



IT WAS TWILIGHT WHEN HE REACHED THE SPUR OF ROCK SHELVING
ABOVE A YAWNING CAVERN

The Running of Silver River

by C. F. Bourke

WHEN a young and ambitious professional man like Harlow, C. E., is informed by a briefly brutal telegram that his first important piece of work has been wiped out by a stroke of misfortune that offers no remedy, he is likely to do one of two things, according to his nature and instinct.

He will either sit down with a cold feeling in the region of his stomach and passively accept the probable ruin of his professional career, or square his jaw and get into action as fast as railroad facilities and the operation of the human brain can encompass

the deed—cataclysms of nature and dispensations of Providence to the contrary notwithstanding.

The latter was the course selected by Engineer Harlow, who, representing his patron, the president of the Western Reducing Company, had recently completed the construction of the reducing-plant at Silverton, the first child of his technical training.

When the plant first went into operation, Harlow looked upon his work and found it good. The great ore-crushers and distributors roared and wheezed like twelve-inch turret-guns in action; canvas-coated, red-

ore-splashed men washed out the last remnants of metal, and the main artery of the plant, the Silver River, swirled athwart the mountainside to continue on its way a turbid, red-stained stream, useless for further purposes of cleanliness.

"The work is good, the plant the best, and the ever-flowing creek will keep her going till we've washed up all the pay-rock on this slope of the Rockies!"

So said Engineer Harlow to Houghton, the manager. Surly, taciturn, and pessimistic, the manager grunted a non-committal reply, and the engineer betook himself plainsward on the overland railroad.

A few days later, while Harlow was resting in Denver, he got a telegram from Manager Houghton, announcing the coming of disaster and the permanent destruction of all the company's hopes—all within the economical limits of an unsatisfactory ten words.

The morning overland train deposited Harlow at Silverton, and twenty minutes later the engineer flung himself from a smoking buckskin pony into the presence of the tiger-snarling Houghton, who awaited his arrival in the spacious office of the Western Reducing plant. There were no polite preliminary greetings.

"What the devil's the matter with that qualified Silver River you boomed in your report? Gone dry almost overnight—stopped running like a piker—quit dead as a cut hose!"

"I know that from your telegram," Harlow replied curtly. "By the way, I presume you forgot the office has a telegraph-code?"

The sarcastic flingback missed its mark.

"Don't you bother about my telegrams, son," the manager growled. "The cat jumped the bag in New York before the crick got through drying up. Wall Street had advance information on that job."

Hardly catching the sense of the

manager's words, Harlow turned to the window commanding a view of the little city of Silverton, below them. Sharply back from the side of the ore-plant he saw the melancholy dry bed of the Silver River.

A week ago the stream was singing out of the bowels of the mountain, furnishing life-blood to the big ore-plant on the hillside.

That was all that had happened in his absence. The rest was the same—the morning sun tipping the backbone of the continent; the heathery hillside; the little town flooded in golden sun-glare. The silent works shed a grotesque black shadow down toward the town, where idle men prowled in the streets—for the ore-plant was the life-blood of the little city, as the Silver River had been the life-blood of the ore-plant.

"Picturesque view, ain't it?" Houghton growled. "Nice place to go fishin', eh?"

In the brief moment of silence Harlow realized what the last few days must have meant to the big manager, lacking intuition, but full of pessimistic imagination.

"It is rather discouraging," the engineer said. "I suppose it's been a pretty bad grind?"

"Grind!" Houghton's fat fist punctuated the exclamation like the fall of a rock-crusher. "Grind! It's been ashes to ashes, all right, all right! A month after we start the plant, the bottom drops out. Black Friday, too! Then Graveyard Saturday and Tombstone Sunday. Dribble, dribble, dribble; that's the way the creek went out; and all of us staring like bull-calves. Pretty soon she was shut off dead, with blind fishes from inside the mountain wrigglin' on the gravel. Then, to cap it, Western Reducing stock was thrown on the market in N'York, an' wouldn't sell for scrap-iron. Oh, my Aunt Maria! Them Raynor brothers did us up plenty and frequent when they unloaded this barn, half-finished, for fifty thousand dollars!"

