

# "Easy" Somers—A Thanksgiving Story

Written for The Colonist by N. de Bertrand Lugin

"AND O'Brien will be clearing out for good the day after tomorrow, and taking the whole swag with him, two year's work's worth. Its certainly up to us."

"Easy" Somers sat bolt upright in the bunk, all of his senses alert on the instant. He had crawled into the cabin several hours before, exhausted from a thirty mile tramp in the first snowstorm of the season. It had not mattered to him that the cabin was windowless, and that the door hung creaking and groaning from the leather strap that served as a hinge; and because he was too thoroughly worn out to kindle a fire in the coal-oil-tin stove that was the only article of furniture the front room possessed, he had gone into the tiny bunk room and had slept the sleep of the utterly spent until the sound of voices aroused him.

Evidently others had been stormbound as well as himself, though they were also as evidently not in as weary a condition, for he could hear a fire crackling cheerily in the makeshift stove, and occasionally a laugh that spoke of high spirits.

"And he's just about as much entitled to the dust as you or me," a deep voice said gruffly. "He jumped the claim and served Somers a dirty trick. I heard the yarn down at Dawson last night, a fellow from Eldorado was telling about it. Somers is a 'no account' Englishman, but he came in here in ninety-eight and staked a claim on Bonanza, one of the best. Then something happened in the old country—mother dying I think it was—and nothing would do but Somers must pull up and quit before he'd done a stroke of work. He left his partner, Emerson, a worse than 'no account,' in possession, and didn't turn up again for a year. Seems the old lady took a long time dying. Anyhow Larry O'Brien, Irish as the devil, with a grudge against Somers on account of some trouble in the old country, comes up the creek, sees how the land lies, gives Emerson a hundred dollars and gets him full, then ships him outside. Emerson hadn't taken out a shovelfull of dirt, was owing everybody on Bonanza, and was tickled to death to go. So when Somers turns up, his friends having lent him passage-money to come back, he finds his claim jumped, a derrick, windlass, sluice boxes et cetera on his own land, and a cabin back on the bench where O'Brien sleeps by nights, and where one summer afternoon he defies 'Easy' to do his worst, that he won't pay him a cent for his forfeited claim, and that he has no rights anyway, not having done any work or paid assessment fees. Big 'Easy' looks blank, flabbergasted, turns white about the gills, thinking of the money borrowed from trusting friends maybe. 'What am I to do?' he asks like the fool he is, instead of knocking O'Brien down and kicking the mean life out of him. 'Go to Hell,' the Irishman says. 'That's the advice your father gave mine when he robbed us of our land at Killaloe.'

Laughter again and the clatter of a bottle against a tin mug. The tantalizing fumes of hot liquor reached Somers' nostrils, but his mind was busy with other thoughts than had to do with the comfort of his weary limbs. Again the gruff-voiced man spoke.

"Yes, I can make a touching story out of the facts when I lick them into shape, a story that will bring tears to your eyes. Phillips and Gregson may give us some trouble, but I doubt it. Stevens will see that O'Brien doesn't leave town too soon. We can make the nearest job out of it that we've done yet, providing we find the case."

"Easy" held himself stiffly erect, straining his ears to hear farther. But the men had evidently concluded that they had had respite enough, for after another drink they left the cabin and whistling their dog took up their journey again.

It was mid-day. The storm had ceased, and the winter sun was showing his face grudgingly above the hills, when Somers stepped into a roadhouse a mile or so above the Forks, and called for a long drink at the bar. Afterwards going into the back room he was hailed by half a dozen men who were playing poker at a table near the window.

"In good time, 'Easy,'" they called. "We've given our orders. The Thanksgiving turkey is roasting."

"And there's plum pudding," cried one.

"But no pumpkin pie," said a jovial faced man nearest the window, laying down his cards and trying to assume a doleful expression, "no pumpkin pie, and I was born and bred in New England"; then swinging round to get a better look at Somers. "What's up, Easy? You look all in!" Somers smiled a little and shook his head. "I'm quite fit," he said, "but I can't take dinner with you, boys. Enjoy the Thanksgiving turkey for me will you? I'm due up at Bonanza by midnight, and I shall have to start at once."

"Not up to O'Brien's?" someone asked slyly.

"Yes," Somers voice was unwontedly firm. "Up to Larry O'Brien's to get what's due me there."

