

WAYSIDE TALES

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Volume 21

Contents for JANUARY, 1922

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CHRISTMAS UP RIO LUCERO



"Like two crouching enemies they face each other."

The Story by S. Omar Barker With Illustrations by Garrett Price

HIGH up on the Rio Lucero, where the crags of old Bull o' the Woods cast their darkest shadow on the red sandstone ledges of the canyon, stand two squatty little cabins. Like two crouching enemies they face each other across the brown and red dumps of hand-worked mines below them.

Of the two drab little dwellings, the one that sits close under the steep slopes of the massive Bull o' the Woods, and looks toward the north, never seeing the sun except in summer, is much the newer. Its walls are lower, its dirt roof is fresher

and less carefully rounded, as if it had been set up in haste—while its companion of the other slope shows even through gray marks of age the loving hand of careful workmen.

Years ago two prospectors, just entering the age of grizzled beards and mellowed hearts, wandered up the trackless canyon of the Lucero and there, in the red sandstone and white quartz cropping out along the gorge, found traces of yellow gold. They stopped and dug a mine, and together they built a warm and roomy cabin as high up out of the shadow

of Bull o' the Woods as they could climb. There, when they had brought supplies and made their crude furniture, they would sit together during the long winter evenings, smoking friendly pipes and sharing tales of labors past and hopes of joys to come.

When summer came again they spent long hours with pick and hammer, burrowing holes in the canyon's bottom. Evenings they would sit beside their cabin, or squat against its rough wall, watching the colors deepen from gold to blood red, and then to black, as darkness fell on the heights of the huge peak that reared its head eternally above them. Then they would talk of the prospect holes and discuss the latest signs of gold, and finger the tiny nuggets they had thus far found, hazarding many a guess as to the luck of the morrow. But whether luck was with them or against them, they were contented, for they loved this life of hard but hopeful digging, with its solitude. To them, a prospect hole was home. The clank of picks and bars on hard crystal quartz was the voice of heaven in their ears. The life and each other they loved, these two old men—better, they thought, than yellow gold itself.

SO PASSED five seasons. Then one day MacGregor found a vein richer than their dearest hopes. From the segment which his pick had exposed the vein seemed to writhe and twist almost horizontally across the canyon, scarcely twenty feet below the surface. It meant a fortune!

It was August and that evening they sat in the mild shadows beside the cabin, and talked and laughed and dreamed like children, until the great gray moon had cleared the crags of the peak above them and sailed high among the stars.

When they had turned in for the night MacGregor could not sleep.

Gold! Riches! Wealth!

These kept throbbing through his brain with such dreamlike insistency that a

doubt finally rose in his mind as to the reality of his fortune.

Then silently he stole out of the cabin and down to the canyon, climbing carefully to the bottom of one of their uneven shafts, where he gathered several stones and carried them to the surface. Even in the moonlight his keen prospector's eye was reassured and he clambered back up to the cabin, shirt-tails waving in the cool breeze of August night.

But up in the cabin Pop Hadley had sensed MacGregor's absence and, waking, had gone out and seen the shadowy movements of his partner down in the canyon. A suspicion crept into his brain that the other was planning foul play. In all their years together there had never been a suspicion in the mind of either. They had, each for the other, the simple trust and honesty of a Damon and Pythias. There had not then been wealth to tempt them; now there was gold—gold that so often plays havoc with the trustfulness of kindly souls, the yellow turning to the red of blood before the eyes of men.

AND so these two old miners quarreled on the very eve of their realization and set at naught the long years of brotherhood and trust. Pop Hadley, all the calm gone from beneath his shaggy brows, demanded a written agreement. MacGregor, sensitive to the core, and reticent and reserved as Scotch blood could make him, took offense at the suggestion. An almost wordless, but none the less intense, quarrel followed, with the ultimate result that MacGregor forbade his former partner entering the shaft where he had found gold, paid him in nuggets for his share of the little cabin, set Hadley's portion of the furnishings outside, and ordered him to move out as soon as possible.

Hadley, the bristly ringlets of his gray beard quivering with anger and emotion, replied that he would leave the cabin—yes—but the mine—never! Then he in turn promised MacGregor he would kill

him if he ever set foot on the ladder that led to the vein of new found gold.

Within a week Hadley had started the walls of a new cabin over on the other slope, under the very nose of Bull o' the Woods. Before winter he had moved into it and built a trail from it to the canyon's bottom.

