

# THE SUNDAY CALL'S THE KING OF THE CROOKED

## \$50 A WEEK PRIZE STORY

BY ANNA BALLARD REEVES

I shot off the car and hurried down the street toward my office. Hearing a man remark as he passed, "Queer looking customer; looks like a real Westerner," I glanced up. Walking ahead of me was a figure that brought to my mind joyful recollections of the past.

The peculiar walk induced from constant wearing of heavy leather chaps, the rounded shoulders designated as the "cowboy hump," and the wide white hat, all bespoke the plains. I overtook the man and grabbed a big arm.

"Is it really you, Hank?" I cried. "How did you get so far away from home?"

A big, weathered, humorous face in which anxiety struggled looked down on me.

"If it ain't that cussed little would-be cowboy Jim from a man! Who'd a-thought he'd made such a good one?" he remarked as he nearly wrung my hand off in his recognizing shake.

"Come up to my office, it's right here, and we will talk."

"I was just huntin' you. I've got a hull coral full of trouble on hand."

Seated in my private office, I sent the boy for whisky and told him that I was engaged on important business and to allow no one to disturb me.

"Now, Hank," said I to my silent old-time comrade of vacation days, "tell me what's up. Killed a man and want a lawyer?"

"Naw!" and a contemptuous look overspread his worried face. "I'm on a kidnaping trip and I want you to help me."

"A girl?" I ventured. He looked more disgusted than ever.

"Naw. It's the king of the Crooked H I'm after. Ever heard of him?"

I shook my head, puzzled, and, pouring out a big drink of whisky, offered it to him. His eyes brightened, but he shook his head slowly.

"Naw. If we don't find the king you owe it to me. While we may find him I'll play fair. It ain't allowed at court and I'm his prime minister; leastways that's what my lawyer says."

I was debating whether Hank had a screw loose or was playing some intricate practical joke, when I caught the sound of a sob as he cleared his throat.

"Kid, I'll spit the hull thing out right now, so's you kin get to work on the trail."

Two years ago I was down at Jink's place. I an' Goody Two Shoes was each aiming to win a bet as to which could drink the most and not show it before the eastbound train cum in. We augered and augered till the train slides in before we knewed it, and I only had six drinks in me.

I seed from the door a woman and two kids get put out. The train went on and left 'em standing lookin' all over for a town that wasn't there.

"They hadn't no luggage, and she and the kids hadn't enough hull clothes on to flag a handcar. She had a purty face, tho. So when I seed her makin' for the section house that was full of Russians that chewed up Uncle Sam's language I shied over. I says: 'Madam, kin I do anything fer you?'"

"She began to cry, then the little kid in her arms begun to squall. The little feller bout six at her side grabs it and gets it quiet."

"Then the woman says: 'I'm cryin' because there ain't no bigger here. I thought this was a bigger place. My old man got killed up in Cripple, an' me an' the children are tryin' to beat our way home to Indianapolis, where ma lives. When we git put off we git a collection took up to go a ways further. Then she bust out cryin' harder."

"I didn't know what to do, but I considered us cowboys as kings of that place an' we couldn't do no wrong, cuz besides us there was only the Russians and the crabbed old station agent that didn't count either. So I just asked the woman over to the saloon porch and brought her some crackers, cheese and beer."

"She was mighty grateful and we all got quite friendly and began amusin' the kids. The little girl was cross, but the little boy was the meanest little feller you could see in a ten days' ride."

"Goody put the idea int. My 'oggin' by sayin' to the little feller: 'How'd you like to go a ranch and live and grow up to be a cowboy?'"

"'I'd like it mighty well, mister, but I can't leave ma an' Sissy; they need me.'"

"There was a heap more to that little youngster than to his ma, a young, silly, helpless kind of being. After a while I got a chance to speak to her alone. I asked her if she would let me take the kid and raise it fer her, if I'd give her fifty dollars and her ticket. She jumped at it at the offer."

"I never seed such a look in any one's face, big or small, as there was on that boy's when she told him. He looked as if his heart would come clean out'n his body an' bust to pieces in front of us. He made the tears stay back somehow, an' he pipes up in a queer little voice: 'Reckon you kin do 'bout me.'"

"'I'll be hard, Roy,' she said kind of sniveling, 'but ma's so poor an' ragged.'"

