

ME--Gold Eagle Jack

The Tale of a Man, a Girl and a Book
By Aileen Cleveland Higgins

THE most important date in my calendar for the last six months was the day I first laid eyes on her. A girl in it? Yes, there happens to be a girl in my story. What you laughin' at? Lovesick? Well, if I had any ordinary thing like that the matter with me, I'd just hike out to the desert and let my bones get a good bleachin'. You'll see it's something entirely different when I get to piecin' matters together.

Today I went down to our bank and got as many bags of my gold as I could carry up to the shack. Then I piled it all upon the table here and I've been sittin' starin' at it till my eyes have got all blinky with the shine. But it ain't no use. It's no good for what ails me. It wouldn't make any difference if the whole Pacific was full of gold eagles—and all mine.

What's the matter with me? Well, I'll just break loose for once and try to tell you. I say try, for I'm not dead sure you'll more'n half understand. Did you ever stop to think what gets in between us humans like a veil, when we try to get a right good look at each other? It's curious, how tangled up we do get when we get to searchin' for a straight idea of the other fellow.

I've got that beginning of it all in my head just like a moving picture, and I can get it out any time I want to and look at it. I was ridin' along on the road to Lone Star Camp, and I see some one a comin' off the trail through the sage brush, lickety-cut. I saw it was a girl—and I went a little slow to be accommodatin'. She jerked up her horse along side of me and said, sort of out of breath, "I'm all turned round—I don't know which road is which. I don't know which road to take to get back to Keystone."

I LOOKED at her a minute. I don't know just what it was I liked best about her face. You know how it is in San Francisco, when you're lookin' at a lot of flower bunches there on the corner. First, you think it's the violets that makes them all look good—then it appears to be the carnations—then all of a sudden, it surely is the daisies, and so on.

Her hair was the blow-away, fluff-away kind, but still it didn't act like it wanted to get very far away from curlin' round her face, which was as much like a pink and white apple blossom as anything I can think of just now. And her mouth—she had the most speakin' mouth I ever saw. She didn't need to say a word—her lips kept crookin' round in such pretty different ways I couldn't have kept my eyes off of them if it hadn't been for her eyes. I can't say much about her eyes except a fellow would be bound to remember 'em long after he was dead—he couldn't help himself. I liked her face—every bit of it. She looked mighty good to me and it didn't take me long to make up my mind.

"I'm going to Keystone," I says, turnin' my horse around, "just come along with me and I'll take care of you."

"But you were going the other way!" she says, surprised.

A man was waitin' to meet me at Lone Star, but what did I care? "I was just turnin' back to look for something I dropped," says I. "And it ain't of enough consequence to go back any further for it."

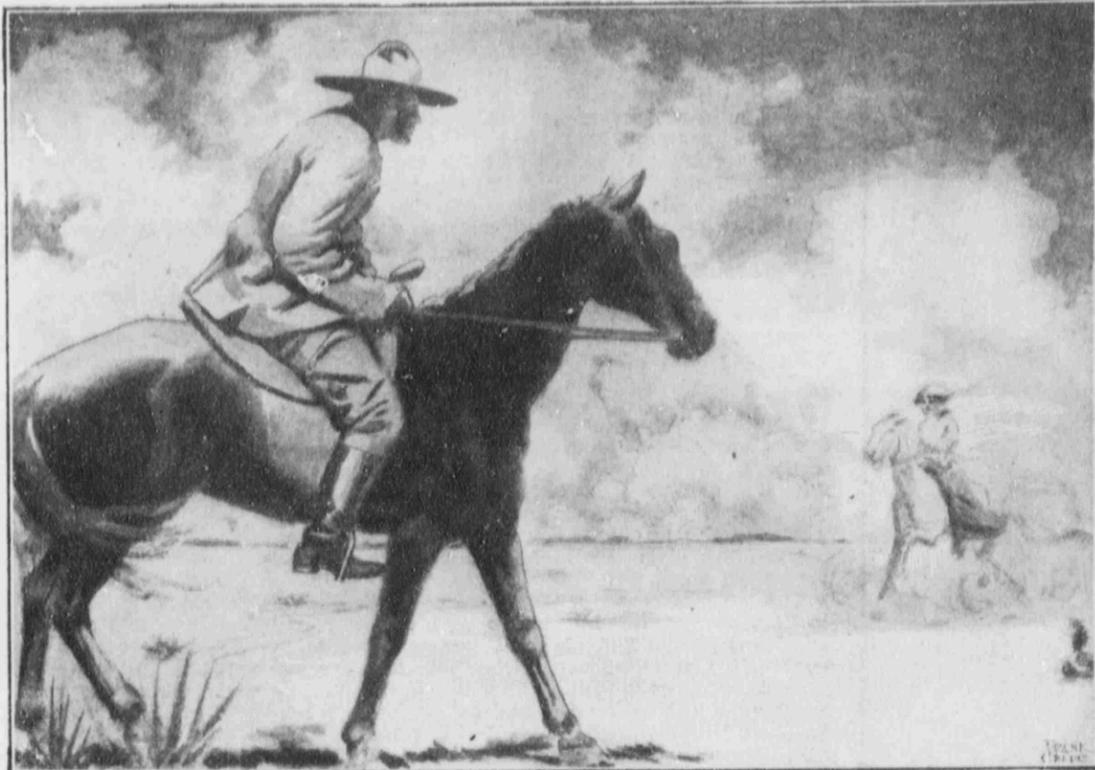
So she rode right along side of me, real relieved.

"How did a little lady like you ever get out in this country?" I asked, natural enough, as we went along. "What can you be after in a place like this?"