A blank silence fell on the little assembly, but it did not pay Somers the compliment of lasting beyond a moment. Then everyone laughed hilariously as if the big Englishman had said the funniest and most improbable thing possible. They quite ignored the fact

that the subject of their mirth, a little pale and erect with a suddenly acquired dignity, was regarding them with grave eyes into which had crept a glint of something that had nothing at all to do with his habitual too gentle smile. Presently the laughter subsiding a little, he spoke to them.

"I know I've given you all ample cause to make game of me," he said. "I've been 'Easy,' too dead easy, and it's all around decent of you chaps to put up with me and give me a lift now and then as you have. And I've accepted it from you thinking when I thought at all that I was doing my share when, fortune favoring me in the game, I could blow in the dust on you, or, when luck failed I could make you laugh with a jest or a song. I've had my mind's eyes opened during the last twelve hours. Some chance words showed me the way to come face to face with myself. Boys I've been a d— fool."

No one among them spoke, surprise held them dumb, and Somers continued. "A couple of years ago you urged me to oust O'Brien off my claim by fair means or foul. I was a fool not to do it. The law would not have helped me any, but every man on Bonanza would have stood by me. I hadn't the nerve to do it. That's God's truth, I was afraid. But something's come to life in me. It needed hard words to waken it, and those words I've heard. Having been face to face with myself for twelve hours I'm ashamed to face myself any longer. I'm going to do what I should have done two years ago, and tonight is my last chance, for O'Brien goes out tomorrow taking his dust with him. I'm going up to the claim and wait for him there, and when he shows up I'm going to demand my fair share of what he's taken out of the land I staked. If he isn't ready to be reasonable, then we'll fight it out, man to man."

One of the little crowd spoke quickly, "You've no chance against him, 'Easy.' He's the surest shot on the creeks."

"It will be a fair test," said Somers quietly, "one man against another and some right on both sides."

"We shouldn't let you go," said Mathews, the man from New England. "There isn't a doubt but that knowing your intention we should detain you by force if necessary."

"But you won't try," Somers said gravely.

"No, we won't try. It's your own business, and you're within your rights."

"I'll be back at this time tomorrow if I come at all," Somers said. "And I'll bring something worth having, depend upon it. You'll all meet me here, eh?"

"Sure we will, 'Easy,'" a chorus of voices assured him.

He nodded, swung on his heel, and with his big shoulders held stiffly erect, went out of the room, leaving an uneasy silence and a little circle of grave faces behind him.

It was dark again when he reached the cabin at No. — Bonanza, a pitchy black darkness without moon or stars. The air was still and heavy with frost. The last lights he had seen were a mile down the creek, and O'Brien's cabin was in total shadow. A husky ran round the houses as he neared the door, barking savagely. Somers spoke to it in a low voice and the animal was silent instantly, fawning upon him. He was about to raise his hand to knock when the door opened suddenly and a little rush of aromatic air touched his face. Then two slender hands seized him with gentle force and drew him within the cabin.

"Oh! Larry, Larry." A woman's sweet plaintive voice spoke to him, while a soft head was pressed against his shoulder. "I thought you would never, never come. Phillips and Gregson have not been here at all, and I was afraid, ghastly afraid, too afraid to light the lamp." She laughed and sobbed together, clinging to him in a glad abandon of relief.

Somers gently disengaged himself, a little stupefied with the delirious surprise of it, but firmly convinced in his mind that the sudden, swift, warm beating of his heart was quite unjustifiable.

"I am not Mr. O'Brien," he said, his voice rather unsteady. "I am so sorry."

There was a choking exclamation of dismay. He heard the girl recoil from him, and move with rapid steps to the farthest end of the room. "But I am not here to harm you," he went on reassuringly. "You must not be frightened or put out. I didn't expect a woman—I thought—I hoped to meet Mr. O'Brien. I have urgent business with him."

The woman was moving about quickly. She endeavored to light the lamp, but her hand was unsteady and the match went out as it touched the wick. Somers offered to help her, and presently they were facing one another over the table, the warm light full upon both of their faces. The woman was young, very young and quite lovely, though pale just now and wide-eyed from some half-formed dread. Somers was smiling his easy gentle smile, and the light in his blue eyes was wholly tender and protecting. Instinctively the girl's fear left her, but with the loss of the one emotion another gained ascendancy. The hot color began to mount into her face, and confused and embarrassed she let her white lids droop.