"'All right,' said the kid, an' he walked off an' sat on the station platform toward side of the building."

"I let him alone, too, till a train cum along, which we flagged - tied the agent an' got out his bags to do it. Little feller was so busy huggin' and kissin' little Sissy that he peered not to notice his ma. She managed to lead him, and he kissed her on the cheek, and we hustled her aboard. He stood close by me an' never looked

at his ma wavin' from the window. "When we goin' home, Hank? said he, puttin' his little paw in mine.

"Now. Come on, Hank, let's dig out," said I to the boys that was standin' by lookin' foolish. Only Goody hung back, said he wan't drunk enough fer Sunday, said it would make him lonesome to go home half full.

"The little chap eyed him with his black look-through-you eyes, then he walked up in front of Goody.

"That's what killed pa and put me and ma on the tramp. Let's go home, he said, coaxing like, and held out his little paw.

"Goody looked silly fer a minit. Then he grabbed the youngster and put him on his shoulder.

"Come on, boys, I was only fooling. Git your hosses and see who gits home fust."

"We sure kept that kid from being lonesome, gittin' home. One would grab him and ride him awhile, then another one; so all of us had a turn at holdin' the grumpy little feller. Time we got home there wan't one of us men that wan't a willin' slave to that boy. Why? we couldn't eat much supper cuz he couldn't!

"'Little feller's got to go to bed. We's beat out,' I said, and stood firm that he had to bunk with me.

"After he got to sleep we set up and talked about how we'd make him comfy and chirky.

"'Ain't we got a cow critter we can break to milk? I heer coffee ain't good fer little folks,' Cracky growled as he chewed hard on his pipe.

"'I seed one yesterday that I'll introduce myself to,' said Goody, spittin' vigorous. 'I know how to make good molasses candy,' chimed in Jiggers. He's the kid there, cum from the East to get, taught the ranchin' trade same as you.' The cowman's face looked at me with kindly humor an instant, then he went on:

"'We had to plan to have one stay at home, cuz that nothing happened to the little kid. It was mostly Jiggers. He kicked, sed he cum out to ride an' not to tend kindergarten. I asked him what he was going to do.

"'I might fan the breeze,' sez he. "'What about that saddle you owe me fer?' And Jiggers stayed.

"'One night we cum home hungry as coyotes and I slammed in an' opened the oven door to see if biscuit was done. I see only a lot of round, brown things.

"'What the h-ll, sez I. "'Oh, Hank,' sez the little feller, 'them's marbles that Jiggers made me out'n clay and they's bakin'. You ain't mad, are you?'"

"'I laughed 'stead o' cussin', and went out to tell the boys the joke, an' we all waited good-natured till Jiggers got supper ready."

"'Our boss heerd of our new family member and he cum out from town red-eyed an' foam-in'. Sed he wan't runnin' no baby farm. How could the men ride and play nurse too. Anyhow the Humane Society wouldn't stand fer it. Furthermore, he used to think there was bigger fools than cowboys, but he was mistook."

"'I held myself in, but itched to kick the old man. I only asked him to git into the rig, as the horse was oneasy, and we'd best dust. He looked at me with eyes wide and mouth open, struck dumb. Finally he cum to his breath:

"'I'll be blasted! Here it's Sunday and you ain't drunk nor actin' like you wanted to be.' Then he says short, looking round: 'Where's the rest of the boys? I don't see any of my horses tied up at the saloon.'

"'Home,' sez I, laughin' inside. "'I'll be teetotally chawed up and spit out again!' he sez, and clumb into an' over an' over sayin' 'howdy to Jink's place."

"'He didn't say nothin' more 'bout the boys until we got most home, then he turns quick like and sez: 'What are you going to do with him?'"

"'What if I say you shan't?'"

"'Then you kin get new men to work you d-d old ranch,' sez I, and whipped up Buttons.

"'The boy was ready fer us and opened the gate. 'Good evening, Mr. Boss,' sed he as he come up manly like, 'want a new hand?'"

"'The boss looked him all over and I see the twinkle come into his eye. I don't know if it was us old stagers cutting fer a mite of a baby you might say, or if it was the funny figger he looked with his pleading eyes and soft, round face with black curls flapping a little in the wind to, of my old shirt and overalls. I'd cut down 'best could; any way the boss laughed. Then he sez: 'Want a job bad?'"

