

Two on the Rancho

By BREVARD MAYS CONNOR

The first moment he saw her, he disliked her violently. He scowled at her as she descended from the station bus in front of the sanatorium, and sank weakly into the one vacant chair under the rusty catalpas. She should have known that those chairs were placed there especially for the men, and he had been just on the point of taking that seat himself.

When she coughed and leaned back wearily, he sneered. His own cough was deeper than hers, his hands more bony, his skin more fever-flushed and transparent; so he felt no pity, only a rush of rage that she should so openly advertise her weakness.

Then she slowly turned her head, and the pale-blue eyes widened with interest as they took him in. He knew she was recognizing those unmistakable signs that hung like shadows over herself, and he resented it with all the feeble rage of the very ill. He was just on the point of going over and demanding the chair when she stood up, and, throwing him a smile of sad understanding, moved slowly into the building.

All afternoon he sat there under the catalpas and frowned at the drowsing plaza. It had been a most unpleasant day even from early morning, when that old, tottering, white-haired Ananias had buttonholed him and, gloating, had boasted that the doctors gave him only three weeks more.

Gordon Barlow's doctors had given him six months; and the contemplation of the shortness of his remaining terrestrial stay, even tho a morbid one, was the only pleasure that remained. People always shuddered when he told them. And now this old man came vaunting his three weeks! It was disgusting, the way some people were always flinging their troubles in the very faces of chance acquaintances!

A dog, a disreputable pariah of the streets, his every rib visible, and his meek tail between his legs, slunk up and lay at Barlow's feet.

"Get away, you beast!" he snarled, thrusting the creature off with his cane.

The very dogs were like the people, airing their misery everywhere. He would get out of the place; it was too crowded, and the climate was abominable. He swore at the heat none the less vehemently because under his breath.

It was hot! Altho it was late September, and palms in the plaza drooped under the relentless sun, and the paved streets smoked dizzily. He would go somewhere, anywhere—it didn't matter where, when there was only six months more.

"Get!" he snarled and waved his cane at the sad-eyed cur, which had returned and was gazing wistfully at the patch of shade alongside his chair.

There was a soft cough behind him. "Oh, please don't hurt him!"

It was a husky voice—a woman's. He was sure it was she, before he turned.

"Is it your dog?" he demanded, glaring into the faded blue eyes.

"No, it's not mine," she said.

"I think you'd be ashamed to admit it if it was."

She didn't seem to take offense, but came and sat in the next chair, which was now vacant.

"I wish he was my dog!" she whispered huskily, cupping her chin in her palms.

"What would you want with a beast like that?"

He waved his cane at the intruder again.

"He'd be mine," she replied simply, and as if the sequence was perfectly natural. "You see, I've never had a dog, or anything like that."

"Humph!" he snorted, suspicious of sentiment. "That's just like a woman, always wanting something she has no use for. As for me, I don't care if I never have anything else. What good

would it do me, when I've only six months to live?"

He watched her covertly, triumphant.

"That's just how long they gave me," she replied listlessly.

He was on his feet on the moment.

"I don't believe it! You look strong—much stronger than I do. Why—why, you'll live years yet!"

Trailing off into a sputter, he stumped off, fuming.

He had hoped to hurt her, or at least to surprise her, but she didn't even raise her eyes as he left—he looked back to see—and this made him more angry than ever. Indeed, he was so angry that he walked entirely around the plaza without stopping—which was very foolish, for afterward, when his rage cooled down, he was so tired that he had to take to his bed.

He told her of this proof of his weakness when they met again that night, and he was hardly able to restrain his glee in the telling. The front porch and the chairs under the catalpas were crowded, so he led her over to a bench in the plaza, pooh-poohing her listless objections.

"Night air? Bosh! Night air can't

quickly. In the shrubbery behind, a girl laughed. The woman shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No, no, not cold!" With a little trembling cry of relief, she added: "Oh, look, there is our dog! I believe he knows us. Here, boy!"

