

IF HE SHOULD COME

If Jesus should tramp the streets tonight Storm-beaten and hungry for bread, Seeking a room and candle light...

IN THE MEXICAN QUARTERS.

Life in the first place had been over kind. For life, I think, had led Billys youth along sheltered ways...

Mike, the forest ranger, first told me of Billy's coming to Verde. Part of Mike's job is to know everything...

"You're the forest ranger," he accused me, kind of unsteady. I admitted it. "Billy's my name. Billy Whitney, and he perched on my desk..."

"So I told him we couldn't boast all the conveniences of Chicago or Gomorrah, but I thought he was getting along nicely with what we had..."

"By the time he was twenty-one he found it, and they tell me he didn't particularly enjoy the trip. 'I know. You're talking of Billy the Kid. He looked at me in silence for a time, then shook his head...'"

"Well, you came to the best place in the world for that, too, son," I told him. "Here in Verde we specialize in minding our own business..."

"And while I finished my monthly fiction for the supervisor, he wandered about the office. Later he went over with me to the Quick and Greasy for a cup of coffee..."

"Spent four years there," I evaded. "So did he. That's about all of his past life he mentioned." Mike smiled thoughtfully. "Well, another misfit has come to Verde..."

For some reason I felt an obligation to be friendly. You see, he was so utterly alone, so uncompromisingly eastern. And lacking a better subject, I talked of the New Haven that's gone forever—the New Haven that I had known...

"Does old Senator Whitney happen to be a relative of yours?" I asked him once. "Amazing old fellow. He came up each year to college and lectured us on the importance of being born in the proper family..."

"Well, as a matter of fact, his family had played its part in our history—in each generation a Whitney had found prominence as soldier, jurist or statesman. No New England museum is quite complete without a bust or two bearing that name..."

"So I myself did most of the talking, telling him tales of Verde and the open range. Later, for a couple of hours, I left him while I went over the month's account with Bud, my foreman from the lower ranch..."

"You'll find, if you stay long enough, that life here can be just as full as elsewhere. Certainly it is less fettered." "Oh, I suppose one can go through the same motions here as elsewhere—just as one cares to..."

"That sort of thing always tires me. 'What did you come here for?' I asked abruptly. 'Blessed if I know. Back East I was cluttered up with a world of famous relatives and friends who for some reason, conceived I should make a success of life. I grew tired of a houseful of gloomy ancestors done in oil looking down at me in eternal disapproval..."

"I wanted to throw it all back in their faces and be my own self, no matter how little that amounted to. And by that time I couldn't. I hadn't realized all this until I was too far enmeshed. I had been doing the expected thing too long..."

"How could I? I couldn't suddenly say, 'This dream about my being a lawyer and a statesman is all well enough, but I have decided not to.' I couldn't say that, could I? In the first place it would have broken my mother's heart..."

"He stood in the doorway looking out into the warm night. I think he sighed. 'That book of Barnes' tells of a colt that was ridden too hard at the start. Spur and quit and never a let-up, and before long the colt was broken and done. He wasn't out for a racer. Well, that's why at twenty-four I am out here—I couldn't go through with it. I didn't want to be successful or masterful or a power in the community...'"

"Well, he wasn't the first who had come out to the desert bruised and beaten. You know there's something infinitely comforting about the desert. It's big and quiet and ageless and it seems to tell you that here at least is rest from the grinding gears of the world and freedom from the tyranny of those garish idols the world worships. That, I suppose, is why many of life's misfits come out here..."

"Not for me. Of course not." "Poor chap. He had ceased even to expect anything might be done for him. Then for long minutes we sat in brooding silence. I was forming a crazy notion that seemed destined to failure. And yet—" "So you're a partner in a ranch here," turned toward him. "Well, it looks as if I'll have to be the partner..."

"Even then he didn't understand. 'It's clear enough, isn't it? We can't let your parents spend ten minutes in Verde, or you're lost. It's a bare piece of deceit, but if I'm going to help you, we might as well do the thing right. We're partners in the ranch and as soon as your parents arrive, we whisk out to my hacienda. There we can keep them from learning the truth. It'll have to be close herding. And when they're ready to go, we'll put them on the train...' "The scheme may blow up—it may succeed. It's a rotten lie either way, but it seems your only chance..."

