

WHO PAYS?

TODAY and TOMORROW

EDWIN BLISS

EIGHTH STORY

"T-R-I-B-B-L-E, trouble, Mr. Payne," Pat Grady solemnly spelled his prediction. "I kin smell it in the air plain as I smell the rotten food in the mess shack that's causing it all. And I'm telling you now that there's no saying where it'll lead any more than I can tell where I'll end. Trouble and bad grub—they been twins from the beginning of time."

Lee Payne tapped the table thoughtfully with his pencil. A young man, he was not inclined to take the matter so seriously as the old foreman of Ira Monroe's oil fields; still there was no dodging the fact that the men were lately become sullen and apathetic in their work, and a few of them openly insolent.

"And you think the food at the bottom of the men's actions?"

"Their stomachs are at the bottom of it—stomachs and lack of food," Pat corrected.

"But can it easily be remedied?"

"Then why ain't it?" Grady did not wait for an answer, but pointed out of the window silently toward a group of laborers loafing boldly beside the nearest big tank. In the center of the group a broad-shouldered, swarthy, beetle-browed fellow was frantically gesticulating to emphasize his remarks, remarks which the two men in the office could not hear but which caused their brows to furrow anxiously.

"Brown Joe's at it agin," muttered the foreman, as though to himself, "and he's got the right of it this time. I tell you, Mr. Payne, I'd rather have a rattler sleeping with me than a mouthy workman. Get rid of that fellow and do it quick. Look at him."

Payne slowly nodded and turned back to his desk.

He glanced at his watch and felt a little tremor of anticipatory fear as he noted the noon hour was upon him. There had been open mutterings this morning. If the food had not improved for dinner, what would those mutterings become? For a half day's labor in the oil wells is not conducive to making one's appetite dainty or birdlike. The situation must be improved and that immediately. If only he could gain a little time.

As the whistle summoned the men from their work he waited for them in the shack, watching them being seated at the long table, noting the furrowed brows, the somber eyes, the significance of their steady scrutiny of Brown Joe, seated next himself. That there was something afoot he could not doubt.

The cook entered, heavily laden with a couple of steaming platters. There was something savoring looking about that steam, but the look was dispelled almost instantly by the rancid odor that permeated through it.

As the cook placed a steaming plate before Brown Joe, the young superintendent strained forward, every muscle flexed to anticipate the trouble he knew instinctively had reached a crisis. But even as his fists balled, even as a hoarse cry of rage broke from Pat Grady's throat, the swarthy, evil-eyed fellow looked at the unsavory mess before him, lifted the plate as though to sniff its contents, then hurled it squarely in the cook's face.

As the fellow staggered back, digging wildly at eyes and ears and nose to wipe the stuff away, Brown Joe lunged forward. But not so quickly that he escaped the heavy right-hand swing of the foreman. Grady, quick to take advantage of the man's stagger back was instantly upon him.

For a second Payne felt himself glued to the spot, unable to grasp the full significance of what had happened. As he threw himself beside his foreman, swinging with both fists, the men lunged forward en masse. In a second the mess hall was a shambles. Chairs, dishes, tables were hurled aside like straws before the brutal ferocity of the enraged crew. Wild with the delight of combat, Grady followed up his advantage, inflicting fearful punishment upon Brown Joe regardless of the fact that he was getting into the open, where the fellow's supporters would make easy work of him.

Slipping upon the messes of food, stumbling over the wreck of the hall, they threw themselves upon him, swallowing him up as in a whirlpool. Payne tried to fight his way through that jam, only finding each effort sent him farther away. There was a murderous note in the hoarse gutturals of the men.

The original idea of mutiny against the food had now grown into hatred for those above them. For just a second Payne hesitated. The arms of Grady still swung like flails, now and then a heavy boot crashing to the floor under the force of those pillar-driver blows. Then the fists were pinned and waved uselessly in the air. Came another lunge and he knew his foreman had been taken off his feet. His hand clasped the cold butt of the revolver at his waist. He did not

know how it happened, how it came in his hand, was unconscious of the muscular action that pulled the trigger. He only saw the orange spurt of flame that leaped over the heads of the squirming mass, heard the splatter of splinters from the roof, then the weapon dangled uselessly in his hand. A cold silence fell instantly upon the pandemonium. He was conscious of a long, shivering shudder and knew seconds would tell whether the victory was won. Brown Joe staggered to his feet, pushing the hair from his eyes and staring about him glassily, still dazed from the blow that had felled him. Payne waved the revolver threateningly and the men quailed away from him, the expression of cowardly beasts in their eyes, then as the gun staidied in his hand, dived fearfully out of the place.

Grady gripped the ringleader by the arm as he would have snatched out, throwing him heavily before the young superintendent.

"You're fired," Payne snapped. "Get out and don't wait for your name, either. If I catch you about the place again I'll not shoot at the rafter, but I'll shoot you in the back."

The fellow slunk backwards toward the door, darting fearful glances at the foreman.

Payne started to look about him at the wreckage, when a heavy step from the doorway made him turn abruptly, to see his employer entering the room. Framed in the doorway he stood, staring about him with knitted brows. Behind the men had gathered about his touring car, the sound of their threatening murmurs a low buzz—the buzz of a mob just barely held in check.

"Well," he snapped, "Mutiny against the food," Payne explained. "I phoned you yesterday again for orders as to what was to be done. The men really can't be



Grady Conquers Brown Joe.

blamed, Mr. Monroe. They haven't had stuff fit for a dog to eat."

The old man picked up a remnant of crockery upon the floor upon which some of the food still clung. He regarded it disgustedly a second, then allowed it to drop quickly from his hand as a sniff of it caught his nostrils.

