

A Deal in Dates.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF TOM HARDWICK, SHERIFF OF MONTEBASCO COUNTY.

BY FRANK N. STRATTON.

I.

THE sheriff of Montebasco County pulled up his horse, leaned wearily upon the saddle-horn, and contemplated the lonely dugout, whose lowly, sod-thatched roof was scarcely distinguishable from its parent plain.

"Beats all," he muttered, "that anybody'd live in such a lonesome, desolate——"

He stopped short as his restless eyes caught sight of the woman emerging from the bed of the sluggish stream below him. As he urged his horse toward her the woman dropped the bundle of drift-wood, folded her arms, and awaited his approach.

"So you've found us at last," she said sullenly.

The sheriff repressed an exclamation of surprise.

"Guess I have," he replied slowly. "Is Bob here?"

The lines in the woman's pinched face grew tenser.

"Yes, he's here—what's left of him," she answered.

"Wasn't lookin' for him; but I've just missed bigger game, an' I might as well take something back home. Reckon he'll come without the warrant. He'll have to, or——"

"He'll give you no trouble," the woman interrupted. "He's out there—under those rocks."

She stretched a bony arm toward an oblong heap of stones half hidden by the drifted snow.

"There are wolves here, also," she said grimly. "But those prey only on the dead."

A quick pressure of the spur against the horse's flank turned the sheriff's back toward the bitter wind, his face from the bitter eyes. For just an instant he bared and bent his head, and

the bitterness died out of the woman's eyes. She glanced at the drooping horse.

"You've been long in the saddle, and must be chilled through," she said quietly. "Come into the house."

As she swung the bundle to her back the sheriff seized it, laid it across his saddle, and followed the woman silently. A little boy, thin-faced and hollow-eyed, ran timidly to his mother as she entered.

"Better put your horse in the shed," the woman suggested, as she replenished the dying fire. "There's a little prairie hay left, I think."

The sheriff spent more time in intervals of profound meditation than in caring for the horse. When he reentered the solitary room, the woman and the child waited for him at a rough table.

"Corn bread, rye hominy, and water isn't much to offer a guest," the woman said, with a little, mirthless laugh; "though there's plenty of the water."

The sheriff ate silently and sparingly. When the child, having eagerly devoured its portion, glanced appealingly motherward, the sheriff, ignoring the maternal frown, filled the empty plate from his own.

"Had a plenty at Gulch Point," he murmured apologetically, "an' I like to see the youngster eat."

The woman shot a quick glance at him, half grateful, half resentful.

"Gulch Point," she repeated. "That's a mighty tired horse to have come only from Gulch Point!"

The sheriff grinned sheepishly, leaned back, and watched the voracious "youngster."

"What ailed Bob?" he asked softly, after a while.

A little tremor came into the woman's voice.

"I don't know. Fever, I guess—and worry."

"Didn't the doc know?"

"We had no doctor. Doctors want money—and Robert thought he'd soon be well. Besides, we wanted no one to see us—you know why."

"But you had help—when——"

The sheriff gave a quick gesture in the direction of the heap of stones. The woman folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head.

"Just me and little Robbie," she said gently. "And—the Book."

The sheriff coughed, fumbled at his belt, and turned toward the fire. The child dropped his spoon into the empty plate, rested his head against the damp wall behind him, and heaved a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Thought you'd gone to Minnesoty, where Bob come from," the sheriff observed. "How'd you come to stop at this God-fersaken place?"

"One of the horses died here, and we hadn't money to buy another. We built the dugout and the shed, thinking we might push on, somehow, when spring came. After Robert went I had to sell the other horse and the wagon to get food."

"What d'ye 'low to do now? Spring's 'most here."

"I don't know. I might teach again—if there are any schools out here."

"Looky here, Mrs. Cruthers, you'd better come back——"

"And ask charity!" the woman exclaimed. "No! If we hadn't lost the farm it would be different."

