

“WHOSO DIGGETH A PIT—”

HE CAME from nowhere — just dropped in one morning at the cook house during breakfast, and asked for a job. Men were scarce during the first boom of the little oil town; that is, good men who knew oil, drilling and tool-sharpening, and the construction of derricks. For that reason, Matt Wilson judged by knowledge first, and character last.

So he hired Baden, who at once sat down with the men and ate ravenously, as if famished. He seemed a droll fellow, and the men enjoyed his company except for one fact. He never, at any time, looked any one of them straight and square in the eye. Through narrowed lids, his gaze shifted swiftly from a man's chin to his watch chain, or to the location of his pockets. It gave the men, at first, an uncanny feeling. But later, as they knew him better, their confidence returned. They jibed him about this habit finally. But he only laughed. So they labeled him “Shifty” Baden.

His past was a closed book. Once a man had questioned him too closely. His hands were long and slender, but they suddenly revealed hard, knotted muscles, which responded skillfully and brilliantly.

“Good fist work,” commented Shorty Mason.

Shifty Baden accepted the tribute graciously, belittling his prowess modestly, and thus he won Shorty Mason's heart. Other bouts were staged with Shorty as manager, and money flowed into Shifty's pockets.

“Shifty's some little boxer,” commented Shorty with pride.

“Yeah,” agreed Indian. “Boss don't like it, though. Beats them to a mush. Can't work for a week.”

“Forget him! Shifty says he's not paying us half what we're worth, anyhow. A man doesn't get even enough to pay his losses.”

“Nope,” Indian agreed, stirring the gravel with his foot. “Shifty says men're scarce. We should cash in on it, he says.”

News of the unrest drifted in to Matt Wilson as he sat figuring ways and means with the Big Chief. The swing-

ing screen door opened, letting in a dozen buzzing flies and Red Nelson.

“We want more pay, and time and half for Sundays,” he said bluntly, eyeing Matt Wilson across the top of the battered office desk.

The heat was sweltering. The flies buzzed maddeningly.

“Gosh, Matt,” the Big Chief exploded, “I thought you said you could handle the men. Better be 'tending your own end. I'll figure out mine alone.” And he gathered up his figures and puffed out of the office.

Matt Wilson was bewildered.

“Why, Red,” he said, “Have you forgotten? I told you fellows if you'd stand by me until we get agoing, I'd make it up to you. I meant what I said.”

Red gazed at the dirt on the floor.

“That was six months ago,” he said sheepishly. “We want more pay now.”

Carefully, confidently, Matt explained to him various data regarding waiting contracts, the outlay of money before income could be expected, anxious investors, the inability to meet more wages now.

“This work is under the American plan, Red,” he reminded him. “You agreed to that when you came to work. But I keep my promises. You will surely get time and a half as soon as we get on our feet. If you fellows strike now, you'll ruin us. There will be no work at all, then.”

Red turned upon him an ugly and sullen look.

“You refuse then?”

“We haven't the money to swing it now, Red.”

Without another word, Red turned and left the office, banging the screen door violently behind him.

Matt Wilson stared after him incredulously. Red Nelson, his best engine man. And his loyalty! Matt had never found occasion to question it.

Scarcely had the door closed than another shadow darkened the opening, a large abundant shadow, the jolly, and motherly person of Widow Gates. But today, no smile wreathed her usually

tranquil visage. Rather, she trembled with wrath as she faced Matt Wilson.

“What sort of men be you hirin' now, Matt Wilson?” she exploded. “Of all the low-down ornery he-snakes that I ever saw, that there Shifty Baden beats them all. If I ever lay my hands on him, he'll cuss his birthday, and wish he were a worm to crawl underground where he belongs. What do you mean, wishin' him on us as is tryin' to build up a peaceful law-abidin' town with morals? Haven't we done well by you?” she demanded.

Matt Wilson gazed at her, his mind awlirl.

“Sit down, Mrs. Gates,” he said.

She waved the proffered seat aside.

“Here I be standing this morning around the corner of the main bunk house, and there was Shifty talkin' to the Kid. She was deliverin' the washin', seein' as this is Friday.

“What's your name?” he asks.

