

VI

TEN MINUTES OF ETERNITY

A REVOLVER, A RATTLER AND THE BOWL
OF A PIPE

THE warm June sunshine flooded the prairie with light. A little frisky breeze made silky noises in the grasses. From the other end of the plowed ground came the clank of harness and the thud of hoof-beats, as the four-horse team drew the sulky-plow, squeaking and complaining.

The monotonous work and soft air acted on the driver like a sleeping potion, and he nodded and drowsed on the seat, with the stem of a pipe clenched between his teeth.

This man, Tommy, was for ever losing the bowl of his pipe, and it was a great treat for me, a boy of fourteen, to tell him of the loss and hear him inveigh against the offending

TEN MINUTES OF ETERNITY

member with all the wealth of his Irish-Western vocabulary. Tommy was full of strange oaths and more bearded than any of his pards.

I giggled in anticipation as the plow drew near—sure enough! The bowl was gone.

"Tommy!" I hailed.

"Hay-oh! lad!" said he, snapping his eyes open. "Whoa, there!—have yer come out with ther grub call?"

"No, Tommy—but the bowl of your pipe is gone."

"What, again?" and he removed the stem, regarding it sideways. "Now, ther curses of the Mormon gods be on that bowl!" and from that beginning followed an oration, lurid and marvelous.

When he had eased his mind he said: "We went down a hole over thayre, an' I'll bet it was thin it jounced out. Let's go and take a bit of a look."

TROLLEY FOLLY

We were both busily turning over the sod and searching, with our faces bent toward the ground, when a voice said:

"Well, Murphy?"

No sound had heralded any one's approach. The question came so entirely unexpected we both started and looked up.

There, seated in graceful ease upon a mound of grass, was a lean, dark man, with a revolver in his hand.

At this sight Tommy stopped rigid, still half stooped. His broad, good-natured face went gray in an instant. His eyes glittered with fear. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and twice no sound came; but the next time the words poured out in a torrent of frantic haste.

"Stephens! I didn't mane it! Lord God, man! I take it back! Sure yer wouldn't hold it aginst me! I was wild drunk at th' time

TEN MINUTES OF ETERNITY

—Fur the love of Heaven, don't shoot me! I've got a wife an' two childer."

The stranger's mouth went sideways in an evil smile.

"You should have thought of that before, Murphy," he said slowly.

"Yer wouldn't kill me before the lad, would yer?" the other went on, his lips so dry now that the words were no more than a whisper.

Stephens bent toward him with savage quietness, and with the same set, twisted smile.

"I told you that I would kill you on sight," he said, "wherever and whenever that might be, and I am here to do it."

He raised the revolver as he spoke. A great sob stuck in my throat. Through my head went a roaring noise.

I looked from the one man to the other in such a sickening ague of fear, that I could not have uttered a sound to save my life. I

TROLLEY FOLLY

waited in this suspense for the report that would shut out the cheerful quiet of the day, like a black blot. In that second of deathly silence between the men, the whispering of the breeze and the clanking of the harness of the distant horses seemed loud sounds.

Already I saw poor, honest, drunken Tommy lying still upon the ground, looking with dead eyes at the blue above.

But I saw a change come over his face, and before I had time to wonder at it he spoke:

"Stephens!" he said, "don't move fur yer life! There's a rattler widin' a foot of yer lift elbow!"

A contemptuous smile parted Stephens' lips at what he considered a silly ruse, and then it stopped frozen, leaving him with a face like a mask, and sitting as rigidly motionless as Tommy had stood but a moment ago, for at that instant the devil of the prairie

TEN MINUTES OF ETERNITY

sounded his whirring warning of sudden death at hand.

For a while all three of us were paralyzed—then,

"Oh, thayre he comes! He's comin' in front of yer! Oh Lordy! Lordy! what'll I do!" shrieked Tommy.

"Keep perfectly still," said Stephens, scarcely moving a muscle of his face. "Where is he now?"

"Howly Mary! His head's a'most touchin' yer hand!"

Stephens' face turned to a green pallor as the blood forsook the tan, but his expression of calm self-possession never changed a jot. There was a certain similarity that struck me even at that instant between the finely modelled evil head of the serpent and the man's clean-cut features.

They might have been a group in bronze,

TROLLEY FOLLY.

those two, for the rattlesnake had stopped, motionless, with his head raised in poise; and not the tremor of a muscle showed the man was living.

"Oh damn! damn this country!" whispered Tommy in an agony, "with never a stick nor stone in it! What'll I do, Stephens? What'll I do?"

"There's a whip on your plow; send the boy for it," breathed he.

I backed carefully away from the horrible spot, fearful the least sudden movement would bring the man's fate upon him.

Then I flew for the whip.

Returning, I placed it in Tommy's hands.

"Now, kid," whispered Stephens, "step back and wave your coat. Hit, Murphy, at your first chance."

I did as directed, and the little fiery eyes turned toward me. Tommy brought down

TEN MINUTES OF ETERNITY

the whip-stock with such fury it shivered into splinters. At the same moment Stephens made a cat-like jump to the side.

The rattler lay coiling and writhing in his death agony.

We three humans stood staring at each other without speaking. A great deal had happened within ten minutes, and speech is for commonplaces—not for crises.

At last Stephens broke the silence. He stretched his long arms, and yawned.

"I feel stiff—sitting still so long," he said.

Without warning, my nerves gave way; I burst into a strangled sobbing.

Immediately the two men began to pat and comfort me.

"Why, kid," said Stephens, "you stood the rest of it like a thoroughbred; you mustn't cry now—there—there, brace up, old man!"

Between them they managed to quiet me,

TROLLEY FOLLY

and then Tommy turned timidly to Stephens.

"How about the trouble between us?" he asked.

"Don't mention it," said the other, with a wave of his hand. "I don't feel just as I did a few minutes ago." He glanced down at the still squirming snake. "If there is a God," he began, then stopped and shrugged his shoulders.—"Well, so long. I must be going. See you later."

Tommy and I watched the slim, athletic figure until it had swung down on to the coulée out of sight.

"He's a turrible man," said Tommy, "but not a bad one after all. Well, look! will ye? I'll be damned if thayre ain't the bowl of that pipe!"

And picking it up we returned to the plow team.

VII

THE PUNISHMENT AND THE CRIME

THE TOO HUMOROUS PROPENSITIES OF BURT MOSSMAN AND OTHERS

When he gets a tenderfoot he ain't afraid to
rig,

Stand him on a chuck-box and make him
dance a jig;

With his re-a-loading cutter he'll make 'em
sing and shout.

He's a regular Ben Thompson—when the
boss ain't about!

—The Expert Cow-man (expurgated).

TEN thousand head of steers were waiting for cars at Dundee. There was the Bar Cross, the V V, the California outfit, the Double Ess Bar, the 7 T X, the Bar A Bar, the Sacramento Pool outfit and the Tinnin-Slaughter wagon, all the way from Toyah. This last