"I thought you were my brother," she said, "your voice when you spoke to Dan sounded like his, and besides Dan is never amenable with strangers. I am sorry to have — to have—"

"Not at all," Somers interrupted quickly.

"There is nothing for you to be distressed about. You are expecting your brother then soon?"

"I don't know at all," she ventured to lift her eyes to his for a moment. "But I hoped he would come long ago. You see, Phillips and Gregson were to have been here and had dinner with me. But something has kept them and I have been quite alone and terribly frightened." Her voice trembled a little. "Do you think anything could have happened?" the pleading in her eyes was restless.

"No," Somers said decidedly, then his innate abhorrence of falsehood prompting him, "Not to your brother anyway. One of the other men may be ill or— or hurt—"

"I don't know your country," she shook her head. "I only came in on the last boat and I'm going out over the ice with Larry. It seems strange to me, very strange that they should not have come or sent word. They were both well yesterday and quite looking forward to the dinner I was to give them. I have roasted pheasants and made pumpkin pies, but I haven't had the heart to eat alone."

"Pumpkin pie," said Somers a little stupidly. "Oh, yes, pumpkin pie." Since he had entered the house he had totally forgotten the resolve that had been uppermost in his mind for the last twenty-four hours. The girl's words brought the scene in the roadhouse before his mental vision, and fired him anew with determination. The smile left his lips. He looked at her squarely.

"I am Eric Somers," he said.

She smiled without the slightest show of surprise. "And I am Sheila O'Brien," she responded. Then she held out her hand. "If you are a friend of Larry's," she said, "you are a friend of mine! Have you had your Thanksgiving dinner?"

"I haven't earned it," said Somers, a little relieved after all that his name bore no sinister significance for her. He held her hand a moment then let it go reluctantly.

"Will you not eat it with me?" she looked at him half-rogishly, half-timidly. "Since you have said that you are sure Larry is safe, and since you are here to stand between me and danger, I think I could enjoy the dinner."

Somers said nothing. They had sat down on opposite sides of the heater, and the girl turned toward him, clasping her slim, pretty hands over the back of her chair and leaning her chin upon them. "Are you a very old friend of my brother's?" she asked.

"No," the man said slowly, hesitatingly, "I'm afraid I can't come under that heading at all, though I have known Mr. O'Brien a great many years."

"Oh!" the girl's cheeks took on a deeper color. She unclasped her hands and sat very straight in her chair. "You will doubtless be explaining your words," she said, a little touch of the brogue showing in her accents for the first time.

"I can't do that," he said a little curtly. "You must ask your brother." All the gentleness had left his face, he looked straight before him. He would not sail under false colors even for the sake of retaining a momentary kindness, and pride forbade him appealing to her sympathy. "I came here tonight to make a demand of your brother and if he failed to grant it to call him out as men of honor or used to do in our fathers' time. But you needn't be afraid. I didn't expect to meet an unprotected woman." He stood up. The girl crouched a little in her chair, her face pale again, her eyes wide with fear. "I'm not a hardened criminal, you know," he even smiled with something of his usual gentleness. "They call me 'Easy' Somers in the Yukon," he went on, "because I've always been such a fool, a 'no account' Englishman, not in it at all with the other 'Sourdoughs.' So you see," his smile was a little bitter, "there is no reason after all for you to shrink from me."

But if Somers' words expressed one thing, his enormous form, his wide shoulders, his powerful hands expressed another to the girl. She saw only in him a strength that seemed omnipotent, a strength that even her fearless brother would find impregnable. But presently the Irish spirit in her rose to the surface. She, too, stood up.

"Then of course you will be going," she said.

He looked down at her. "If you will let me stop until your brother returns," he said simply, "I will be of whatever aid I can." Knowing what he did, he did not realize the absurd incongruity of his words. The girl's lip curled a little.

"I should feel safer without you," she said. "I should feel safer quite alone."

For a brief instant Somers lived the scene in the roadhouse over again. For the first time the faces there that he knew so well had expressed other than a good-natured contempt for him, something that was almost respect. Well, he wasn't going to do anything to merit their change of feeling after all. He was going to be more of a fool than ever. Instead of taking away from O'Brien what was his own just due, he was going to stay by O'Brien's sister and protect the man's ill-gotten gains for him. He said with impatient obstinacy,

"Nevertheless I will stop with you."