"Thew! Can't blame anybody kicking at such stuff," he muttered, then a frown of annoyance grew into heavy anger upon his countenance.

"You've written me three times about this situation, haven't you?" he demanded, abruptly; then, without waiting for an answer, as Payne flushed and started to stammer: "I don't want to hear anything about that. It's my own fault; trust Julia to ever do anything. Every morning the same thing; every night—wait till tomorrow. The girl seems absolutely to have no sense of responsibility, of the rights of others, anything save her own right to put off—put off—put off."

Payne hung his head, avoiding the glowing eye of the old man. There was no denying what had just been said. It was characteristic of the man that the moment he saw a situation and grasped its full significance he took hold of it and battled for the mastery. Payne stepped quickly up beside him, fearful of the result of such an attempt while the men were in their present humor. Monroe brushed him aside, lifting his hand.

"I understand there's been some complaint about the food," he began, a twinkle in his eye that melted some of the threatening glances fastened upon him. "I have understood it was bad for some time, but I didn't realize how bad food could be until I took a—"

"He wrinkled his face wryly and the ice was broken.

From the back of the crowd a man laughed. In a second he was joined by others and soon Monroe held them in the palm of his hand.

"Well, it's going to get better and get better right away," he declared, emphatically. "I'll go you one better than that, men, and tell you its going to get good. Tonight you can look forward to a real supper—a real supper, understand."

He turned upon Payne, even as the men were wildly cheering, knowing that now was the psychological moment to make his strongest play.

"Get in my car, Lee," he commanded, "and don't waste any time—getting back here with a load of grub—have it here for supper."

For once Julia Monroe was ready, impatiently waiting the arrival of her sweetheart. He had told her nothing of the reason for his coming to town in the middle of the week, told her nothing of the row. But he had spoken of something which had made her jump from the mass of cushions against which she spent a goodly portion of her days and hustle into her new becoming afternoon gown. Just a week remained before the date of their wedding and she had delayed in characteristic fashion procuring any of the clothes she had spent so many hours planning and dreaming up upon the divan.

She plunged immediately to the subject, even before Payne's arms had relaxed about the waist of her, looking up into his face in the tantalizingly irresistible fashion which he, as well as her father, always found so irresistible.

"Now, there's no use telling me why you came to town; there's no sense trying to talk to me about food for the men. There'll be plenty of time after you look over a few little things in the shops with me."

"But I must have it there for supper—I tell you, Julia, the situation became so serious there was nearly a murderous row at the fields—"

"Both the fields," she exclaimed petulantly. "You're just like father—oil, oil, oil morning, noon and night, until I've even ordered the cook to leave any of the hateful stuff out of the cooking."

Payne laughed, despite himself, laughed and catching her about the waist, drew her to him, trying to coax the pretty, pouting face towards his own.

"All right," he laughingly capitulated, "But on just one condition—that we go to the grocery together."

The irresistible music of her laughter intoxicated him and, as they swung into the car he wondered how in the world he had ever for a moment dreamed of resisting her lure. In fact, as they wandered from shop to shop that afternoon, he felt more and more the hero for the manful fight he had put up against her tempestuous assaults.

And once as he looked at his watch, to his strained, guilty ear came a sharp report, the report of a revolver. He started and moved swiftly toward Julia, placing his arm commandingly upon her wrist. She turned the witchery of her glance upon him and, for just an instant, the suspicion of a frown puckered her brow. It cleared instantly then, with an exquisite, little whimper she came very close to him, looking up into his face with the perplexed and worried expression of a child.

"I'm simply famished," she exclaimed. "Surely, you won't permit me to starve, Lee. Just a mouthful and then we can—"

"Hungry!" He started as she voiced his thought of the unappeased hunger of those men he had visualized throughout the afternoon. "No really, Julia—"

She had his arm in her two, tiny hands. Ineffective hands they seemed, dainty and blue-veined and almond-tipped at the fingers. And yet, like buds of steel, they drew him, despite himself, despite everything within himself that cried out aloud against their pressure.

Ira Monroe settled back in his office chair, idly staring at the hands of the big clock. He had gone over the books for the first time in a week, had listened to Pat Grady's story of the fracas that had come so near ending fatally. And, as the old man's eyes closed, slowly, very slowly his mind traveled from the fields to his home in Los Angeles.

A faint smile hovered about his lips as he thought of his petted daughter, of the fearful consequences that might have occurred from her remissness in writing concerning the food supply out here. It seemed incredible that such a slight, fragile little thing could be the storm center about which such things revolved.

Two—three—four o'clock and still the hands traveled along their way. At five o'clock, the old man rose and stared anxiously out upon the road that led past the great derricks of his oil fields. Here and there he could catch a glimpse of the men, great, powerful fellows, cheerfully exerting their muscles to the utmost, their minds centered wholly on the mess hall and the elaborate supper that had been prepared for them.

Five-thirty. He frowned heavily. Was it possible that Payne, knowing the seriousness of the matter, could permit anything to delay him. Failure was a

word which Ira Monroe had never tolerated in himself any more than he tolerated it in others. Results—that had always been the foundation stone upon which he builded.

"Tick—tock—tock—tock—"

The strokes were pounding at his very brain now. Like blows from a sledge they were. He clamped his hands to his ears that he might shut out the sound of the clock.

Five-forty-five.

He shrugged his giant shoulders and moved out along the road for some sign of the motor. Not even a dust cloud rose above the shimmering heat waves that danced along the way to the city in the distance. He felt an irresistible desire to look at his watch, although he knew what tale it would tell.

Nervously looking about him he saw the men slacking in their labors.

He hustled toward the mess shack. Something must be done but for the life of him he could not imagine what it would be. Supper was what the men wanted and supper was what they would tell.

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