"It would be different if Bob hadn't tried to borrow money on the farm when it wasn't his any longer."

"He didn't!" the woman cried fiercely.

"Oh, I reckon the grand jury knowed what they was doin' when they fetched in that indictment."

The woman gripped the edge of the table, and leaned toward her guest.

"What does that indictment say?" she asked breathlessly.

"It says a plenty. Cuttin' out the 'thens' and 'theres' an' 'aforesaid,' it says that Bob tried to get money under false pretense. An' Flint an'

Harmsley do tell a mighty ugly story. I didn't think it of Bob. Knowed he was green an' easy frustrated, but thought he was straight."

The wan eyes of the woman gleamed and glittered in the dim room.

"Tell me what those men said," she demanded hoarsely. "I never understood why we should run away, but Robert insisted, and never would tell me why."

"Why, when Bob couldn't renew the mortgage, an' couldn't borrow to pay it—the panic bein' on, you know—Harmsley offered to loan him the money. But he wouldn't accept an ordinary mortgage. So you an' Bob made Harmsley an absolute deed; remember signin' it, don't you?"

"Yes; but I never knew why."

"Well, then Bob an' Harmsley signed an agreement——"

"In duplicate?"

"Don't know; ought to have been, if Bob had any sense. Agreement was that Harmsley would deed the farm back if Bob paid the thousand dollars, with twelve per cent, on or before last October——"

"When?"

"First of last October—October 1, 1896. Record of Harmsley's contract, in the recorder's office, says so; read it myself. Well, Bob didn't pay, an' consequently the farm was Harmsley's for good, 'cording to the contract. Then, about the middle of last October, Flint offered to loan the thousand at eight per cent, not knowin' the situation, an' Bob arranged to get the money on that farm that wasn't his; did get Flint to advance him a little—to skip out with, I reckon, in case Flint caught on before he got it all, which Flint did. That's all, an' that's enough—in this State."

The woman had crossed the room, and was unlocking an old and battered trunk. She lifted out and carried to the table a huge and well-worn Bible, from among whose pages she drew a paper, frayed and stained.

"Tell me what this is," she said, an exultant ring in her voice.

The sheriff stirred the embers of the fire to brighter light, stooped, and glanced hastily over the document.

"It's a duplicate, sure enough. In Harmsley's handwrite, an' signed by him an' Bob—just like the one Harmsley holds."

"Is it? Look again."

Again the sheriff of Montebasco County stooped, then suddenly straightened up with a puzzled, suspicious look on his bronzed face.

"If Bob had this, why did he——"

"He lost it. The next day after I signed that deed he told me he'd lost an important paper, and it must have been that. I found it—only last week—inside the lining of his old coat."

"Did Harmsley know it was lost?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure Robert told him. Harmsley was friendly toward Robert. He warned him, later, that Flint intended to prosecute—advised him to run."

The sheriff of Montebasco County muttered an exclamation, dropped into his seat, and stared at the fire. The little boy crept into his mother's arms, and she swayed her body to and fro, crooning a lullaby, as she watched the sheriff curiously.

"Frien'ly toward Bob!" muttered the sheriff to himself. "Yes; oh, yes! That's why he asked me to hold the warrant for a while—so's Bob would have time to go, an' stay gone. Of course he showed Bob his copy—Harmsley's copy—an' the record!"

The woman ceased her lullaby, and interrupted the sheriff's cogitation.

"I've thought that if those figures are right, and Mr. Harmsley's are wrong, maybe he'd give me a chance to get the farm back by next October, as it says. But if he wouldn't—I couldn't pay lawyers, and the thousand dollars and interest, as I'd have to, even if I should win."

A sarcastic smile played over the bronzed face.

"Oh, yes; Harmsley would do what was right—for Harmsley!" Then, as he looked up and saw the expression on the woman's face, a soft light shone in the keen gray eyes. "You've studied an' worried a good deal over this," he observed reflectively.

The woman buried her face in the child's curls.