"I saw a spark of hope in his eyes. 'What can I do to help?' "Plenty. Just now you look more like a broken-down fare dealer than a ranch owner. For the next week you've got to ride hard. Get some tan on your face and learn one end of a horse from the other. I threw in the clutch, and as we rolled down the big hill from the mesa I added, 'And let's hope this makes a man of you...' "I don't want to sail under false colors," he replied slowly. "Especially with you, for I owe you a big debt of gratitude. But I haven't the least desire to buck up and be somebody. Please don't make that a condition..."

"I won't. As soon as the old folks depart you can go to the devil as quickly and completely as you see fit." "And in a thoroughly bad humor I dashed through Verde to the noisy delight of every mongrel dog in town. At the ranch that night I called the boys out to the bunk house and told them of my conspiracy. Some of them grinned; most of them swore, but all promised to see me through..."

"And," Bud added, "if I have to perjure my immortal soul too heavily, I'll show the kid that life can be interesting for five minutes at least. That is, when his parents pull out." "I nodded. 'It's the parents we've got to think of. They're old, you see. All their hopes are bound up in this worthless pup. Well, we can't take that away...' "So again they all swore violently, which is the cowboy's way of telling you that they're with you tooth and nail..."

"And now every day before the old folks coming Billy rode with us. He sat a horse in that queer, stiff eastern fashion and tried to persuade my sorrel mare to trot in the approved English style until she got sick of it and bucked him off. After that Billy took my advice and rode with longer stirrups and a western saddle. On those rides he learned a little about the cattle game and not once did he ask for a drink. Which may or may not have been a good sign..."

"Now it's unimportant whether Billy or I happened to be the more nervous that morning as we drove to the Santa Fe station before train time. Twice we walked the length of the long platform, swa-ping platitudes about the spring weather to show how unconcerned we were. At the blast of the whistle, Billy jumped a foot. Then with a grinding of brakes and the hiss of steam, the long cars stopped. And suddenly I felt my arm clutched as in a vise. 'We're lost,' Billy whispered; 'they've brought Claire...' "At the moment I didn't realize who Claire was. 'Keep steady and act delighted,' I said and thrust him forward..."

"I remember a lovable and gentle old couple talking with that same old buck East dialect that some of us once knew and have since forgotten. But the little old lady had eyes for no one but Billy. He had lifted her in his arms and carried her to the car. I was presented. 'Billy's partner...' "Yes, they had heard of me. To the old senator I recalled the days when he spoke at college banquets back East. That pleased him. Claire I couldn't quite make out. By that time I had remembered that the girl Billy almost married—the girl who had insisted on Billy's being somebody. Well, she seemed a very competent little somebody herself..."

"Billy's father shared the front seat with me and tried not to seem too proud of Billy as I showed him our ranch property and some of our livestock. 'Blood, sir blood in both cattle and man,' he said once. 'The thing's an axiom. Good blood and you can't go wrong...' "I agreed heartily. I would have agreed to anything. Luncheon went by safely and Billy took his father on a tour of the buildings. Throughout that sunlit afternoon his mother sat in the patio. And there she told me a little tale of her hopes and dreams for this boy of hers. A tale of simple high-hearted devotion and of loyalty and belief even when he funked the eastern career..."

"Some said then he would just become an ordinary cowboy," she looked at me with those kindly eyes—"but I knew he couldn't help going upward." "And now her hopes were being justified. He was making a place for himself out here—helping to build up the country. Always the Whitneys had been nation builders. Was I wrong, I wonder, in resolving to preserve to her that dream of a man who never lived? For in the next two hours I painted a picture of a vigorous, masterful man whose coming to Verde had put new heart in us..."