"Oh, I want to get the atmosphere of the place," she says.

"This atmosphere's not worth much," I says, thinkin' of the wind and dust.

"Oh, I suppose it's according to one's point of view," she says.



I see some one a comin' through the sage brush, lickety-cut. I saw it was a girl.

Point of view—now here was something new; then all of a sudden I thought I understood. "You'd have to come from a pretty poor place to find southern Nevada much better. Where'd you come from?" I asked.

"Japan was the last place I was in," she says. "Japan?" I says, surprised, rememberin' some pictures. "What's the matter with Japan? Ain't the cherry trees bloomin' any more? Why didn't you like it?"

"Oh, I did like it—but this is more the setting I want. This kind of a field is much less untouched. It's freer and wider," she answers me. "There's sure plenty of room to move around in," I says, looking at the desert layin' all around us.

"And there's such a chance for local color," she says.

"If it's color you're after—you'll get plenty of it in our sunsets," I says. "There ain't none to beat 'em—nor the mountains neither."

"Oh, I think it's a wonderful country," her face all lighting up. "It's wonderful any way you look at it. Father says from a mining standpoint the place is just full of opportunity. Father came with me, you know—to look after some of his interests in the mines here. Maybe you know him—Mr. Sherman Joyce?" she said the name very proud.

AND what do you think? I did know him—he was the heavy-weight easterner I'd closed a big deal with that very morning. I could have soaked him plenty if that had been my way of doing things. He thinks he knows a lot more about mining than he really does. There's some about just the a, b, c, of the thing he's not caught on to yet. But he's the kind you couldn't help likin' some.

"Yes," I says, "I've had a little business with him. He's all right. I'm glad you've got some one to take care of you here—it ain't no place for you alone."

"Oh, I know a great many people here," she says. "Mrs. Carlton is a college friend of mine, and I'm visitin' her—so I know all her friends. Hasn't she the dearest little adobe home?"

"I don't know," I answers, "I've never been in it."

"Oh," she says, just like that. "Don't you know her? I supposed every one knew Mrs. Carlton."

"Yes, I know her some," I says, "Her husband's our lawyer, and I guess we give him more than any other clients he's got—even that Philadelphia set. I see Mrs. Carlton in the office sometimes and around—but, you see, we don't just run in the same set. I don't go much on the camp's society ways—and besides, outside of business—I've got a reputation in this place about as bad as a

train robber." "How interestin'," she says, makin' her horse go real slow. "How ever did you accomplish it?"

"That's easy," I says, "I try to amuse myself some when I ain't workin'—and I've tried different ways—mostly without gettin' much out of them—but always seeing a thing to the finish. And I don't think it's worth while takin' the trouble coverin' up these things like most of the fellows do—especially that college set of fellows the town's full of. Some of 'em go at getting rich, too, on the same coverin' up principle. But I've never seen things that way myself. So just as every one knows they are dead sure of a square deal when they do business with me—they know too, every time I mix the drinks, or play a heavy stake, or—" I didn't go on, for some way, things didn't seem just as innocent as usual to me. I just summed everything up so as to be honest without giving details—"I'm about as bad as they're made," I says.

She was quiet a minute. Then she says, like she was sort of thinkin' out loud, "Square sinning—that sounds sort of paradoxical—but it seems to me that's the kind it

would be easiest to pardon." "Pardon?" I jerks out, flarin' up, "I don't ask no one to pardon me for nothin' I do."

She looks at me a minute with her eyes half closed like she was makin' a camera out of 'em and gettin' a picture back in her head. Then she says, "You are certainly a unique type."

"Now, what fellow could be sure what she meant by that? It sounded fair enough but I didn't have no answer ready for her, so I says very sudden, "Your cinch needs tightenin'."

Then when I'd fixed her saddle, and we'd started off again, she asks, "Would you mind telling me if you carry a pistol?"

"You bet your life," I says, "Jack Bruce ain't goin' around half dressed." Then I pulled my coat sideways, so she could see my belt with my pet pistol in it.

She seemed real pleased, though she wouldn't take it in her hands to examine it close.

JUST then an auto whizzed by. "A modern mining camp with its automobiles, its electric lights and telephones would be a revelation to Bret Harte, wouldn't it," she says, lookin' back after the auto. "Do you like his work?"

Then I did a fool thing. It's not in me to bluff smooth, but I didn't have sense enough not to try.

"I think some of his work is very coarse," I says, thinkin' from the first part of her remark, he must be some screw pretty much behind the times.

"Oh, you do?" she cries. "Why, we worship Bret Harte at home in Boston."

Then I knew the gentleman must have some way stumbled onto a mighty big pile.

"Maybe in Boston, it don't matter how a man gets at a thing," I says, after a minute.

"Oh, yes it does," she says. "But surely you think Bret Harte's work shows true skill? It seems to me he has complete mastery of his material. I've read everything he has written a dozen times over."

Then I was disgusted with myself. But thinkin' over my remarks I couldn't see but what the things I'd said would do for a writin' man as well as any other, so I just says, real stubborn, "Well, I'll take the newspaper every time instead."

"How long have you been here?" she asked, after a while. "Seven years," I says. "Ever since the camp started. I struck for the sage brush as soon as I heard about the first strike and I've worked hard ever since. I ain't had a good rest since the last day I jumped off my jockey saddle at Tanforan."

Then she looked at me a little queer. "Were you a jockey?" she says, in a way I didn't like a bit.

"Yes, I was a jockey," I says, "and I've been other things not so good—a loafer, a gambler, and