"Worried? Night and day—day and night! There's a mistake somewhere. I can't understand it. Do you?"

The two vertical furrows between the shaggy eyebrows of the sheriff of Montebasco County deepened and lengthened as he rose to his feet, slipped the paper into his inside pocket, and buttoned his coat.

"I think I do," he growled. "I ain't sure, but I reckon I do. I'm goin' to find out."

The woman sprang up, distrust and alarm in the thin, gaunt face.

"You can't take that paper!" she cried. "It's all I have to prove Robert's innocence!"

The sheriff frowned.

"Can't you trust me?" he asked gruffly.

"Trust you—trust the man who dogged us to this place? I trust no one now. Give me that paper!"

She placed the drowsy child in the chair, and advanced upon the sheriff resolutely. He handed the paper to her, and she thrust it into the bosom of her threadbare dress. Then she followed after him to the door, and stood there, watching him with suspicious eyes, as he bridled and mounted the horse. He rode up to her, and halted.

"Go to Gulch Point every week," he said, "and ask for mail. It's a long tramp—nigh ten mile—but you may get something that will clear—him."

He pointed again to the mound of stones. She looked up searchingly into his face.

"I'll go," she said quietly.

"Then let me see the date in that document again. I may have to swear to it."

The woman drew back, took the paper from her bosom, opened it, and held it up, out of the sheriff's reach. Quick as a flash he bent from his saddle and snatched it from her hand.

She was still following him when he glanced back before galloping into the distant foot-hills.

II.

WHEN the sheriff of Montebasco County entered the office of Alexander

Harmsley, dealer in real estate and shaver of notes, and closed and locked the door behind him, Mr. Harmsley wheeled in his chair at the flat-topped desk and looked up inquiringly.

"A little private business, Aleck," explained the sheriff, "an' I don't want to be interrupted."

"At your service, sheriff," replied Mr. Harmsley briskly. "What can I do for you?"

The sheriff leaned back in the chair at the opposite side of the desk and regarded Mr. Harmsley cordially.

"My term's 'most up, you know, Aleck, an' I don't care to run again. Concluded to settle down to farmin'. Been lookin' around a little, an' rather like that Cruthers place. What's your figures?"

Mr. Harmsley summoned his most gracious smile, and caressed his respectable whiskers thoughtfully.

"Fifty per acre—four thousand dollars—and dirt cheap at that."

"Pretty high, Aleck. It don't stand you in more'n a thousand or so, you know."

Mr. Harmsley produced a cedar box on which was depicted an exceedingly burly gentleman engaged in the occupation of holding up the world.

"Have a cigar, Tom. Don't smoke, myself."

"Too busy makin' other people smoke, eh, Aleck?" the sheriff observed pleasantly, as he struck a match. Mr. Harmsley chuckled.

"If you don't happen to have the ready cash, Tom, I can give you time on that——"

"Oh, I guess I won't need much time in this deal."

"Oughtn't to, as long as you've been in office—with the graft there is in it," remarked Mr. Harmsley, winking significantly while the sheriff grinned.

"How's th' title?"

"To the Cruthers farm? Straight as a string. Gilt-edged."

"Cruthers claimed, you know, that the time for redemption didn't expire till next October. I ain't buyin' no lawsuits. If he should come back——"

"Come back? With you holding that warrant? Not much. You don't

know Cruthers. And the statute of limitation don't run while he's concealed, you know."

"That's right. An' I reckon your contract's ironclad."

"It's recorded; read it."

"Recorders have made mistakes. I want the place, but I'd have to see the original contract. Four thousand dollars is four thousand dollars, Aleck."

Mr. Harmsley frowned, meditated, walked slowly to the great steel safe, unlocked a private drawer, drew forth a folded and labeled paper, and tossed it upon the desk. The sheriff unfolded it leisurely.

"Excuse me for bein' so partic'lar, Aleck, specially with an old friend, but I've heard that Cruthers said——"

"Damn what Cruthers said! He's done."

