



FROM THE LOWEST LEVEL

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AN ASSOCIATION OF MINING MEN OF CALIFORNIA

BY J. H. WYTHE, JR.

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"Is Judas busted yet?" solemnly inquired Jimmie James, the chain-bearer.

"He was just a-critin' ready fer to 'ang 'im wen I 'ad 'a leave," called back the miner as he passed on down the trail.

Dejectedly the chain-bearer trails up the mountain toward the Mexican camp. Reason enough has he for sadness. Not that he is any friend to Judas Iscariot, but because of a certain blue-eyed maiden, Ellen Truson by name, whom despite the watchfulness and dislike of her step-mother he hopes to see alone long enough to bid farewell, while Colonel Bestor, the new surveyor, is watching the execution of Judas on the plaza; for Jimmie James expects to leave the New Carthagina mines to-morrow for the Boise district in Idaho.

When he reaches the road the chain-bearer seats himself upon a log, waiting there according to orders, for the new surveyor, whom he sees several hundred yards below riding on horseback up the zigzag road.

"Wish 'e'd 'urry," Jimmie mutters, wiping the perspiration from his forehead on the sleeve of his jacket.

The chain-bearer is yet quite a distance from the Mexican camp, which is on the summit of the mountain; but the atmosphere is so clear and still that he catches, occasionally floating down from the white church which he sees standing out near the top of the mountain, a note from the chant of the Spanish choir, grotesquely alternating now and again with the long necessary and the intoning of the Italian priest celebrating the mass.

Far down the canyon a voice, once melodious but long since roughened and broken by exposure, hard usage and hard fare, lustily breaks the silence:

Angel de amor, mi amor divino. Tu eres la duena del corazón. Ultima luz, que mi humillar. Or, no mecesias tu respender.

Instantly followed by a multitude of oaths, shouts, repeated cracks of a blacksnake whip like a rattling fire of musketry, and ending in a mixed mass of sounds rendered intelligible only by the words:

"Hello, Jimmie!" cries Colonel Bestor, slackening the gallop of his horse, "what's all that?"

"It's his crazy 'Mig, sorr," was the reply. "He's 'a breaking in 'is pack, and he's loaded with 'im 'sucker wood down 'a' the Hingish camp; 'wen I do go back to the top o' the hill 'is mules' 'e'd be loaded with barrels of water."

"I thought it might have something to do with Judas," said the surveyor.

"No, sorr," Jimmie replied, adding what the miner had said about the execution.

Colonel Bestor, who had arrived at New Carthagina two days ago, is an ex-army officer who has to do with the army on account of failing health. It is not his custom to converse with his subordinates unless he is so inclined, and his chain-bearer did not dream of interrupting the necessary conversation with his superior. So in silence the colonel rides up the winding way, followed on foot by Jimmie James.

Presently from the heights, but mellowed by distance, comes the sound of a brass band playing a gay waltz.

At the church and the few houses of the Mexican camp visible from this side of the mountain pass out of sight, the surveyor only to be seen in the distance, where a Japanese bomb that is fired as a signal. And now the firing of guns, the crackling of packs of firecrackers and bursting of bombs, the backing of dogs, the shouting of a hurra, and the universal hub-bub signify to Jimmie that the services of the church are almost done, or, in the opinion of the Mexicans, ought to be.

The surveyor is not so well informed. "Get up," he cried to his horse, "we needn't 'urry, sorr," shouted Jimmie.

But fearing he would be too late, the colonel whips up his mustang. For on his way to break the army up he had been asked for an alms toward paying for the obsequies of Judas Iscariot, by no less a person than Judas Iscariot himself. For a Spanish boy, riding more nimbly on the tail of a jackass than any one else he has seen, such riding could believe possible, met the surveyor coming out of the office and drew out: "Pleas-a Don Senor Colonel Bestor to geef-a money for Judas Iscariot," at the same time making an effigy of Senor Iscariot, which he was holding on the front of his saddle, bow profoundly and spread out his hands for a gift. Could words more plainly have asked?

So when he found he would have to pass through the Mexican camp to reach the old Union prospect, the depth of which he had been ordered to measure, the new surveyor had delayed leaving the office until he had partly broken up the army on the execution of Judas. And now, fearing he had waited too long, Colonel Bestor is urging on his pony, determined if possible to be present at the death. But there is no need of haste, as Jimmie James well knows.

By fast walking and by taking advantage of short cuts the chain-bearer comes over the ridge, in sight of the plaza, but at a higher elevation than the Colonel Bestor is mounting from his yellow mustang on the opposite side of the jail from the crowd.

As Jimmie hurries toward the shelf where, as though hanging in mid-air, he sees the women coming out of the old, tumble-down, once whitewashed Roman Catholic church and mingling with the throng in the tiny plaza.