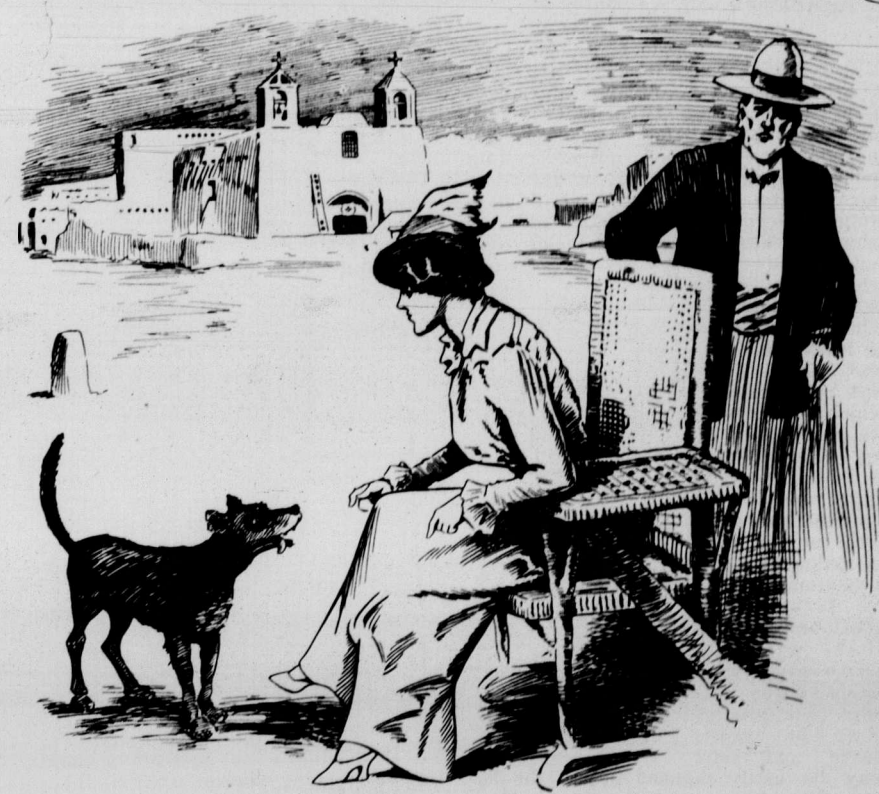
At the snap of her fingers the cur came forward, wagging his tail with open-hearted camaraderie. She opened her hand-bag and took out a little package, which, unrolled, proved to be a bit of bread and meat. Greedily the dog snapped it from her fingers.

"Shame, sir! she chided. "You have no manners. Now if you were my dog—I wish you were my dog!"

"You'd soon find out what fleas were," snapped Barlow. "I'm going to take my good night constitutional. Good-bye!"

II.

Gordon Barlow was naturally abrupt, but in this case his hasty departure was due to pure fright. He had always fled from the tender tone and the softer view of life, even before the shadow had fallen upon him and soured what had been naturally sweet. Life had always appeared to him as a battle



"I wish he was my dog," she whispered huskily

make or break us now! So what's the difference? Besides, we'd be bored to death with that bunch."

Above, the sky was so clear that the myriad stars were reflected in the little pools left by the watering-carts. A hot breeze, stealing from the south, brought with it the faint crack of rifles, and now and then the heavier boom of cannon, marking the last desperate stand of the insurgents. She listened attentively, for it was still new to her.

"Doesn't it seem awful for healthy people to want to kill one another?" she whispered, as if awed.

All his bitterness welled up in a sudden, poignant cry.