"I told her how this Billy of hers had introduced new methods into my ranch and by unending labor and sheer personality was turning a losing venture into a glorious success. I told her of the devotion of the men and their trust in him. And more than once I saw tears of happiness—even at a price. And through it all Claire, silent and imperturbable, stood behind the old lady's chair watching me with wide contemplative eyes. And when at last the mother had gone, Claire sauntered over and stood before me..."

"Do you know what I think?" she asked abruptly. "I think you are probably the most imaginative liar in all New Mexico." She left me to digest that. "And not until after dark could I get Billy alone to tell him of Claire's words. We were sitting on the coral fence talking. Billy nodded gloomily. 'Neither you nor I can take her in. But I think she'll help us. Wait...' "He left me and not many minutes later returned with Claire. To Billy's look of entreaty, I shook my head..."

"It's your story," I reminded him—"you tell it." "Billy didn't tell it well. But he did manage to make a clean breast of it in his fashion and I think her contempt for Billy grew in the telling. At the end she blazed up at him. 'You're a loathsome beast, Billy,' she said among other things, and the pitiless disdain in her voice made him flinch. 'What a rotten job you've made of living—and I suspect you'll make a rotten job of dying.' For a minute her lips quivered. 'And if it weren't that I loved those old people in there too much—' Then abruptly, 'After all, you're not worth getting steamed up over, are you, Billy? Of course I'll lie like the rest of you if the need comes...' "You're a good fellow, Claire," the boy began...

"She raised her hand. 'Don't praise me, please—somehow praise from you makes me feel unclean.' And Billy slunk away like a dog. For a time the girl and I sat smoking on the coral fence while a tiny moon rose in the eastern sky. Somehow out on the desert fringes seem unimportant. And perhaps a little of the brooding peace of it all touched the girl, for presently she asked a little defiantly, 'You're thinking I've been hard?' "I shook my head. 'I didn't happen to be thinking of that at all. No, but it's interesting to speculate on what kind of man he might have become if everybody hadn't conspired to stampe him...' "Stampe?" "With the necessity of being somebody. Driving him, as he once told me, like a colt spurred and quirted at every step. So he fled away, broken. And now he's good for nothing. Yes, perhaps I do think you've all been a little hard..."

"Do you blame me—even if your theory is true?" "It isn't a theory and I'm not blaming anyone. But I do believe you had more to do with it than the others. You see, I happened to know that Billy loved you, and feeling that you, too, were among the success worshipers, he played up to you. Played the big competent man of the world. And the role was too much for him..."

"You've got to remember that for every Abe Lincoln there are a few millions who are just plain nice boys. Out here we think more of living and less of getting somewhere. Still, that's all aside from Billy's shipwrecked love." "She seemed to consider that for a time. 'The world has wasted a deal of emotion over the thing you call 'shipwrecked love' hasn't it? That sort of thing is not love, just attraction—a mating kind of thing...' "And that isn't love?" "It is? It's not what I want to believe. I want to believe there's something finer to it all than that. Some quality of the intelligence at least. My generation's not willing to accept your ready-made definitions if it can find something cleaner and better..."

"I groaned. "In another minute you're going to tell me you belong to the generation that wants to think things out for itself. You know, back in the past geologic ages even our own bright-eyed contemporaries were saying that. But life found us out. And some of us found life out. And one of the things life taught us was that love isn't the milk-and-water kind of emotion you describe but a dear, unreasoning thing that suffers and helps and is content to love. Love doesn't ask if you're a judge or a horse thief..."

"Was it milk-and-water to give Billy back his ring when he decided to be a rich man's son rather than a man in his own right? You say he played up to me—but all I ever wanted was that he stand on his own two feet. Is it milk-and-water to ask a little self-respect in the man you love?" "Perhaps. At any rate, when love seeks you out you won't split your hairs or go through any laboratory tests. You'll go to your man. In the years I've lived over here, I have seen a good many hard lives, some rough people, and a few quick untidy deaths. But through it all I've seen this force of love making up for a whole flock of misery. Yes, and bringing the damned out of hell. This congealed partnership of yours—well, I'm prophesying that when love reaches out and touches you, you'll ask no questions..."