The jacks, that had carried Judas in a mule or marmoset and jumpers, some of them wearing bright-colored neckerchiefs and others with red sash belts; here and there a Cornishman in a Sunday broadcloth, and younger some in workaday clothes; poverty-stricken pigs, some black and some a dingy, dirty white; dogs of every size and breed and color, but almost all of them curs, the jacks, that had carried Judas, gayly caparisoned; bare-footed and bare-legged children, the majority of them hatless; Spanish women, the most of them old and yellow and wizened, but among them a few young women with the rich, brown beauty peculiar to them, but old and young alike dressed entirely in black, and with black shawls, which the old women wear as a cowl, from beneath which shine piercing black eyes, nothing else being visible except their low foreheads and a narrow border of ebony-like hair; and several Cornish women and girls, all of them, except one, dressed in the brightest of colors and bedecked with ribbons and plumes. The one exception is no other than Ellen Truson, whose plain straw hat with a narrow band of ribbon around it, and dress of simple white, seem almost as striking by the contrast with the others of her sex who are around her as her rare beauty would be anywhere; for she is of a fair complexion, with rosy cheeks and lips and eyes of deepest blue, and fine, though jet-black hair.

All these people moving among themselves, against the background of the Mexican houses, once of various colors, but

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long since toned down and harmonized with one another by that dim tint which only time and neglect and dirt combined can give, and the entire scene still fairly blended and united by the mild air and cloudless sky, seemed to Colonel Bestor to make up one of the most picturesque scenes he had ever witnessed.

But the chain-bearer has eyes only for the fair girl in the white, until a bend in the street hides her from view.

In a few moments Jimmie enters the plaza. The crowd is gathered around a live oak tree, standing out from the extreme little triangular plaza, the other angles being marked by the church and the jail. Suspended by a wire from this oak hangs Judas Iscariot, with his head gravely and solemnly raised and his arms outstretched on the porch in front of the church, now playing a solemn dirge for Judas.

It can hardly be the frightful execution of the dirge that Jimmie James has in mind, the dirge, excruciating though the blare of that minor strain may be. More likely it is because Ellen Truson is no longer there. But accountable or not, certain it is that having made sure that she has left the plaza, he turns to the opposite side of the church and seats himself on a rock, where, although out of view of the crowd, he can see any one who may come up the single, steep, straggling street which leads from the plaza to the jail from the other direction to that by which he had entered it.

The mountain slope at the chain-bearer's feet is so precipitous that it is almost a cliff. On the left the black and the red ravine is a winding brook, with bordering willows and lofty trees and a bit of pasture, where several cows are browsing, and on the edge of which is a ruined hut. But, though so clearly seen, the height is so great that evening appears, as it were, in miniature. Towering above the other side of the ravine rises the loftiest part of the Coast Range Mountains, enough in the shadow and distance to appear as a mere necessary background, but in mass and boldness distinct in their outline, and so near that they seem to Jimmie almost to overhang the Mexican camp, with its church and jail and the black and the red ravine, and the plaza, while in their invincible silence and calm repose he feels, what he is too ignorant to be able to express, that there is something scornful and stern and threatening in the attitude of a poet, circumstances had made Jimmie James first a miner and now a surveyor's chain-bearer, and to be entirely indifferent under any stress of anxiety or grief to the necessities of such a scene would have been for him impossible.

"Hit makes a feller feel sorter lonesomer," he said.

Meanwhile the Colonel Bestor has been discussing the young man, Don Sanchez by name, hat in hand, comes to the side of the jail where the surveyor is viewing the scene. Placing his unemployed hand over his heart and making, beyond doubt, the most polite bow of the world, Don Sanchez, in a characteristic and extremely soft, limpid and musical voice, rendered the more interesting by its continental but inimitable pronunciation and accent, said:

"Def-a the Don Senor Colonel Bestor weel be so kind-a to geef-a heed heem the honora of-a taken care-a of hees horse, while the Don Senor and the colonel-a shooft-a in the jail."

The surveyor consenting, Don Sanchez sends a young man away with the horse and leads Colonel Bestor to the plaza porch of the jail, in plain view of the Judas tree, where, after many apologies for so doing, Don Sanchez leaves him, for Don Sanchez himself is to be the grand master of the ceremonies.

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which did not have craps on its doorknob from Good Friday to Easter, and it is now the interesting Saturday.

When Colonel Bestor rode up to Mrs. Truson's gate the chain-bearer had already said "Good-by." Ellen was in her room weeping, and he stood there, his hand on the door, shrilly beating the disconsolate lover, who for his part did not look as if he heard a word she was saying.

As the surveyor and his attendant pass the saloon on their way down the hill, the old Union prospect, Colonel Bestor is surprised to see Don Sanchez, who stands just inside its door, angrily scowl at the chain-bearer.

"What's the trouble between you and Don Sanchez?" asks the surveyor.

"Hellen's give um the sack, sorr," he said.

"And accepted you, Jimmie?"

"No, sorr," the chain-bearer replies, his lower lip quivering, "heer's Steve Clemons' sorr."

"Ah, I'm sorry I spoke of her," said the surveyor. "Are you sure?"

The chain-bearer affirmatively nods his head.