The former partners ceased to speak to each other, but, oddly enough, each obeyed the other's warning and did not return to the shaft where MacGregor had found gold. It was not fear of violence that had held them, for such men are unwont to be afraid. Perhaps it was a desire to show contempt for the wealth in question. Maybe it was merely the whim of old men, or again a desire to avoid the pain of further quarreling. At any rate the old ladder leaned unused and with time decayed against the stone wall of the shaft, both men diligently and silently sinking shafts and excavating branching tunnels all about it in an effort to tap the paying vein elsewhere in its meandering beneath the surface.

CHRISTMAS came and passed, and if either man felt anything of regret, or had a desire to become friends again, he kept his own counsel and made no sign. Each went for his own supplies and when questioned by the curious at Padilla's store in the tiny village of Valdez concerning the other, replied sharply that "he did not know."

Often during the next summer they swung their picks or plied their bars within a dozen feet of each other, but said no word. A look of bitterness grew on the faces of both and the last sandy locks of MacGregor's hair became white as snow above his hollow temples. It was as if a great cancer ate at the heart of each.

CAME the second Christmas Eve of bitterness on the Rio Lucero. Pop Hadley, his empty pipe in hand, sat at the little window of his cabin and watched the line of shadow creep up the opposite hillside, crowding the sunlight slowly up-

ward as the winter sun sank lower and lower behind the somber ridges that dropped off westward from the summit of Bull o' the Woods.

Darkness came. Pop Hadley lighted a lamp and then resumed his seat by the window, watching, as he always did, for the appearance of a light in MacGregor's window across the canyon. It was Christmas Eve, and in spite of himself his mind saw visions of other years when this night had meant joy to the child heart of him—then visions of the years when he and MacGregor had smoked and cracked nuts and talked or played cribbage together, reminiscences of other happy Christmas Eves crowding their conversation.

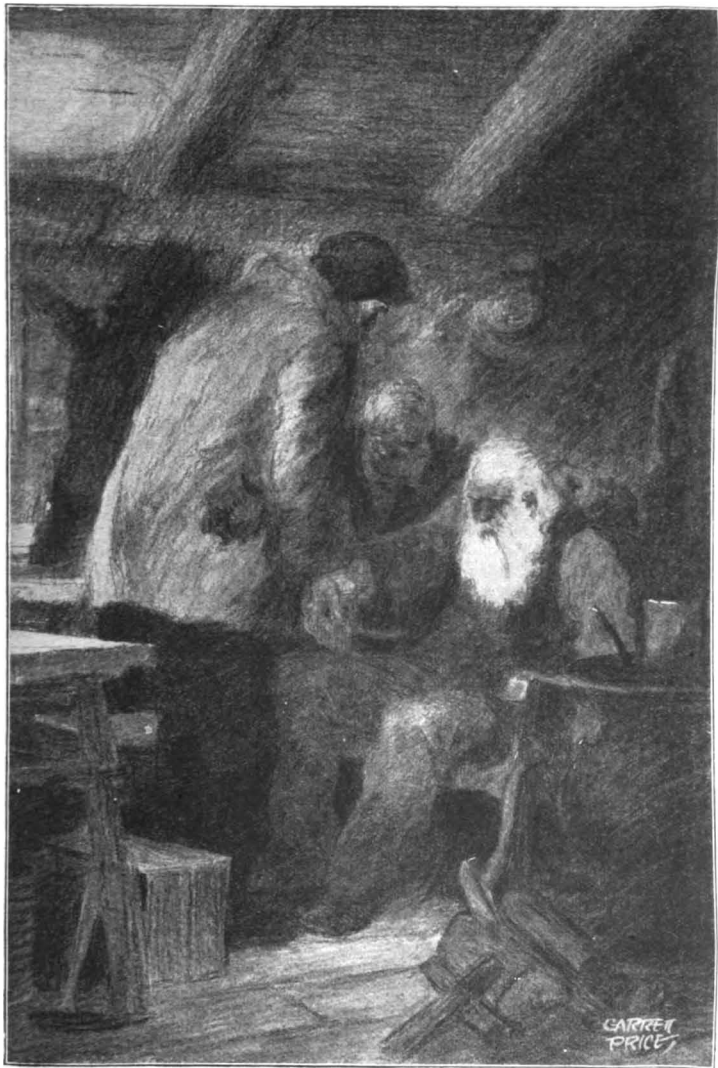
An hour of darkness passed and no light appeared across the canyon. The watcher became uneasy. Something was wrong. He had seen MacGregor go in with wood at dusk, so that he must be there, but there had not even been the flicker of the match with which he would have lighted his pipe. By nine o'clock Hadley could control his fears no longer.