"The Silver River was flowing out of

the side of the mountain, five miles from here, fifty years before the Raynors staked out this property," Harlow returned. "It was a subterranean stream, coming out of the big divide, before Fremont crossed to the coast."

"Well, it ain't running any more," Houghton replied doggedly. "And them Raynors have gone off with our fifty thousand to irrigate the Yuma Valley, somewhere t'other side of the divide. Them chaps know where to find water!" He put up his big hand, as Harlow picked up his hat with a sudden gleam in his eye and moved toward the door. "It's up to you to do some hustling. The N'York gang's ready to sell this plant for old junk—they got an offer through some real-estate shark—only they want your report first. Sing your swan song, so's I can get out of here and hunt another job!"

Harlow had already passed the door and flung himself on the buckskin bronco.

"I'll take a week to sing my song," he said grimly. "I'll go over that mountain, or through it, first. That's what none of you seem to have thought of!"

II

THE young engineer realized that he faced a problem for which the text-books offered no solution. He rapidly rehearsed the details of disaster—the purchase of the reducing-plant, with its seemingly time-defying water-supply; the inexplicable cutting off of the subterranean stream, the artery of its life; the raid on the company's stock, and the proffered purchase of the plant for junk. There were others, apparently, who knew as well as Harlow and Houghton the importance of the part played by the Silver River in the operation of the Western Reducing Company's ore-works.

The sun was still high in the heavens when he turned the buckskin bronco's head out of Silverton, following the bed of the dried stream into the recesses of the mountain. He

carried with him food and candles, and—the last thing Houghton, relenting in his surliness, had suggested—a heavy Remington navy revolver and a well-filled cartridge-belt.



It was twilight when he reached the spur of rock shelving above a yawning cavern whence, formerly, the Silver River had sprung from its unknown source in the heart of the hills. He had searched the creek's rocky sides, but had found no indications of former drought. So far as the rocks told him, the stream had simply lost its way, or had forgotten to flow along its accustomed route.

He had drawn out a match to light a candle when the sound of horses' hoofs and men's voices on the mountain trail caused him instinctively to draw the bronco within the shelter of the cavern's mouth. When the twilight riders stopped just above him, he stood breathlessly with his hand clapped on the bronco's muzzle.

"Aw, come on!" a voice said. "What's the use hanging round that hole in the mud?"

The response came, accompanied by a chuckling laugh.

"I was just wondering what that kid Harlow said when he saw that dry stream. Lordy, we didn't wipe his eye or nothing, did we, Billy? Wonder what that Western Reducing gang would think if they was real wise to the job?"

"They'd get after our scalp four ways to once, if they was," the other man growled. "Just the same, it will be time for us to whinny when we get the transfer-papers signed, sealed, and delivered. Then they can squeal all they want, and so can the ranchers over in

Yuma. Come on, Bob!"

Harlow drew his first full breath simultaneously with the sound of the men's departure. Bill and Bob Raynor! So they were the mysterious bidders for the ore-company's plant—the very men who had sold the works to the company a year before. Chance had sent to him the very men who had been in his mind all the afternoon, as connected in some way with the failure of the stream.

What he had heard swept from his mind all thought of exploring, single-handed, the bed of the lost river. His way lay now after the Raynors. He left the shelter of the cavern, following their trail cautiously as an Indian on the slot of an enemy. Over the tortuous turns of the mountain path he had no trouble in keeping the two brothers in sight, silhouetted against a starlit sky, as they toiled upward toward the backbone of the range.

Under the clear stars he watched them gain and cross the plateau that topped the range, doubling sharply to the right before they dipped behind the ridge on the other side. A second later the buckskin bronco was speeding across the open plateau. It stopped at the top of a steep slope, and far below Harlow saw the twinkling lights of a ranch-house. The night riders had disappeared, but he followed down into the hollow. There he pulled up sharply, checking a cry of surprise.

A sound of swirling water came from the right—water, where he had found only a dried-up hillside the summer before! He turned the bronco toward the sound. One hundred—two hundred yards, and the pony's feet paddled in water pouring swiftly downward. Directly over him projected the frowning front of a huge precipice, and from the base of the cliff the water was spouting forth in a cataract. Then he saw something else—a passageway and a hand-rail leading inward on the side of the torrent, the pathway showing white on the rock.