"A healthy man! Just think what a healthy man, a strong man, can do!" He wrenched his hands until the knuckles gleamed white in the glare of the arc-light, while his dark, fever-brightened eyes glowed like twin coals beneath his heavy, knitted brows. "Just think of being able to plan things, and to know that you will have the strength to carry them out! There were so many things I had dreamed of doing, so many things—"

Across the river there was a sudden outburst of firing, which died away as

wherein achievement had to be carved out with all one's unrelenting strength. The height of human happiness, to his mind, was seeking to achieve by means of the fiercest struggle of which he was capable.

He had been educated for an engineer, had dreamed of taking rugged nature and making it plastic to his will; but where his strong spirit longed to build, his frail flesh betrayed him, and so he cast his dreams away and laughed at them cynically.

But this cynicism, this delight in his hopeless condition, was only a mask which pride made imperative. Beneath, the fire burned all the more fiercely for the darkness which enshrouded him. This woman's weariness, her lack of energy, her passive acceptance of the inevitable, irritated him.

That, in turn, made him wonder why he should care enough about such an inconsequential person to be irritated. He believed in the doll theory concerning women—that they were valuable in proportion to their physical attractiveness; and this woman lacked entirely the color and curves and bloom that were his conception of feminine assets.

The thought evidently sobered him,

for this time he made the circuit of the plaza much more leisurely and sanely. Several times he stopped beneath the blazing arc-lights to read the moving-picture lithographs. His sluggish blood quickened to the lively tunes of the automatic pianos.

Once he glanced back at a group of soldiers elbowing their way along, care-free in their surety of health. He smiled to himself. He knew the futility of that surety. It had once possessed him; and he turned back with a pang that they should waste with such abandon moments that could be so precious to one who could really make some use of them.

As he was strolling slowly back toward the sanatorium, his head bent forward on his breast, a hand touched his arm.

"Ello, señor, you been in El Paso long, si? I did not know."

Barlow found himself looking down into the swarthy face of one of our neighbors across the border.

"What are you doing here, Miguel?" he asked in surprise.

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders mournfully.

"My mother's sister's husband, he was sick. We bury him to-day." Miguel put away the sorrows of the world with another shrug, and looked up with a charming, white-toothed smile. "Señor will go out to the rancho, si?"

The sight of this man had brought to Barlow's mind a long-forgotten piece of property. It was an inheritance from an uncle who had an inexplicable liking for the fastnesses of northwestern Mexico. Its present possessor had only once been persuaded to visit it.

His rancho! He remembered it as a wild, inaccessible place amid barren hills, which he had rejoiced to leave; but now the sound of the words vaguely appealed to him. He had said that he wanted to leave El Paso. Well, here was just what he was looking for.

"I am at the Sanatorium Alfoces, Miguel," he said abruptly. "Come the day after to-morrow, and I will go to the rancho with you."

Miguel bowed his delight, while his eyes narrowed with a world of good-natured understanding.

"And señor will take a—leddy!"

Barlow glanced at him sharply. Then he remembered. This had been one of the avuncular failings.

"Señor will not take a lady!" he snapped, and turned away, while Miguel bowed his apology.

The girl was still sitting where he had left her, with the dog curled up at her feet, fast asleep. Triumphant he told of his plans to leave, of Miguel and the rancho, and the wild mountains and stretches of uninhabited country. Her dull eyes brightened for a moment.

"It must be wonderful out there! I've never been able to get out into the country, and I've always wanted to make things grow. I had a geranium in a pot at the hospital, but a little girl loved it so much that we—we buried it in her arms." His snort was poorly concealed, and she turned quickly, abashed. "But won't it be lonely out there, and dangerous, with all the fighting going on."

"I want it to be lonely," he said, biting his nails. "And as for the fighting"—he touched his breast—"I carry a passport here that people respect. I won't be entirely alone, anyhow. There are Miguel and his wife."

The cur awoke suddenly, and industriously sought the cause of his disturbance with a hind leg.

"Why don't you take a dog?" she asked.

"I wouldn't have a dog!" he almost shouted, and went to bed.

III.

She didn't appear until very late the next day, Barlow, who had wandered about restlessly, with the germ of an

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