“I'm the Kid,” she answers. “I brung your washing.”

“Oho!” he says and sizes her up and down. “You do the washing.”

“No, Mrs. Gates does,” she says, “I deliver for her. Git them, too.” Then she shoves his parcel toward him.

“He takes it and says ‘thanks,’ and squeezes her hand right there before my very eyes, although he didn't see me.

“And the poor Kid, being, as you know, ‘nobody home’”—she tapped her forehead significantly with her forefinger—“She grins and looks up at him stupidlike.

“And that vile snake runs his hand up and down her arm.

“How's that?” he asks.

“And she says, ‘tickles,’ and giggles at him.

“I couldn't stand it any longer so I came around the corner, and gave him such a look as would freeze him to an ice-cake, were he not so hard-boiled.”

The widow panted for breath.

“And I sends the Kid home, but he's found out she lives with me, and he's come past so often it's made me nervous. And the Kid stays inside and sulks and

won't help me, 'cept I let her out so as she can talk to him."

Matt Wilson passed his hand over his forehead.

"Troubles never come singly," he cited. "That is not all, Mrs. Gates. The men have planned to strike. They want more money. Shifty must be back of it. They were satisfied until he came."

He thought a moment.

"Tell Chris Younger I want to see him," he commanded.

The widow waddled off excitedly.

Chris Younger came at once.

"I want you to go out in the field and take Baden's place and send him in to me at once." Matt Wilson's voice was hard.

Baden was sullen.

"I was just amusing the Kid," he offered. "As to the strike! I have nothing to do with it. If the men want to strike, I can't help it."

Matt Wilson was furious. It rather amused Baden.

"Got any proof about the strike?" Baden asked.

"No! you cur, but I have about the Kid, and that's enough. Get your time and get out!"

Baden's eyes narrowed. Slowly, he advanced toward Matt. He raised his right hand. It was knotted into the famous fighting fist.

But Matt was before him. Swiftly, he opened a drawer, and Baden was staring into a wicked little contrivance of steel and pearl.

He turned, and slunk out of the office like a beaten thing. But, once clear of the office, and out of sight, he turned, knotted up his fist and shook it maliciously toward the way he had come. He was in an ugly frame of mind. By nature underhanded, he went about getting his revenge entirely under cover. He found the Kid delivering clothes as usual. He had only a moment.

"Hello, Kid!" he greeted brightly.

The Kid snickered.

"Hello, yourself!" she responded.

"Say, like to go for an automobile ride this afternoon?" he asked.

"Sure." The Kid's vacant eyes took on a happy expression.

"All right. That's fine. Now listen, Kid. Today there's going to be a fire in one of those oil tanks out there." He waved toward the field of tanks beyond the towering derricks.

"When the fire gets going good, and everybody's gone out to where it is, I'll come to Mrs. Gates' place for you, and

we'll go for a ride." Baden turned to go. "Now don't forget. If you are not at Mrs. Gates' front gate waiting for me, I won't take you. Remember, when you see the smoke, I'm coming for you."

A sharp whistle, like a little boy calling his dog, sounded from around the corner, and Baden struck off in the direction of the oil tanks.

Carefully, he skirted the derricks, with their choking engines and labyrinth of crawling cables. Down a gentle slope he crept to where the great storage tanks lay blinking in the hot sun. He chose the farthest tank. It lay glimmering at him in the sun, huge, black with weather stains, shimmering in the heat. Baden turned his eyes from the tank, and carefully scanned the field around him. Five other tanks made up the field, one fifty feet away, the others more distant. They reminded Baden of big stone animals, quiet, peaceful, waiting for his mischief. There was no life about them. Not a human being was in sight.

Deftly Baden took from his hip pocket a small cloth bag. From under the rubber band around it, he pulled out a yellow note book and tore from between its covers a white square of paper. Quickly, he filled the paper with the contents of the cloth bag. Next a match from his vest pocket. Another quick look around, and he bent his head forward, cupped his hands to his mouth and the cigarette was lighted.