The ranch-house was so close that he

could hear the laughter and shouting of the men. He dismounted from the pony, dropping the reins over the bronco's head to hold him in his place, and entered the face of the mountain, bending his head to follow the narrow pass that skirted the rushing water. He was beginning to understand what Manager Houghton said about the Raynors' "irrigating" Yuma Valley.

"They've tapped the subterranean stream here, and they're checking against our bank-deposit!"

Under the shadow of the cliff he lighted a candle, and drew back as his foot touched the margin of a wide, shining body of water. From the base of the ledge, as far back as he could see, the water shone and rippled toward the outlet into the valley. But something to the right diverted his eyes and drew a savage oath from his lips. Across a gloomy arch a wall of rock rose above the surface of the water, stopping its course into the depths of the mountain, whither it had doubtless flowed for ages before the barricade was erected.

That the work of diverting the stream was not yet completed was evidenced by the loose blocks of stone, the crowbars, and the pickaxes strewn about the path.

Picking up a handful of clay from the margin of the underground lake, Harlow plastered his candle against the wall of the cavern. Then his quick ear caught a faint sound, as of a man's voice outside. He snatched up a crowbar that lay handy.

"Before they get me I'll leave my mark," he muttered grimly.

He set the crowbar into the interstices of the stones, exerting all his strength to lever the top blocks off. Then he heard the crack of a rifle outside the cavern, followed by the shrill whinny of the buckskin bronco.

He ran along the narrow path, tossing the candle into the water as he reached the overhanging cliff, and sprang upon the

bronco's back. The buckskin slipped on the damp rock, recovering himself with a snort. As he headed for the trail up the mountain he saw a bunch of horsemen coming from the ranch-house, and bullets began to whistle about him.

"After him, boys! Corral him before he gits up top! He's been, in to the lake!"

With the yelling voices behind him and the bullets whistling past his ears, Harlow lay down on the gallant little buckskin's back to ride as he had never ridden before in his life.

"He's seen the dam. Take him, boys! Don't let him get over the range alive!"

Harlow knew the trail. Besides, he was riding for his life; and he was carrying with him the secret of the Silver River.

At the top of the slope he gave the bronco his head across the plateau, unbuckling the holster-flap of his Remington navy revolver as he sped for the other side. A slow rage was growing in him at the treachery of the Raynors, who, not content with ruining him, were now eager to take his life.

Half-way across the plateau a horseman was only a few yards behind him. The riders were not ten yards apart when Harlow wheeled the bronco. He felt a stinging burn in his shoulder; then the big Remington spoke, and in the flash he saw Bob Raynor plunge headlong from his saddle. When he swung the buckskin again into its course, the others were yelling after him like wolves.

III

AN hour later, Houghton, of the Western Reducing Company, sprang to his feet at the sound of a galloping horse sliding and slithering on the gravel before the door. Harlow, revolver in hand, stumbled into the room.

"There's no time to talk—get the Winchesters!" Harlow gasped.

He fell into a chair and turned down the lamp, but not before Houghton had jerked two rifles out of a locker and spilled a box of cartridges upon the table.

"Who are we goin' to shoot up?" he asked laconically. "Hoss-thieves?"

"The Raynors—or one of 'em. I got Bob Raynor. I found the river. They'll get me, if they have to burn down the plant!"

The pursuers must have come up quietly. There was a slight scuffling before the office; then a voice rang out sharply:

"You Houghton, hand Harlow out here, or it'll be worse for both of you! You hear?"



FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE HOUSE CAME
A SHOWER OF BULLETS

The big manager slid up the window softly.

"Ain't receiving callers to-night," he said. "Come t'morrow, Bill."

An oath and a shot answered him, chipping the window-ledge. The manager dropped to the floor, shoving the barrel of his Winchester across the sill. A scream followed the report, and then from both sides of the house came a shower of bullets, shattering the window-panes and knocking the mortar from the ceiling of the room.

"Confound 'em," Houghton growled,

“they’ve got behind the powder-house! I can’t shoot over there!”

The besiegers had gathered about a small structure on the far side of the road, facing the office-building. Behind them the hillside sloped steeply; there was no other cover under the bright starlight except the dry bed of the river.

The horsemen had stopped firing. Harlow, leaning upon his window-sill, heard the manager’s voice coming from afar off.

