

# THE CROSS-CUT

By Courtney Ryley Cooper

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"OR I'LL SHOOT."

**SYNOPSIS.**—At Thornton Fairchild's death his son Robert learns there has been a dark period in his father's life which for almost thirty years has caused him suffering. The secret is hinted at in a document left by the elder Fairchild, which also informs Robert he is now owner of a mining claim in Colorado, and advising him to see Henry Beamish, a lawyer. Beamish tells Robert his claim, a silver mine is at Ohadi, thirty-eight miles from Denver. He also warns him against a certain man, "Squint" Rodaine, his father's enemy. Robert decides to go to Ohadi. On the road to Ohadi from Denver Fairchild assists a girl apparently in a frenzy of haste, to change a tire on her auto. When she has left, the sheriff and a posse appear in pursuit of a bandit. Fairchild, bewildered, misleads them as to the direction the girl had taken. At Ohadi Fairchild is warmly greeted by "Mother" Howard, boarding-house keeper, for his father's sake. From Mother Howard Fairchild learns something of the mystery connected with the disappearance of "Sissie" Larsen, his father's co-worker in the mine. He meets the girl he had assisted, but she denies her identity. She is Anita Richmond, Judge Richmond's daughter. Visiting his claim, Fairchild is shadowed by a man he recognizes from descriptions as "Squint" Rodaine. Back in Ohadi, his father's old friend, Harry Harkins, a Cornishman, summoned from England by Beamish to help Fairchild, tells him the truth. The pair find the mine flooded and have not sufficient funds to have it pumped dry. Later in the day "Squint" Rodaine announces that he practically saw Harkins fall into the flooded mine, and evidently is drowned. Harkins being a general favorite, the entire population turns out to clear the flooded mine. When the work is practically done, Harry appears. It had been a shrewd trick, and the men take it as a good joke. Fairchild learns that Judge Richmond is dying, and that he and Anita are in the power of the Rodaines. They begin, as partners, to work the mine. In their hearts both fear Larsen was killed by Thornton Fairchild and his body buried by a cave-in which destroyed the mine.

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

From far away the drone of the caller sounded in a voice familiar, and Fairchild looked up to see the narrow-eyed, scarred face of Squint Rodaine, who was officiating at the wheel. He lost interest in the game; lackadaisically he placed the buttons on their squares as the numbers were shouted, finally to brush them all aside and desert the game. His hatred of the Rodaines had grown to a point where he could enjoy nothing with which they were connected, where he despised everything with which they had the remotest affiliation—excepting, of course, one person. And as he rose, Fairchild saw that she was just entering the dance hall.

Only a moment he hesitated. Maurice Rodaine, attired in a mauve frock suit and the inevitable accompanying beaver, had stopped to talk to some one at the door. She stood alone, looking about the hall, laughing and nodding—and then she looked at him! Fairchild did not wait.

From the platform at the end of the big room the fiddlers had begun to squeak, and the caller was shouting his announcements. Couples began to line up on the floor. The caller's voice grew louder:

"One more couple—then the dance starts. One more couple, lady an' a gent! One more—"

"Please!" Robert Fairchild had reached her and was holding forth his hand. She looked up in half surprise, then demurred.

"But I don't know these old dances." "Neither do I—or any other, for that matter," he confessed with sudden boldness. "But does that make any difference? Please!"

She glanced quickly toward the door. Maurice Rodaine was still talking, and Fairchild saw a little gleam come into her eyes—the gleam that shows when a woman decides to make some one pay for rudeness.

Fairchild's hand was still extended. Again Anita Richmond glanced toward the door, chuckled to herself while Fairchild watched the dimples that the merriment caused, and then—Fairchild forgot the fact that he was wearing hobnailed shoes and that his clothes were worn and old. He was going forward to take his place on the dance floor, and she was beside him!

Some way, as through a haze, he saw her. Some way he realized that now and then his hand touched hers, and that once, as they whirled about the room, in obedience to the monarch on the fiddler's rostrum, his arm was about her waist, and her head touching his shoulder. It made little difference whether the dance calls were obeyed after Anita Fairchild was making up for the years he had plodded, all the years which he had known nothing but a slow, grubbing life, living them all again and rightly, in the few swift moments of a dance.

The music ended, and laughing they

returned to the side of the hall. Out of the haze he heard words, and knew indistinctly that they were his own:

"Will—will you dance with me again tonight?"

"Selfish!" she chided.

"But will you?"

"For just a moment her eyes grew serious.

"Did you ever realize that we've never been introduced?"

Fairchild was finding more conversation than he ever had believed possible.

"No—but I realize that I don't care—if you'll forgive it. I—believe that I'm a gentleman."

"So do I—or I wouldn't have danced with you."