"Yes, I reckon he is," remarked the sheriff, scanning the paper. "Done—to a golden brown!"

Mr. Harmsley darted a quick, suspicious glance across the desk, and laughed, faintly and unpleasantly.

"You make devilish odd remarks sometimes, Tom; remarks that might cause talk if overheard."

"That's why I locked the door," observed the sheriff dryly. He was holding the paper up, so that the light shone through it, and his weather-beaten face was growing stern and rigid. Harmsley scowled, and reached an arm across the desk.

"You're insulting, Hardwick—and too damned suspicious. Give me that paper. The place is not for sale. I've changed my mind."

"As well as the figures, eh, Aleck?"

"What are you talking about?" roared Harmsley.

The sheriff had produced another paper, and was comparing the two through keen, half-closed eyes.

"About forgery, Aleck," he answered pleasantly. "That's what a jury would call it. It's really an artistic job, Aleck, but you scratched a little too deep on that seven; an' when you filled in the six, the ink was blacker an' thicker, an'—steady there! Drop that, quick!"

Harmsley's hand came up from out

the drawer. He was looking down the muzzle of the revolver of the sheriff of Montebasco County.

"Now let me hear you push that drawer shut—with your knee, Aleck, with your knee! That's all right. Now you may sign this, if you don't mind. Just a matter of form, you know—perfectin' the title of Mrs. Cruthers to her farm. Bein' the sheriff, I can acknowledge your signature."

Harmsley's fat face was livid with rage and terror as he stared at the deed that lay before him.

"This is blackmail!" he protested. "Nothing less than blackmail!"

"Oh, no, Aleck. It's justice—something less than justice—for I ought to give you up to the State's attorney, along with these two papers, an' the

letter you foolishly wrote to your fellow conspirator, Flint, which I scared him into givin' me an hour ago. Are you goin' to sign, Aleck?"

Harmsley's shaking hand reached for a pen.

"You're a devil," he groaned. "If I sign, how do I know you'll——"

"You've got the word of Tom Hardwick, sir. But don't let anything I say influence your judgment, Aleck. If you'd rather take your chances—what an easy writer you are, Aleck! So smooth an' graceful. Thanks! Any time you want to make another little deal in dates like this one, Aleck, you can count me in—an' don't you forget it, either! So long, old boy. I've got to hustle to get this recorded an' into the next mail north."

CRAB-APPLE BLOSSOMS.

WITH an azure snood in her sunny hair,
Her soft feet gleaming pink and bare,
Frolicsome Spring goes by;
'Mid briars and hazel along the stream
Anemones and claytonias gleam,
Where her cast-off sandals lie.

Reckless truant, she does not care
If the willows wear strands of her golden hair,
Or wild plums flash with the pearls
In the necklace they stole from her dainty throat,
As she dances along to climes remote
Where the sifting snow still whirls.

Where the dusky woods have a sunny cleft,
Fringe from her violet gown is left;
And on mosses in every glade
Are rings or chains of the buttercup's gold.
Wherever she passes our eyes behold
Sweet signs of the wilful maid.

Crab-apple blossoms! The very name
Fills our soul with a tender flame
No other flower can bring;
For their color and fragrance were once a part
Of the blood that beat in the joyous heart
Of the gracious madcap, Spring!

Adela Stevens Cody.

EDITOR'S NOTE—We desire to call special attention to the serial stories by Stanley Weyman and Anthony Hope now being published in this magazine. "The Abbess of Vlaze," by Mr. Weyman, began last month, and is continued, with a synopsis of the first instalment, on page 50 of the present issue. No reader of MUNSEY'S should miss this stirring historical romance.

Anthony Hope's "Double Harness," which is continued on page 83, with a synopsis of the earlier chapters, is another remarkable story. Its theme is that greatest problem of modern life, the marriage question. Messrs. Hope and Weyman stand high among the leading novelists of the day, and these two serials are as good work as they have ever done.