a diagonal course toward the trail they would take. But night fell suddenly, and there was nothing to do but wait till morning. There was one comfort in this: the others must also wait, and the refugee could not go far. In any case, he must make for the settlement or perish, since he had left behind his sheep and his cow.

It fell out better than Tim hoped. The pioneers were as good hunters as was he, their instinct was as sure, their scouts and trackers were many; and he was but one. They found the Faith Healer by a little stream eating bread and honey, and like an ancient woodlander drinking from a horn, relics of his rank imposture. He made no resistance. They tried him formally, if perfunctorily. He admitted his imposture, and begged for his life. Then they stripped him, tied a bit of canvas round his waist, fastened him to a tree, and were about to complete his punishment when Tim Denton burst upon them.

Whether the rage he showed was all real or not, whether his accusations of bad faith came from so deeply wounded a spirit as he would have them believe, he was not likely to tell; but he claimed the prisoner as his own, and declined to say what he meant to do. When, however, they saw the abject terror of the Faith Healer as he looked at Tim, and as he begged not to be left alone with Denton, for they had not meant death, and he thought he read death in Tim's ferocious eyes, they laughed cynically, and left it to Tim to uphold the honor of Jansen—and the pioneers.

As they disappeared, the last thing they saw was Tim with his back to them, his hands on his hips, and a knife clapped in his fingers.

"He'll hit his scalp and make a monk of him," chuckled the oldest and hardest of them.

"Dat Tim will cut his heart out, I think, *hogshit!*" said Nicolle Terrasse, and took a drink of white whisky.

For a long time Tim stood looking at the other, until no sound came from the woods whither the pioneers had gone. Then at last, slowly and with no roughness, as the terror-stricken impostor shrank and withered, he cut the cords that bound him.

"Dress yourself!" he said shortly, and sat down beside the stream, and washed his face and hands as though to cleanse them from contamination. He appeared to take no notice of the other, though his ears keenly noted every movement.

The impostor dressed nervously, yet slowly; he scarcely comprehended anything, except that he was not in immediate danger. When

he had finished he stood looking at Denton, who was still seated on a log, plunged in meditation.

It seemed hours before Tim turned, and now his face was quiet, if set and determined. He walked slowly over and stood looking at his victim for sometime without speaking. The evangelist's eyes dropped, and a grayness stole over his features. This steely calm was even more frightening than the ferocity which had been in his captor's face. At length the tense silence was broken.

"Wasn't the old game good enough? Was it played out? Why did you take to this? Why did you do it, Scranton?"

The voice quavered a little in reply. "I don't know. Something sort of pushed me into it."

"How did you come to start it?"

There was a long silence; then the husky reply came. "I got a sickener last time—"

"Yes, I remember, at Waywing."

"I got into the desert and had hard times, awful for awhile. I hadn't enough to eat, and I didn't know whether I'd die by hunger or fever or Indians or snakes."

"Oh, you were seeing snakes," said Tim grimly.

"Not the kind you mean; I hadn't anything to drink."

"No, you never did drink. I remember—just was crooked and slumped over women. Well, about the snakes?"

"I caught them to eat, and they were poison snakes often. And I wasn't quick at first to get them safe by the neck—they're quick too."

Tim laughed inwardly. "Getting your food by the sweat of your brow—and a snake in it too, same as Adam. Well, was it in the desert you got your taste for honey too, same as John the Baptist—that was his name if I remember."

"He looked at the tin of honey on the ground."

"Not in the desert, but when I got to the grass country."

"How long were you in the desert?"

"Close to a year."

Tim's eyes opened wider. He saw that the man was speaking the truth. "Got to thinking in the desert, and sort of willing things to come to pass, and moaning along you and the sky and the vultures and the hot hills and the snakes and the flowers, eh?"

"There weren't any flowers till I got to the grass country."

"Oh, cuss me if you aren't simple for your kind! I know all about that. And when you got to the grass country, you just picked up the honey and the flowers and a calf and a lamb and a mule here and there, without money and without price, and walked on. That it?"

The other shrank before the steel in the voice and nodded his head.

"But you kept thinking in the grass country of what you'd felt and said and done and willed in the desert. I suppose."

Again the other nodded.

"It seemed to you in the desert as if you'd saved your own life a hundred times, as if you'd just willed food and drink and safety to come, as if Providence had been at your elbow?"

"It was like a dream; and it stayed with me, and I had to think in the desert things I'd never thought before," was the half abstracted answer.

"You felt good in the desert?"

The other hung his head in shame. "Makes you seem pretty small, doesn't it? You didn't stay long enough, I guess, to get what you were feeling for, you started in on the new racket too soon. You never got really possessed that you was a sinner. I expect that's it."

The other made no reply.

"Well, I don't know much about such things. I was loose brought up; but I've a friend," Laura swam before his eyes, "that says religion's all right, and long ago as I can remember my mother used to pray three times a day, with grace at meals too. I know there's a lot in it for those that need it, and there seems to be a lot of folks needing it, if I'm to judge by them down there at Jansen, specially when there's the laying on of hands and the Healing Springs. Oh, that was a pig sty game, Scranton, that about God giving you the Healing Springs, like Moses and the rock? Why, I discovered them springs myself two years before I went South, and I guess God wasn't helping me any, not after I've kept out of His way as I have. But anyhow religion's real, that's my sense of it. And you can get it. I bet, if you try, I've seen it got. A friend of mine got it, got it under your preaching—not from you—but you was the accident that brought it about, I expect. It's funny, it's merkabulous, but it's so. Kneel down!" he added with peremptory suddenness. "Kneel, Scranton!"

In four the other knelt.

"You're going to get religion now—here you're going to pray for what you didn't get—and almost got in the desert. You're going to ask forgiveness for all your damn tricks, and pray like a fanning mill for the spirit to come down. You ain't a scoundrel at heart—a friend of mine says so. You're a weak vessel, cracked perhaps. You've got to be saved and start right over again, and 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.' Pray, pray, Scranton, and tell the whole truth, and get it—get religion! Pray like the — You go on, and pray out loud! Remember the desert and Mary Jewell and your mother! Did you have a mother, Scranton? Say, did you have a mother, lad?"

Tim's voice suddenly lowered before the last word, for the Faith Healer had broken down in a torrent of tears. "Oh, my mother,



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