But a change had come over the girl's face. The last vestige of timidity left it. She lifted her chin haughtily and her blue eyes grew dark.

"I remember now," she said. "At first your name told me nothing. I have not been in Ireland since I was a little child. I was brought up in Scotland, my mother's country, and the old tales I had almost forgotten. You are Eric Somers of Glentven, are you not?"

"I am."

"And a fitting son of your father," her voice was very low. "As he robbed my father of Killaloe, so you would rob my brother of this, of this he has worked so hard to gain."

Somers face lost a little of its ruddy color. "Lacking a knowledge of the true facts," he said, "no doubt that would be your interpretation. Let it go. Your brother will tell you better perhaps. Meantime—"

"Meantime, since you say your business is not with me, perhaps you will go."

Somers hesitated a moment. If he told her the truth about the plot he had overheard, would she believe him? Not likely. And if she did believe she would be panic-stricken, perhaps needlessly. He could wait about outside until O'Brien returned, and then he could leave her in safety.

"If you insist," he said.

"I do insist," she raised dauntless eyes to his.

Somers walked down as far as the creek and stood listening. He was thankful that the dog did not attempt to follow him. She had evidently kept him in the house. The cold silence of the night was unbroken. He turned his head and glanced back at the window. He could see her dark head in profile as she sat close to the fire in an attitude of fearful expectancy. His heart gave a throb of pity. Then a slight noise broke the intense stillness. He leaned forward looking down the creek, every nerve strained to listen. Presently he heard the crunching of snow and the murmur of low voices. He had just time to step back into the shelter of the bush when two figures loomed up in front of him. Perceiving the light in the window, they stood stockstill within an arm's length of him.

"She is alone, sure enough," one of them said. "This is dead easy." "No need of firearms tonight," the other laughed softly.

The first man whispered again, "There's to be no shooting at all, mind that, nor no talk of it. We're friends of Somers, peaceable, well-meaning friends, who only want to see justice. No bullying, nor bull-dozing, unless O'Brien arrives. I've taken all but one cartridge from your gun so you'd have no temptation."

"The devil you did," the other laughed in a whisper.

They moved towards the house, and Somers followed, always keeping well in the shadow behind them. He heard them knock saw the door open, the two men take off their hats and the girl hesitatingly allow them to step inside. The light had been full on their faces and in that brief instant Somers had recognized "Silvery" Jennison, and Lawson, two of the proprietors of a notorious gambling den in Klondyke City, who were understood to have left anything but an enviable reputation behind them in Denver, from whence they came. "Silvery" Jennison, so-called on account of the smooth glibness of his speech, having killed his man, and Lawson being a gambler of the most depraved type. Both bore the appearance of gentlemen, and it angered Somers to see the ease with which they had imposed on O'Brien's sister.

It took some little time and a good deal of careful manoeuvring before Somers could make an entrance through the back of the house. Access once gained, however, it was a comparatively easy matter to slip from the shed into the kitchen, between which and the living room where the three were assembled there was only a door and that ajar.

He could hear Jennison talking and talking of him. He had evidently told a most pitiful story, for his flexible voice was by now sonorously pathetic, and he broke off his sentences occasionally to swallow the sham emotion which he pretended was overwhelming him. Lawson was mute as usual. It was Jennison's role to persuade and where persuasion proved to be no avail Lawson aided in convincing.

Somers bit his lip hard when he heard his mother's name mentioned, and controlled himself by a great effort from going into the room. He heard himself lauded for his deeds of charity, for his unimpeachable honor, for his never-failing kindness and good-nature. He heard himself being pitied for the deprivations he had suffered, for the wrongs he had endured at the hands of unscrupulous men who had imposed upon his noble trust in human nature. He heard his present condition being described as penniless, poverty-stricken, and half-starving, with a debt hanging over him that meant his ruin body and soul if he could not get the wherewithal to pay it. He was collecting himself for a sudden entrance, when Sheila O'Brien spoke, her voice low and unsteady.

"You say you have appealed to my brother?"

"Again and again," Jennison said sadly. "It is not very clear to me," she said still unsteady. "But I can see that a wrong has been done your friend, a wrong that must be righted."

"I felt that we would not appeal in vain to womanly sympathy and comprehension," Jennison's voice was positively musical in its gentle triumph.

"Tell me, did he know of your visit?" she asked.