With a lithe spring, he made the first rung of the iron ladder that clung to the side of the tank. He climbed rapidly. He pressed more firmly between his lips, the forbidden cigarette, and bent further over the trap door, the better to examine the contents of the tank, puffing rapidly the while that the cigarette might be well lighted before he dropped it in. He balanced his body easily on the top rung of the ladder. But it was slippery. His foot slid. He grasped the side of the tank wildly, lost his hold, and fell headlong into the reservoir.

THE oil was black, heavy and unrefined. It received his body without sound, and sucked it half way to the bottom. Oil filled his ears, his nose, oozed between his parted lips, covered his face, his clothes, and his shoes with slime.

Now Baden was young, and full of strength and the love of life. He fought his way valiantly to the top, with the long measured strokes of the practiced swimmer. He reached up a slimy hand to brush the oil from his eyes. Failing in this, he shook his head vigorously, and managed to open his eyes at last. All

was black around him. Accustomed to the glare of the sunlight, his eyes could not penetrate the thick gloom. He turned his attention to his swimming.

"Stuff's easy to tread if only my shoes were off," he muttered.

Gradually, his vision became clearer, and he was able to discern the side of the tank. He swam toward it. The crude oil belabored the process, and he spent his strength freely, but at last he reached his goal. The side of the tank rose above him, smooth, slimy, bare of any handhold. He looked above. The trap door shone distant, a square of light in a vast expanse of gloom and shadow, unattainable, mocking.

"Help, help, help!" he cried. His voice choked with oil, echoed back feebly from the sides of the tank.

Then it was that he looked around him, and his oil-sodden eyes opened wide in horror.

"God help me now!" He could not speak. He could only breath the words.

A hundred globules of fire danced before him, bounding like rubber balls across the thick oil, sputtering in one pool, igniting others. No steady conflagration burned. Due to the quality of the impurities in the oil, the fire had not yet found constant feed. The top of the oil was like a huge frying pan in which dozens of fiery balls spat and sputtered at each other, to break out at last, scattering fire in all directions. They lighted up the interior of the tank in sulphuric colors, blue and green and royal purple, and the golden glow of lightning. The little white tube of tobacco floated innocently near Baden, its fire scattered, its mission fulfilled.

Baden gasped.

"Help!" he cried, frantically from between sticky, oil-smudged lips. The cry was smothered, gummed in his throat with oil. Baden made a super-human effort and spat out the filth.

By this time his shoes were thoroughly saturated with oil, and weighed heavily, bearing him downward. Each movement of his legs cost him effort which he could ill spare. His clothes, drenched with oil, were oppressive, clinging to his body like slimy hands, eager, waiting to pull him downward. He struggled against their deadliness. A ball of burning oil burst near him, spraying his face with liquid fire. It seared into the flesh. Automatically, unthinking, he dived back into the oil.

He rose farther away from the fire. And now he was continually on the move, dodging, ducking, a weary chase, with the fire-balls constantly increasing in number. At length a huge ball

sprayed him from behind. It covered his matted hair with burning oil, and he sank below the surface, suffering excruciating agony.

He rose. But now the fire was all about him. The entire surface of the oil was covered with liquid fire. But the color was changed. From the oil, the fire rose dull red to blacken into suffocating smoke. It filled the tank with deadly fumes. It sucked up the oxygen like a fiery dragon.

Was no one coming to help? Baden gasped for breath, choked up with oil.

Blinded in an agony of fire and smoke, he realized at last that his was not to be the victory. The flames settled once more upon him. There was no escaping them. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt only the torture, the soul-racking pain.

His mind was strangely clear. Only a few more seconds to live. Dimly, he realized it. Hazily, he racked his wavering mind. The old half-forgotten training served him not falsely.

“L-lord—” his weary feet trod the oil slower and slower. “Lord have

mercy”—the thick black smoke settled down upon his head. His nostrils distended, his hands flew upward. Slowly, his body sank—“on my soul.”

The words were inaudible. The oil closed over him silently. A few slow, sluggish ripples marked his passage.

From the little white wicket gate that marked the entrance to Mrs. Gates' front yard, the Kid watched, impatiently, a huge black cloud of smoke rise from the distant trap door and spiral upward, and hang, heavy, black, and foreboding, above the big, oil tank!

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