"Then please—"

"Pardon me." She had laid a hand on his arm for just a moment, then hurried away. Fairchild saw that she was approaching young Rodaine, scowling in the background. That person shot an angry remark at her as she approached and followed it with streaming sentences. Fairchild knew the reason. Jealousy! Couples, returning from the dance floor, jostled against him, but he did not move. He was waiting—waiting for the outcome of the quarrel—and in a moment it came. Anita Richmond turned swiftly, her dark eyes ablaze, her pretty lips set and firm. She looked anxiously about her, sighted Fairchild, and then started toward him, while he advanced to meet her.

"Yes," was her brief announcement.

"I'll dance the next one with you."

"And the next after that?"

Again: "Selfish!"

But Fairchild did not appear to hear.

A third dance and a fourth, while in the intervals Fairchild's eyes sought out the sulky, sullen form of Maurice Rodaine, flattened against the wall, eyes evil, mouth a straight line, and the blackness of hate discoloring his face. It was as so much wine to Fairchild; he felt himself really young for the first time in his life. And as the music started again, he once more turned to his companion.

Only, however, to halt and whirl and stare in surprise. There had come a shout from the doorway, booming, commanding:

"Ands up, everybody! And quick about it!"

Some one laughed and jabbed his hands into the air. Another, quickly sensing a staged surprise, followed the example. It was just the finishing touch necessary—the old-time hold-up of the old-time dance. The "bandit" strode forward.

"Out from be'ind that bar! Drop that gun!" he commanded of the white-aproned attendant. "Out from that roulette wheel. Everybody line up! Quick—and there ain't no time for foolin'."

Chattering and laughing, they obeyed, the sheriff, his star gleaming, standing out in front of them all, shivering in mock fright, his hands higher than any one's. The bandit, both revolvers leveled, stepped forward a foot or so, and again ordered speed. A bandanna handkerchief was wrapped about his head, concealing his hair and ears. A mask was over his eyes, supplemented by another bandanna, which, beginning at the bridge of his nose, flowed over his chin, cutting off all possible chance of recognition. Only a second more he waited, then, with a wave of the guns, shouted his command:

"All right, everybody! I'm a decent fellow. Don't want much, but I want it quick! This 'ere's for the relief of widders and orphans. Make it sudden. Each one of you gents step out to the center of the room and leave five dollars. And step back when you've put it there. Ladies stay where you're at!"

Again a laugh. Fairchild turned to his companion, as she nudged him.

"There, it's your turn."

Out to the center of the floor went Fairchild, the rest of the victims laughing and chiding him. Back he came in mock fear, his hands in the air. On down the line went the contributing men. Then the bandit rushed forward, gathered up the bills and gold pieces, shoved them in his pockets, and whirled toward the door.

"The purpose of this 'ere will be in the paper tomorrow," he announced. "And don't you follow me to find out! Back, there!"

Two or three laughing men had started forward, among them a fiddler, who had joined the line, and who now rushed out in flaunting bravery, brandishing his violin as though to brain the intruder. Again the command:

"Back, there—get back!"

Then the crowd recoiled. Flashes had come from the masked man's guns, the popping of electric light globes above and the showering of glass testifying to the fact that they had contained something more than mere wadding. Somewhat dazed, the fiddler con-

tinued his rush, suddenly to crumple and fall, while men milled and women screamed. A door slammed, the lock clicked, and the crowd rushed for the windows. The holdup had been real after all—instead of a planned, joking affair. On the floor the fiddler lay gasping—and bleeding.

All in a moment the dance hall seemed to have gone mad. Men were rushing about and shouting; panic-stricken women clawed at one another and fought their way toward a freedom they could not gain. Windows crashed as forms hurtled against them; screams sounded. Hurriedly, as the crowd massed thicker, Fairchild raised the small form of Anita in his arms and carried her to a chair, far at one side.

"It's all right now," he said, calming her. "Everything's over—look, they're helping the fiddler to his feet. Maybe he's not badly hurt. Everything's all right—"

And then he straightened. A man had unlocked the door from the outside and had rushed into the dance hall, excited, shouting. It was Maurice Rodaine.

"I know who it was," he almost screamed. "I got a good look at him—jumped out of the window and almost headed him off. He took off his mask outside—and I saw him."

"You saw him—?" A hundred voices shouted the question at once.

"Yes." Then Maurice Rodaine nodded straight toward Robert Fairchild. "The light was good, and I got a straight look at him. He was that fellow's partner—a Cornishman they call Harry!"

"I don't believe it!" Anita Richmond exclaimed with conviction and clutched at Fairchild's arm. "I don't believe it!"

"I can't!" Robert answered. Then he turned to the accuser. "How could it be possible for Harry to be down here robbing a dance hall when he's out working the mine?"

"Working the mine?" This time it was the sheriff. "What's the necessity for a day and night shift?"

"We agreed upon it yesterday afternoon."

"At whose suggestion?"

