

## A LIFE PARTNERSHIP

By ROY NORTON

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For 20 years they had been "partners," had worked or played, enjoyed or suffered, and fed or starved together. Neither the desert's vastness, the mountain's ruggedness, nor the forest's impenetrableness had been strong enough to separate them, but now that mightier thing, the love of woman, threatened to come between.

Singularly enough it all came about, as good old Hugh McCarthy, who owned the claim farther up the canyon, said, because of "the buttin' in of civilization." And Hugh ought to know, because for ten years he had been their only neighbor within a day's ride.

The Ahpalino, as it meandered along the line trying to find whether it flowed in California or Oregon, wasn't very rich in gold: "jest fair diggin's—yes, jest fair diggin's," the partners had truthfully told the forlorn-looking Jim Sands, when he first appeared on the scene with the woman, then his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Jim, "not hankerin' much fur riches," staked as their claim the regulation number of feet a mile below. Then, as Hugh said, "Jim had caused a heap of trouble by gettin' up and dyin'." That was less than a year after his arrival.

Neither tears nor weeds were affected by the widow; she was a little too used to "tough luck" and a little too angular and sharp-featured for either. One of the kind of women who seem to take nearly everything as a matter of course and all in the day's work. But the partners were tender-hearted old fellows, as becomes men whose lives had been passed out in God's good open, and from the time of Sand's death their trouble began.

Life with them had assumed great method, passing along fixed lines and within definite times. Their routine being broken upon, through the necessity of "lookin' after the widda" each twilight after the day's toil, was really the first little crack within the life. It isn't on record anywhere whether Abner or Ezra was the one who first thought of going to her assistance, but it's most probable that both thought of it at the same time. The effect, however, was quite obvious.

Now that there was a widow a mile down the canyon, the grass didn't look so nice and the bushes weren't so trim, and it didn't take a pair of field-glasses to find a weed here and there in the garden. That's what Hugh said.

It went on this way quite a while, until after they had cut wood enough to run the Sands derelict through the winter and were ready to haul and pile it in her cache. And in the meantime the cumulative result was that both loved the widow, and both wanted to marry her, and each kept quiet because he didn't want to hurt his partner's feelings.

The widow was a willing sort, and would probably have just as soon accepted one as the other.

One night, after they had trudged through the darkness to their own cabin, lighted the lamp and taken their regular seats in regular places on opposite sides of it, Abner broke silence.

"Ezzy," he said, with an odd little quaver in his voice, "you've got to marry the widda. I give you my consent. 'Tain't fair to a woman to pay her as much attention as you have without marryin' her."

Although Ezra wanted mightily to marry the widow, he didn't want to leave Abner, and it hurt his heart that Abner wanted to "marry him off that-a-way."

His jaw dropped until his mouth hung open, his eyes filled to the brim with tears, and he looked really old. He sat for a long time and gazed at the floor, a picture of utter dejection.

"Abner," he said, after he could trust himself to speak, "I ain't done nothin' to you, hev I? Ye don't want to get shot of me—do you?"

Then they both broke down about as far as they could, neither wishing to show his emotions to the other, and ended by discussing the trying situation from all points of view. Abner wasn't altogether frank, though; he practised deception by insisting that he didn't love the widow. Their confidence brought forth one result, and that was—the partition. There had been so many mental reviews of the years past that both realized the impossibility of living under separate roofs.

They slept in a double-decked bunk, one above the other, over against the cabin wall, and long after the smiling moon had crept over the hillside to watch tenderly over them through the night and throw the light of her peering through their window, they tumbled and tossed in the shadow of the great adventure; Abner because he was losing a partner and not gaining a wife, and Ezra because of the trial before him, winning a wife but losing a partner.

The following day Ezra procrastinated, and in the end convinced Abner that preparations should be made at the cabin before he ventured out upon his errand to the widow.

Perhaps, too, Abner was the more easily convinced because the partition afforded a little delay; but he felt that each blow of the hammer as it sent a nail into the giving pine was helping to build up the barrier between him and Ezra and his old life.

Ezra and Abner proposed to the widow the next day. Abner accompanying Ezra to the bend of the road and waiting until he should return. The world looked pretty gray. Loneliness was leering at him from the corners and preparing to rub shoulders. Thirty years of partnership, and then desertion! He bravely tried to whistle when he heard the foot steps returning. Yes, Ezra had won by putting the case before her in good, honest, old-time way.

Abner had checked off five months in the almanac, not having much else to do in the evenings, when the end came. In all those five months he had daily shriveled in size, become repressed in spirit and sad of eye. From brooding at night he took to brooding in the day, and always was with him the feeling that now, at last, he was old. He seldom spoke in those days, and if one asked a question of the partners, it was Ezra who answered, in a falsetto solo. Duets were out of fashion. That is, Ezra answered unless his wife was around, on which occasions she answered enough for all three.

One day the remarkable thing happened. Abner was taken sick and couldn't work. It was the first time in at least 50 years, and naturally Ezra took note of it. The whole universe was upset. Then he, too, brooded, and from Abner's side of the partition.

There was but one solution, and in great issues he was not wont to shrirk. He went through the dividing line and softly but with firmness closed the door.

"We both love ye," he said to his bride, "and I don't want to do nothin' to hurt your feelin's, but if you don't



"We Both Love Ye," He Said, "But If You Don't Mind, I Guess You'll Have to Go."

mind, I guess you'll have to go. You see, Abner and me was fair to married before we met you, and we both feels as though we was committin' bigamy or burglary, or some other drefful thing. Abner's dyin' in there—of a broken heart. He ain't never been the same," and here he paused and with an unconsciously tragic gesture waved his arm at the partition, "since that thing was built." At last he was awake to the fact that it had divided their lives.

The former Mrs. Sands didn't seem to mind much.

About a hundred feet below their cabin the partners built one for her much more pretentious than their own. They devoted great time and care to its fitting—and wrought well. And with her went the partition from the older home—a menace destroyed. Then they dropped back as nearly as possible into the old life and tried to readjust themselves. They invariably passed a portion of the evening with her and, as befitted gentlemen, worked for her happiness. It is doubtful if ever she had been as happy.

One day she died. They gently laid her away where she had wished, up on the hillside back of the garden, where the little cross they afterward erected could always look down upon them in loving remembrance and gratitude for giving her the happiest days she had ever known.

The flowers of spring snuggled round her resting-place, nor did they lack care in their nurturing, for each night two loving old men carried water for their replenishing and wrenched away vagrant weeds.

It was on the anniversary of her death that they made the last obliteration. No one knows whether they had ever discussed it in words. It was as evening—the long, quiet evening—came that together they walked to the cabin built for her, and occupied by none but her, and to it applied the torch.

They sat in silence, these two old men, until naught remained but a few glowing heaps of logs, and the moon had arisen, and the night was mellow with memories of the joys and tragedies of their lives.

"You kin see down the canyon jest the way we uester before we built it," said Ezra, with a great, gentle, longing tenderness.

"Yes, kin see down jest the way we uester before we built it," came the wistfully answering voice, softly. "Jest the way we uester."

And they silently entered their home, for the first time in their lives holding each other's hand. The door closed behind them, the embers died out, and the great sheltering Father of Night stretched shielding palms over the cabin, the little cross on the hill, and all those things which "looked jest as they uester."

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