"'The kid busts out joyful, 'Oh, you're going to let me stay!' and he ran up and grabbed Boss's hand, shook it and sez, 'I'll work good!'"

"'What's your name?' sez Boss, all gentle."

"'Roy, sir.'"

"'Roy! Why that means king! That's what you are, and here's your prime minister and there's your cabinet, pointin' to the other three that were coming out of the shack, all grins when they see the little man run up to Boss.

"That's how King got his name. We alluz called him that."

"'What you going to do come round-up time?' sed Boss when we was smokin' after supper."

"'Take him with us, I spoke quick and settled."

"'H'm! What you going to give him to eat? Kids can't live on beans and sow belly same as you boys does."

"'We just thought that maybe you'd send us out some garden seeds,' I suggested mild like. Boss stared.

"'You blooming loosed cow puncher! Don't you know a garden takes time and water?'"

"'We've got Sundays and 'bits of extra time,' I put in, 'and there's a well full of water that the windmill draws up.'"

"'You kin punch cows all right, but you bloody cuss, you'd look well packin' water in buckets over to a garden.'"

"'You send the seeds, never mind how I look.'"

"'And the seeds come."

"'We teached King to cuss beautiful. 'Onct I ketched him whimperin' over a hard bump he got fallin' off a hoss he was practicing up on. I set rig down and telled him that men don't cry at anything, but just cuss to relieve their feelings; he mustn't cuss at me, cuz mostly the man is the wust and ornarrest fool of the two; and he mustn't cuss at men unless he had a gun to back him; but he could cuss at cow critters, fer they was plumb ornery; and he could break loose and cuss at stoves and firewood and sich like; but unless he was hurt awful bad he mustn't cuss, fer it wan't being game."

"'He remembered all we told him to. Onct I met old Benson on the road and he wanted to borrow my razor, being as a new gal was in the country. I told him he could go up to the house and shave there, that he couldn't lug the razor off, fer we all cleaned up Sundays. Benson waitin' in, went to my bunk and was just drawing the razor out from the mattress, when a child's voice behind him piped up:

"'Put that razor down.'"

"'Being in a hurry Benson said, 'Mind your own business, kid,' without turnin' round. Then a string of cusses broke loose that startled old-timer Benson and he whirled round to see King standin' in the doorway pintin' the little gun I give him right at him. Old Benson was too 'spried and scart to explain, and I don't know what 'ud a happened if Jiggers hadn't cum in just then and fixed things up."

"'We teached King everything we knew, ever to poker; but we stuck at book larnin'. One night I winked at the boys and sez: 'If I only knew some one that could write letters fer me and kind o' look after accounts I'd be happy.'"

"'And if I had some one to read the news to me once in a while I'd feel better when I went out in company,' put in Goody."

"'And if I had somebody to tell me about gogery when I wants to go places it 'ud cum in mighty handy,' added Cracky. Jiggers spoke up then: 'I know all that, cause I went to school, but I get too tired to help you out evenings.'"



HANK

ARMSTRONG

HE WHIRLED AROUND TO SEE KING STANDING IN THE DOORWAY, FINDING THE GUN RIGHT AT HIM

didn't know it was in him! Then he sed:

"'Sissy!'"

"'We didn't say a word, fer somehow we knowed it wouldn't be no use. He didn't let a whimper out'n him that we could hear, but us fellers was smakin' round corners swallowin' hard. King must a cried to himself in the night, tho', cuz in the mornin' his eyes was half shut."

"'When that train pulled out with our King aboard us fellers just blubbered."

"'That was six months ago, and now Boss says that King was wuth ten dollars a month to him on the ranch, and if I'd go and fetch him he'd pay my expenses, and we cud arrange fer King to send his ten every month to his ma—it would be morn' he cud make here probably, anyhow it would be cheaper fer her, fer she wouldn't have him to feed."

"'I got here this mornin' and went straight to 14 Bolton street, but they ain't there—haven't been fer months, and no one seems to know where they cud be."

"'The cow puncher looked so miserable when he ceased speakin' that I inctively went over and patted him on the back."

"'We will find him!' I cried with determination in my voice."