"Well, I am not," said Colonel Bestor.

While the surveyor and his man are silently descending the hill toward the old Union prospect it may be well to say that Colonel Bestor is yet a young man, and that although he has been in the States army he had been dubbed "colonel" by the manager of the New Carthagina mines because it was deemed that his title should greatly outrank the bosses of the mine, who were called "captains."

"Are we almost there?" asked Colonel Bestor.

"Us 'd 'ave time if I'd cut across 'ere, sorr," said Jimmie, pointing toward a footpath, "an you 'urry 'urry 'urry 'orsc."

"All right," assents the surveyor.

In a moment the chain-bearer disappeared in the chaparral.

Upring on his pony, the colonel is soon out of sight of the Mexican camp, the last vestige of it which he saw being the tree of execution and the fluttering remnants of poor old Judas Iscariot.

Meanwhile there is trouble in the English camp.

"Them men sez they won't work no more on the four 'undred after to-day, sorr, an' I can't get none w'at will neither," said Captain Black, the underground boss, entering the manager's office.

"What do you think it is?" asked Mr. Rose, the manager.

"I've no hider, sorr, but you know 'ow the men 'ave been complainin' 'all 'long o' the water 'at the shaft 'om has been 'a' lots' 'us. Lots' o' 'em's sick, or 'as sore heyes. An 'ye can see by the timebook 'ow many 'as give up their jobs rather 'n work 'ere hit's so weakenin' 'er' sicken'."

"See here," said Mr. Rose; and going to the other side of the draughting-table he took from a drawer a large map and unfolded it. "This is one of the plans we got when we bought this property. Here," he added, pointing to the map, "is our new shaft; and here three-fourths of a mile to the north is the old Union prospect. Now the men in the mine, regardless of interrupting his chief, and forcibly striking the plan with his fist, "no more work 'ere," he said.

Colonel Bestor walks leisurely into the office.

"How deep?" abruptly asks Mr. Rose.

"Three hundred and forty-two feet to the bottom."

"What!" shouts the manager, "three hundred and forty?"

The office door dashes open and Jimmie James drops into a chair, gasping out:

"He didn't stop—dead 'im—skip!—that's 'all 'is know's."

Mr. Rose, followed by the others, rushes out of the office.

"Hit's Tommy Davies an' Jimmie Taylor, sorr, 'at 'as 'eard 'em say 'at the men in the shaft-house 'ere 'as sayin'."

Beside the mouth of the shaft Dr. Symons and the bucket-tender, Don Sanchez, are vigorous in the prostrate forms of Taylor and Davies.

"How did it happen?" interrogates Mr. Rose.

"'W'at 'is 'up?" inquires Captain Black, the surface boss.

"'How do you know?" asks the manager.

"Bell rung 'oist men," skip comed 'up 'all full o' dirt, an' Taylor an' Davies a-lyin' 'ere on the floor, 'at 'as 'eard 'em say 'at the men in the shaft-house 'ere 'as sayin'."

"'E's 'on the four 'undred,'" said Jimmie.

"'He can't stop,'" said Jimmie.

"'Yes, yes! 'is know's'" he impatiently interrupts. "I'll be back soon," he calls, hurrying on, "keep 'up 'ear'."

The men, that had been covered with infinite gentleness and that peculiar care and reverential tenderness that is uniformly characteristic of even the roughest miners under such circumstances, carry Taylor and Davies to the shaft-house, and there, with all day the pumps are at work and huge buckets, which have been rigged up to assist in the emergency, are hoisting out the water; and inspection parties of the most experienced miners, exercising the utmost caution not to be suddenly overpowered by the deadly gas, are every little while descending and ascending the ladders in the shaft.

As it is known that the 400-foot level where the men were at work is under a column of water reaching to the 200-foot level in the shaft, to say nothing of the gas that is above the water, the effort is, of course, to clear the mine of water, and to recover the bodies for Christian burial, a matter of the utmost importance in the eyes of every California miner, however wicked and reckless.

Graves are dug and coffins are made and mourning garments are prepared by the friends of those who were at the mine at the time of the accident, and at the last there may be no unseemly delay.

At the noon hour on Monday, two days after the accident, Captain Black has gone to the office to report progress. The new shaft whistle is sounding and the men are wending their way toward their respective camps.

The only persons at present in the mine-house are Colonel Bestor, Jimmie James, Joseph Treaskis (the engineer), and plainly visible through the furnace-room door, the stoker.

"Where did you say the captain put that plan?" asked the surveyor.

"'Hon that 'at 'ack o' 'er' 'air-compressor, sorr,'" Treaskis replied.

"I'll 'and it to 'e, sorr," said Jimmie James. By standing on a box on tiptoe the chain-bearer manages to knock the stoker off the shaft, and he catches the head of the surveyor, who wildly clutches the air in a futile attempt to catch it.

On their knees, Colonel Bestor and the chain-bearer try to reach the plan from the far corner of the furnace-room, and, plainly visible through the furnace-room door, the stoker.

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