"I'm not sure—but I think it was mine."

"Young fellow," the sheriff had approached him now, "you'd better be certain about that. It looks to me that might be a pretty good excuse to give when a man can't produce an alibi. Anyway, the identification seems pretty complete. Then he turned to the crowd. "I want a couple of good men to go along with me as deputies."

"I have a right to go." Fairchild had stepped forward.

"Certainly. But not as a deputy. Who wants to volunteer?"

Half a dozen men came forward, and from then the sheriff chose two. Fairchild turned to say good-by to Anita. In vain. Already Maurice Rodaine had escorted her, apparently against her will, to a far end of the dance hall, and there was quarrelling with her. Fairchild hurried to join the sheriff and his two deputies, just starting out of the dance hall. Five minutes later they were in a motor car, chugging up Kentucky gulch.

Slowly, the motor car fighting against the grade, the trip was accomplished. Then the four men leaped from the machine at the last rise before the tunnel was reached and three of them went forward afoot toward where a slight gleam of light came from the mouth of the Blue Poppy.

The sheriff took the lead, at last to stop behind a boulder and to shout a command:

"Hey you, h there."

"Ey yourself!" It was Harry's voice.

"Come out—and be quick about it. Hold your light in front of your face with both hands."

"The 'ell I will! And 'oo's talking?"

"Sheriff Adams of Clear Creek county. You've got one minute to come out—or I'll shoot."

"I'm comin' on the run!"

And almost instantly the form of Harry, his acetylene lamp lighting up his bulbous, surprised countenance with its spraylike mustache, appeared at the mouth of the tunnel.

"What the doody 'ell!" he gasped, as he looked into the muzzle of the revolver. From down the mountain side came the shout of one of the deputies:

"Sheriff! looks like it's him, all right. I've found a horse down here—al' sweated up from running."

"That's about the answer." Sheriff Adams wot forward and with a motion of his revolver sent Harry's hands into the air. "Let's see what you've got on you."

A light glared below as an electric flash in the hands of one of the deputies began an investigation of the surroundings. The sheriff, finishing his search of Harry's pockets, stepped back.

"Well," he demanded, "what did you do with the proceeds?"

"The proceeds?" Harry stared blankly. "Of what?"

"Quit your kidding, now. They've found your horse down there."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea—" Fairchild had cut in acridly—"to save your accusations on this thing until you're a little surer of it? Harry hasn't any horse. If he's rented one, you ought to be able to find that out pretty shortly."

As if in answer, the sheriff turned and shouted a question down the mountain side. And back came the answer:

"It's Doc Mason's. Must have been stolen. Doc was at the dance."

"I guess that settles it." The officer reached for his hip pocket. "Stick out your hands, Harry, while I put the cuffs on them."

"But 'ow in bloody 'ell 'ave I been doing anything when I've been up 'ere working on the chiv wheel? 'Ow—?"

"They say you held up the dance tonight and robbed us," Fairchild cut in. Harry's face lost its surprised look, to give way to a glance of keen questioning.

"And do you say it?"

"I most certainly do not. The identification was given by that honorable person known as Mr. Maurice Rodaine."

"Oh! one thief identifying another—"

"Sheriff!" Again the voice from below.

"Yeh!"

"We've found a cache down here. Must have been made in a hurry—two new revolvers, bullets, a mask, a couple of new handkerchiefs and the money."

Harry eyes grew wide. Then he stuck out his hands.

"The evidence certainly is piling up!" he grunted. "I might as well save my talking for later."

"That's a good idea." The sheriff snapped the handcuffs into place. Then Fairchild shut off the pumps and they started toward the machine.

Back in Ohadi more news awaited them. Harry, if Harry had been the highwayman, had gone to no expense for his outfit. The combined general store and hardware emporium of Gregg Brothers had been robbed of the articles necessary for a disguise—also the revolvers and their bullets. Robert Fairchild watched Harry placed in the solitary cell of the county jail with a spirit that could not respond to the Cornishman's grin and his assurances that morning would bring a righting of affairs. Four charges hung heavy above him: that of horse-stealing, of burglary, of highway robbery, and worse, the final assault with attempt to kill. Fairchild turned wearily away; he could not find the optimism to join Harry's cheerful announcement that it would be "all right." The appearances were otherwise. Besides, up in the little hospital on the hill, Fairchild had seen lights gleaming as he entered the jail, and he knew that doctors were working there over the wounded body of the fiddler. Tired, heavy at heart, his earlier conquest of the night sodden and overshadowed now, he turned away from the cell and its optimistic occupant—out into the night.