"'Hank and I swung around the evening paper office all that afternoon. We questioned every newsboy that came to buy papers for the evening sale. Many knew Roy McPherson, but had not seen him lately. We were beginning to despair when at last we came upon a little shaver who said he knew Roy and had seen him only yesterday buyin' a nickel's worth of tea at a corner grocery store. We got the address and hurried to the place."

"'Yes, the grocer knew Mrs. McPherson. She was sick and the boy was taking care of her and doing a little janitor work on the floor where they lived above the store."

"'We went up a rickety outside flight of stairs and knocked at a shattered door opening in the narrow landing. We heard whispers, then little feet trotted across the room, the door opened a bit and the shy, dimpling face of a very little girl peeped out at us."

"'Hello, Sissy!' cried Hank, reaching in and catching the child up, 'where's the brother?'"

"'A smothered cry of joyful recognition came from within. With a warning little hand lifted, a thin, sad little fellow hastened to the door and whispered, 'She's asleep, don't wake her. I'll come outside.'"

"'Hank dropped Sissy and gathered the little man to his bosom exactly as a longing mother would have done. The light of yearning love was so intense on the man's face that I turned aside."

"'My boy! my boy!' he murmured and smoothed the head again and again. The boy hid his face in the man's coat and his little body shook convulsively, but no sound came. After a bit we three sat on the stairs."

"'You must go back with me,' urged Hank, his hand gripping the boy's arm so hard that he winced. 'Ma ain't able to bring her up alone. I've got to do it.'"

"'Hank's face was a study between admiration and despair. Nothing was said for a while. The fierce hunger of the eyes was startling, but the lines of strength about his mouth were encouraging."

"'Ma can't spare me this time,' said a voice struggling to be firm. 'We will send her money.'"

"'Roy's face shone an instant, then his lips came together hard. 'There is Sissy. Ma ain't able to bring her up alone. I've got to do it.'"

"'Hank's face was a study between admiration and despair. Nothing was said for a while. The fierce hunger of the eyes was startling, but the lines of strength about his mouth were encouraging. Just then a baby would come to his own."

### ANNOUNCEMENT.

For the purpose of encouraging California and Western writers, by offering a consideration for short stories equal to that paid by the best magazines, and for the purpose of bringing young and unknown writers to the front, the Sunday Call announces a weekly fiction contest in which a cash prize of \$50 will be paid each week for the best story submitted. There is no section of America more fertile in material for fiction or more prolific in pens gifted to give spirit to the material at hand than is California and the West. Therefore the Sunday Call offers \$50 for the best story submitted each week by a Western writer. Stories of Western life and Western characters will, as a rule, be given the preference, but all strong stories, and especially strong stories by new writers, will receive careful consideration.

Each story will be judged strictly upon its literary merit. Typewritten copy is the easiest to read and will receive the first consideration from the editor, but do not hesitate to send a story in handwriting if you cannot afford to have it typewritten.

Fifty dollars in cash for a story of not less than 2500 words and not more than 3500 words is approximately \$7 per thousand words, or 1.7 cents per word. The highest price paid by the leading magazines for the work of any but the very best writers is rarely more than two cents a word, more often one cent and a half, and generally one cent. With the majority of magazines the writer, after his story is accepted, is compelled to wait until the publication of his story before he is paid, a period of seldom less than six months, and usually from nine months to a year. The stories accepted in this contest will be paid for immediately upon publication, and will be published on the first Sunday following the judging of the manuscripts.

Each Week for the Best.

## SHORT STORY

# \$ 50 \$

Submitted to the

## SUNDAY CALL

### RULES.

I. No story will be considered that is less than 2500 nor more than 3500 words in length. The length of the story must be marked in plain figures.

II. In the selection of stories names will not count. The unknown writer will have the same standing as the popular author.

III. As one of the objects of the Sunday Call is to develop a new corps of Western writers no stories under noms de plume will be considered. If a story earns publication it will be well worth the writer's name.

IV. Stories not accepted will be returned at once. Those selected will be published one each week.

V. This fiction contest will be continued indefinitely.

VI. An author may submit as many manuscripts as he desires, but no one writer will be permitted to win more than three prizes during the contest.

VII. Always inclose return postage. No manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by return postage.

VIII. Write on one side of paper only; put name and address legibly on last page, and address to the SUNDAY EDITOR OF THE CALL, SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.