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RIMROCK JONES

(Continued from page 19.)

They were friends of Stoddard's as well as his—it was safest to work alone.

So, while outwardly the same goodhearted plunger, Rimrock began his campaign of revenge. It opened with a series of secret orders to outside brokers that he knew and soon, by selling Navajoa short, he had hammered the asking price down. Then he bought it in, a little at a time, until the market began to rise; and then, vindictively, he slaughered it again and gathered in more at the bottom. Not for nothing had he listened to Mrs. Hardesty and Buckbee and learned how the market riggers worked, but neither to her nor to Buckbee did he so much as hint of his purpose. His day would come when the Tecolote dividend was voted, when he got his million dollar check; and the only thing that could keep him from a notable revenge was some slipup in connection with the dividend.

In the continued absence of Mary Fortune, with her third and decisive vote, it would be necessary for Rimrock to agree with Stoddard, to the extent of dividing their profits. Not a great ways to go, even for men who were sworn enemies, and Stoddard certainly needed the money. He needed it badly, much worse than Rimrock, and would need it from time to time; yet until Rimrock actually got his hands on the money it was essential to conceal his plans. For a shrewd man like Stoddard, if he got an inkling of his purpose, was perfectly capable of tying up their profits and of stopping his credit at the bank. It was dangerous ground and Rimrock trod it warily, buying Navajoa in the most roundabout ways; yet month after month increased his holdings until his credit at the bank was stretched. If they asked for collateral he could turn over his Navajoa, although that would tip off his hand; but his note was still good and he went in deeper as the date of the annual meeting drew near.

There came a time when Buckbee asked shrewd questions and Mrs. Hardesty took him playfully to task; but he carried it off by wise nods and smiles and the statement that he knew something good. He was learning the game and, to cover up his tracks, he joined the mad whirl of social life. In place of his black sombrero and the high-heeled boots that had given him his entree in New York he appeared one evening in a top hat and dress suit, with diamonds glittering down the front of his shirt. It was a new plunge for him, but Buckbee supplied the tailor and Mrs. Hardesty launched his debut.

SHE had almost adopted him, this baffling, "free" woman, and yet she still had her reserves. She went with him everywhere, but the recherche suppers were almost a thing of the past. It was opera now, and the gayest restaurants, and dinners where they met distinguished guests; but at the entrance of the St. Cyngia, when the graven-faced doorman opened the door to let her pass, she had acquired a way of giving Rimrock her hand without asking if he wouldn't come in. She played him

warily, for his nature was impetuous and might easily lead him too far; but the time came at last when she found him recalcitrant and insurgent against her will.

It was at the opera where, amid jewelled women and men in immaculate attire, they had sat through a long and rather tedious evening during which Mrs. Hardesty had swept the boxes with her lorgnette. Something that she saw there had made her nervous and once in the cloakroom she delayed. Rimrock waited impatiently and when at last she joined him he forced his way aggressively into the slow-moving crowd and they were swept on down the broad, marble stairs. Once a part of that throng, there was no escaping its surge, and yet, as they drifted with the rest, two great columns of humanity flowing together like twin brooks that join in a river below, she clutched his arm and started back; but the crowd swept her inexorably on. Then Rimrock caught her glance-it was flashing across the foyer to the stream on the other side. He followed it instinctively and there, tripping gracefully down the stairway as he had seen her once before at Gunsight, was Mary Fortune, his girl!

Yes, his girl! Rimrock knew it instantly, the girl he had always loved. The One Woman he could love forever if fate would but give him the chance. He started forward, but a hand restrained him; it was Mrs. Hardesty at his side.

"Where are you going?" she asked and the slim, jewelled fingers closed down on his hand like a vise.

"Let me go!" muttered Rimrock, as he struggled against her; but she jerked him back to her side.

"Don't you dare to humiliate me!" she hissed into his ear, "don't you dare to leave me—for her!"

"It's Mary!" mumbled Rimrock without taking his eyes from her and Mrs. Hardesty tightened her grasp.

"If you do-I'll kill you!" she added dangerously; but Rimrock gave no heed. He had forgotten all about her; forgotten she was there. the dead weight that was holding him back; all he saw was Mary, more radiant than ever, moving towards him down the stairs. She was dressed in soft white and her glorious brown hair, that had before been crushed down beneath its clasp, was fluffed out now in all its beauty; and she talked and laughed as she came. At her side was an elderly, distinguished gentleman who listened with an indulgent smileand then they were engulfed in the crowd. The mass of humanity that had swept them down the stairway closed in and swallowed them up.

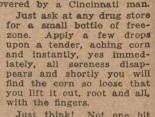
She was gone—but she was there—right there through the crowd—and Rimrock started towards her. Mrs. Hardesty followed, dragged on by main strength, and then resolutely she set her feet. The outraged escorts of jostled ladies formed a solid phalanx against him and Rimrock wheeled impatiently.

"Let go of my arm!" he commanded savagely and then he met her eyes. If he had doubted before the nature of the tiger woman he could read it now at a glance. She was choking with anger and her thin, even teeth were bared as she hissed out her breath; and then she spoke, very quietly:

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