It was only a short walk to the hospital and Fairchild went there, to leave with at least a ray of hope. The probing operation had been completed; the fiddler would live, and at least the charge against Harry would not be one of murder. That was a thing for which to be thankful; but there was plenty to cause consternation, as Fairchild walked slowly down the dark, winding street toward the main thoroughfare. Without Harry, Fairchild now felt himself lost. Before the big, genial, eccentric Cornishman had come into his life, he had believed, with some sort of divine ignorance, that he could carry out his ambitions by himself, with no knowledge of the technical details necessary to mining, with no previous history of the Blue Poppy to guide him, and with no help against the enemies who seemed everywhere. Now he saw that it was impossible. More, the incidents of the night showed how swiftly those enemies were working, how sharp and stiletto-like their weapons.

Looking back over it now, he could see how easily Fate had played into the hands of the Rodaines, if the Rodaines had not possessed a deeper concern than merely to seize upon a happening and turn it to their own account. The highwayman was big. The highwayman talked with a "Cousin-Jack" accent—for all Cornishmen are "Cousin Jacks" in the mining country. Those two features in themselves, Fairchild thought, as he stumbled along in the darkness, were sufficient to start the scheming plot in the brain of Maurice Rodaine, already ugly and evil through the trick played by Harry on his father and the rebuke that had come from Anita Richmond. It was an easy matter for him to get the in-

spiration, leap out of the window, and then wait until the robber had gone, that he might flare forth with his accusation. And after that—

Either Chance, or something stronger, had done the rest. The finding of the stolen horse and the carelessly made cache near the mouth of the Blue Poppy mine would be sufficient in the eyes of any jury. The evidence was both direct and circumstantial. To Fairchild's mind, there was small chance for escape by Harry, once his case went to trial.

Down the dark street the man wandered, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, his head low between his shoulders—only to suddenly galvanize into intensity, and to stop short that he might hear again the voice which had come to him. At one side was a big house—a house whose occupants he knew instinctively, for he had seen the shadow of a woman, hands outstretched, as she passed the light-strewn shade of a window on the second floor.

It was pleading, and at the same time angered with the passion of a person approaching hysteria. A barking sentence answered her, something that Fairchild could not understand. He left the old board sidewalk and crept to the porch that he might hear the better. Then every nerve within him jangled, and the black of the darkness changed to red. The Rodaines were within; he had heard first the cold voice of the father, then the rasping tones of the son, in upbraiding. More, there had come the sobbing of a woman; instinctively Fairchild knew that it was Anita Richmond. And then:

It was her voice, high, screaming. Hysteria had come—the wild, racking hysteria of a person driven to the breaking point:

"Leave this house—hear me! Leave this house! Can't you see that you're killing him? Don't you dare touch me—leave this house! No—I won't be quiet—I won't—you're killing him, I tell you—"

And Fairchild waited for nothing more. A lunge, and he was on the veranda. One more spring and he had reached the door, to find it unlocked, to throw it wide and to leap into the hall. Great steps, and he had cleared the stairs to the second floor.

Dimly, as through a red screen, Fairchild saw the frightened face of Anita Richmond, and on the landing, fronting him angrily, stood the two Rodaines. For a moment, Fairchild disregarded them and turned to the sobbing, disheveled little being in the doorway.

"What's happened?"

"They were threatening me—and father!" she moaned. "But you shouldn't have come in—you shouldn't have—"

"I heard you scream. I couldn't help it. I heard you say they were killing your father—"

The girl looked anxiously toward an inner room, where Fairchild could see faintly the still figure of a man outlined under the covers of an old-fashioned four-poster.

"They—they got him excited. He had another stroke. I—I couldn't stand it any longer."

"You'd better get out," said Fairchild curtly to the Rodaines, with a suggestive motion toward the stairs. They hesitated a moment and Maurice seemed about to launch himself at Robert, but his father laid a restraining hand on his arm. A step and the elder Rodaine hesitated.

"I'm only going because of your father," he said gruffly, with a glance toward Anita. "I'm not going because—"

"Oh, I know. Mr. Fairchild shouldn't have come in here. He shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry—please go."

Down the steps they went, the older man with his hand still on his son's arm; while, white-faced, Fairchild awaited Anita, who had suddenly sped past him into the sick-room, then was wearily returning.

"Can I help you?" he asked at last.

"Yes," came her rather cold answer, only to be followed by a quickly whispered "Forgive me." And then the tones became louder—so that they could be heard at the bottom of the stairs: "You can help me greatly—simply by going and not creating any more of a disturbance."

"But—"

"Please go," came the direct answer. "And please do not vent your spite on Mr. Rodaine and his son. I'm sure that they will act like gentlemen if you will. You shouldn't have rushed in here."

"I heard you screaming, Miss Richmond."

"I know," came her answer, as icily as ever. Then the door downstairs closed and the sound of steps came on the veranda. She leaned close to him. "I had to say that," came her whispered words. "Please don't try to understand anything I do in the future. Just go—please!"

And Fairchild obeyed.

"Your partner's in jail. Guilty or not guilty?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)