“What are they down on us for? What got them after you, anyhow?”

Harlow tried to get his voice, but his senses seemed to be drifting away on some boundless sea, far from the trouble and pain of life. Everything seemed dimmed and dulled except that horrible stinging wound in his shoulder. Then he screamed with agony. The manager’s big hand was on his arm, brutally shaking him into consciousness.

“They’re going to rush us. Wake up here! They’re bunching behind the powder-house—my God, they’ve *fired* it!”

Harlow caught, that. The devils from the mountain had fired the powder-house, which held enough giant-powder to blow a troop of cavalry into chin-straps.

A shout from Houghton roused him. The light was growing brighter behind the little house across the road. A man on a black horse shot away from the light, crossed the road, as Houghton fired at him, and leaped his horse over the steep bank into the bed of the river.

“Missed the brute!” Houghton growled. “It’s Bill Raynor. He’s going to enfilade us when we jump for it out back. There go two more! I can’t hit anything in this light. Are you awake, boy? Got hurt, didn’t you?”

Two or three shots entered the side window, coming from the river-bed, and Houghton pulled Harlow to the floor.

“They’re all over in the river now,” he

growled, “except two of the brutes that’s gone up under the trestles. What’s it going to be, son—blow up, or run for it? What’s that?”

It seemed to Harlow that he had been listening to the sound for hours. Far out in the night, a deep, dull boom came out of the darkness of the hills. Harlow crawled across the room and laid his rifle across the sill of the side window commanding the river-bed. He knew what ghostly vengeance it was that was roaring and booming closer and closer; and a moment later the men hidden in the river-bed knew, too.

“They blocked the creek on the other side of the range,” he whispered, in answer to Houghton’s excited questions. “Keep the devils in their own trap; they can’t come out this way! Don’t you hear the water? I found the dam, and got a crowbar under the keystone. It’s the river coming!”



REGARDLESS OF FALLING TIMBERS AND CRASHING GLASS, THE ENGINEER CLUNG TO THE REMNANTS OF THE WINDOW

“They’re afraid to come this way, an’

they're making up stream to where the bank is lower," the manager cried, as a flare of fire from the burning powder-house lit up the scene like daylight.

"There's one of the brutes trying to climb the bank now," Harlow chattered, half crazed from pain and weakness. "If I thought it was Bill Raynor, I'd pot him!"

"You'll get out of this hole right now, that's what you'll do!" Houghton exclaimed. "See that fire out there? The whole place will go up in about a second. Mosey, man!"

He sprang to the rear of the office, flinging open a back door; but Harlow did not heed either his words or his actions. A spitting, clear stream of fire spurted up from the roof of the powder-house, like the fire-spurt of a blow-pipe. Then a blast like the explosion of a twelve-inch gun rose in the midst of a great furnace of flame, lifting the whole front of the building with it. But, regardless of falling timbers and crashing glass, the engineer clung to the remnants of the window, glaring at another devouring element that was forging onward with irresistible might. He saw the white crest of the mighty wave that led the coming river, and he heard the wild shrieks of the men caught down between the banks of the torrent.

IV

"THOUGHT we'd never get you awake," the

manager was saying. "Thought you was sure finished when that bang came. The powder blowed a hole in the ground big enough to plant Raynor and all his gang, including the cayuses. How d'ye feel?"

A shade of anxiety crossed Harlow's features.

"The Raynor crowd are dead, you say?"

"Dead, not them!" The manager grunted his disgust. "That bloomin' river came down like Niagara on a bender, but it only accounted for two or three drowned broncs. The sheriff came back from Yuma Valley this morning, and he says the Raynors have skipped clean out o' the country. They must have been working to block up Silver River ever since they sold this plant to the Western Company. Figured on getting the plant back for nothing, an' then they'd turn on the water again. See? Nice pair of citizens!"

Harlow was lying in the back room of the wrecked office. The crushers were pounding and booming in the reducing-works, and he smiled as he listened to the fuss and flurry of the river.

"I wired N'York," Houghton said. "Guess you get most of the credit, son."

"I guess the credit goes to Providence, all right," Harlow murmured. "She did her work with fire and flood, but she always does it handsomely. I guess she knew where she wanted the Silver River to run!"