Cursing himself for a soft hearted, silly headed old fool, he put on his heavy arctics, bundled himself up thoroughly, and started out. As an after thought he returned for a small flask half filled with brandy.

Two feet or more of snow covered the ground, still as crystalline and light as when it had fallen, for even the sunlit day had been cold. Tonight the air was bitter, with a still, stinging cold. On such a night, breath freezes and eyes throb with pain from the frost, but Hadley hardly sensed it.

At the door he paused for breath, and then knocked. There was no answer. He pulled the latch and walked in. There had been a fire in the room, but it was chilled now.

"Mac!" he called in an uncertain voice. "Who are ye?" came the voice of MacGregor, hoarse but still defiant. Then Hadley could discern the shadow of his shoulders stooped over the table near one of the little windows.



"Though dressed only in rags, and apparently an old man with long white hair and beard, the stranger showed marvelously few evidences of suffering from the extreme cold."

"It's Pop, Mac!"

The old man's voice quavered in spite of himself.

"I didn't see no light in the windy, and I calc'lated ye might be sick and need me, Mac, so I come clean acrost through the snow an' all."

"Need ye? Need ye?" MacGregor stood up, his voice torn between bitterness and tears. "Had ye coomed from hell, back ye could go for ary bit I'd be needin' ye!"

Hadley came a step nearer. There was pleading and contrition in his voice.

"It's yer old pal, Mac," he begged, "Old Pop Hadley come back to ye!"

He could not see the tears on MacGregor's wrinkled old cheeks as he answered, still defiant and bitter:

"Ye bin no pal o' mine! I dinna want ye here! Out! Away with ye!"

HADLEY sobbed audibly as he turned back to the door. Suddenly a faint cry as if for help came to the ears of both men. It seemed to be but a few feet from the door. Wonderingly they listened, for men were not wont to travel up the Rio Lucero even in summer; but when the cry came again they rushed out together and down the path. There, lying exhausted in the snow, was a man.

Quickly they carried him in, lighted a lamp and began chafing his hands. Though dressed only in rags, and apparently an old man with long white hair and beard, the stranger showed marvelously few evidences of suffering from the extreme cold. In a few moments he had revived enough to sit up between the two old miners in front of the stove where MacGregor had rekindled a roaring fire. For a time the three old men sat in silence. Then the stranger spoke. There was an indefinable sweetness in his troubled tone.

"I must be on my way!" he said.

MacGregor started in astonishment.

"Man, man, ye'll bide with us the night! Aye, 'tis a cruel night to be travellin' forth! Ye'd freeze in a mile!"

In a moment they had persuaded him

to stay, and he sank back in the crude chair, a strange little smile on his face.

Suddenly Hadley remembered where he was. He rose and started putting on his coat.

"Well, I'll be goin' back now, Mac," he said apologetically, "I'd a'most forgot."

"Aye, pal, and so had I! But ye'll rest the night with yer old partner, won't ye Pop?"

The eyes of the two old miners met over the white head of the stranger, and without a word the breach of years was sealed. Together they prepared food for the stranger and then afterwards the three sat contentedly smoking their pipes by the fireside. Hadley and MacGregor were curious about their guest but remained courteously silent, and though he offered no explanations his very presence seemed to emanate peace and contentment.

IT WAS almost midnight when MacGregor laid a bed for the stranger before the fire, and the two old miners turned in together in the straw bunk in the other room. It was as it had been in the old days, and, with the bitterness draining from their hearts, the two old men slept like children.

With morning they came out to build a fire, but their guest was gone. On the table was a little note: "I was a stranger and ye took me in." That was all.

"God save Him—and us!" said MacGregor, kneeling and pulling Pop down beside him.

STRANGE things have happened when the snow lies deep up the Rio Lucero and in the shadows of Bull o' the Woods, and there are those who scoff to hear them told. But there in the old cabin on the sunny slope above an untouched mine shaft live two contended old miners who will tell you truthfully of that Christmas morning when a stranger left their little shanty, never a track in the snow to tell where he had gone.