"No, indeed," Jennison assured her. "Had he so much as guessed at our intention he would have moved heaven and earth to balk it."

"That's the first really honest word you've spoken tonight," Somers said, quietly stepping into the room and bringing up before Jennison. "I've heard nearly the whole of your eloquent story, and it has moved me though not in the same manner in which you intended it to effect the rest of your audience."

But Jennison was equal to the occasion, though the sight of Somers had startled him greatly, and the change in Somers' appearance had startled him still more. He essayed to smile, and rising, faced the other man.

"You have come to plead your own cause," he said. "But Lawson and I have done that for you. Miss O'Brien wishes to see justice done, and everything is all right. Lawson and I won't be unfair, you'll find," this last with a little ominous narrowing of his lids and a motion of his hand to his pocket.

But Somers was a changed man tonight. He did not flinch. His eyes were quite cold and steady upon the other man's. "As to that," he began briefly, and in a moment he had covered Jennison with his own revolver, "I was in Flint's cabin last night," he said. "I heard you and Lawson plotting. I made up my mind then that I would forestall you here, and interview O'Brien before you could come, or keep you out until he did arrive. I didn't expect, as you did, to find a woman. That puts an entirely different aspect on the affair. Now, you get out, both of you."

"And leave the swag to you," Lawson spoke now for the first time realizing that the moment had come to drop the mask. "Not much, we won't. If you're willing we'll divy up, there's enough for all and no fear of interruption. Phillips and Gregson are bound and gagged in their own cabin. O'Brien won't leave town for hours, he's had his drink fixed for him. The road is clear for us to get down the river before a living man suspects—"

"I didn't come here to rob," Somers' face flushed hot. "And if you don't get out as I told you, I'll find a means to hurry you—Take your hand from your pocket, Jennison."

But after all he had to deal with men who had a dozen tricks to his one. Suddenly a shot rang out sharply, and Somers' right arm fell heavily.

"Ready to listen to reason now, eh?" Lawson was face to face with him holding his still smoking weapon against the other's breast. "Do you think we're babies," he snarled, "or fools like yourself? I guess the fight's about out of him, Jennison," he finished with an insulting sneer.

Somers had staggered a little, but recovering himself, stood upright, his eyes as unflinching as ever, his jaws set. Suddenly his left arm shot out and his fist struck hard against Lawson's jaw, felling him instantly. Before Jennison could take his weapon from his pocket, Somers had transferred his revolver from his right hand to his left, and was covering Lawson's confederate.

"Put up your hands," he said evenly, with the exultant fire of battle in his eyes. "Higher up, if you please. Now, Miss O'Brien, I shall have to ask your help, I am afraid." The girl came quickly from the corner where she had been crouching. "Take his gun from his pocket," Somers ordered.

Tremblingly she obeyed him, handling the revolver with fearful caution.

"Now, go," Somers said briefly to the livid Jennison. "Go straight out the door to the creek and find the shortest way to your own side of the line. Don't wait for your friend, he'll come when he's ready—Ah, he's ready now," as Lawson, very pale except for the bruises on his jaw, staggered to his feet and gazed with helpless rage upon the erstwhile "Easy." "Neither of you need trouble to return to Dawson," the latter went on. "I'll swear out a warrant for your arrest the minute you do. Don't trouble to pick up your revolver, Lawson."

He followed them to the door, which he closed carefully behind them. Then, turning, he faced the girl.

She had laid Jennison's revolver upon the table, and now stood very forlorn and white-faced in the middle of the room, twisting her hands together and regarding Somers with pleading eyes.

"Oh, I have misjudged you," she whispered. "And you are hurt—your wound—"

"Is nothing to worry over," Somers said quietly. "A little water and a bandage will soon set it right."

"Tell me," she asked as with hands that trembled she helped him to dress his arm. "Tell me, was any of the story that man told me true?"

"Some of it." There was not a trace of bitterness in Somers' voice. "Your brother did jump my claim. But that was years ago, and I've no doubt he felt himself justified. Perhaps he was." It was "Easy" who spoke now.

"And your mother—" she whispered timidly. "Was that true also?"

"Yes," palling a little, "that was true enough."

"Then Larry has been wrong, very wrong. Oh, but he can be hard, cruel even, if he bears any one ill-will." She put the last stitch in the bandage with infinite tenderness. The

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