"In answer she smiled that rare smile of hers. 'What a sentimental fire-eater you are! You know I wish I could believe that—almost.' Although we spoke a different language, I could find it in me to admire her fearless sincerity. Two weeks passed. Billy's parents were basking happily in the boy's reflected glory. And through it all Billy played his part and was perhaps the most miserable man in New Mexico. It wasn't easy, of course, and the bitter part of life's little jest was that Billy had to play his unenviable role before the level gaze of this girl he couldn't quite forget to love. For Billy wasn't deceiving any of us in that, at least—a smile from her would have brought paradise down. But paradise remained far away..."

"And it was little compensation to know that by very necessity something of a man's assertion had come to him during those days he rode the range. For one thing, Bud strained his knee and Billy had been doing his best to fill the breach. Then on the coral fence one evening he told me his parents had decided to leave. 'Life is funny in a cruel kind of way,' he added. 'I've never seen them look so happy. You know until the day they die, they'll be proud of a man who lives only in their imaginations. Claire said that. She said, too, that you ranked a big gold medal for being the most barefaced liar in the Southwest...' "Thanks..." "Billy kicked his heels on the coral bars. "Once I told you that as soon as they left I wanted to sink back into the old life and be a bum again. But somehow the way you've trusted me, the way the boys have treated me—I'm trying to say that I want to begin again. I want to make another start. A real start this time." He smiled across at me almost happily. "Wouldn't you be surprised if I have in me the makings of a he-man?" Slowly the smile faded. "Only it will come too late with Claire..." "I had nothing to contribute to that. Then after a time, "I don't suppose you know much about love." As a matter of fact I don't. Hereford steers are my only weakness. But I asked, "Are you taking this roundabout way of telling me that you've been bamboozling yourself for a long time, Billy, about the uselessness of life in general? What you're really suffering from is a bad case of dislocated hopes because a little girl once said you hadn't the right stuff in you. It's just possible that if you went to her with this new plan of yours, she'd listen..." "And Billy climbed down off the coral. "You give so much advice, some of it ought to be sound..." "I sat and smoked and watched two cigarettes when Billy came out of the house. With one word or a look he passed me and disappeared in the stables. A moment later he was lost in a cloud of dust on the high loop to Verde. The sound of galloping hoof-beats must have reached Claire, for she came down the path to where I sat. "Billy's gone?" Her voice was tremulous. "I pointed toward Verde. "Gone as if all his devils were after him..." "They were." She looked up at me with white lips. "I sent him away. I tried to be kind, but he wouldn't let me. He asked me to be his wife. He needed me, he said, to help him hold on. I tried to tell him that he had to stand on his own two feet. I can't marry him just to bolster up his faint courage, can I? If Billy had come through just one test with flying colors, if he—" "What did he say?" I interrupted. "He just stood there in the doorway looking at me; then he pulled on his hat and said, 'I guess after all you are a success-worshiper, aren't you, Claire? From now on I'll take my own road.' A tear gleamed in her lashes. "But he was wrong, wrong. I'm not a success-worshiper. I just wanted him to be a man—to face life like a man, to work out his own destiny. You've done, don't you?" I asked grimly. "You've sent him back to that death in life—back to that cursed existence he led before you came..." "I sent him? How have I sent him? Can't you realize how terribly easy it would have been for me to surrender to that unreasoning love you talk of? And yet love alone won't help him. He's got to help himself. He's got to find manhood for himself, just for the sake of manhood—or fail. And now he's lost it all. And now he's lost it all. And I'm making a fool of myself, crying about milk that was split years ago." Tearfully, resentfully she added, "Such you know about love..." "It seemed unanimous around there that my ignorance of love was profound. So I went in and read about Hereford breeding for profit..." "And once during that interminable evening the thought came to me that neither Claire nor I was wholly right or wrong. For this thing we call love may assume as many aspects as beauty. And not all love perhaps is a redeeming force. A mother's love had led this boy to play an unenviable role in the eyes of the girl. And love for that girl had driven him back again to the futilities of the Mexican quarter. Yes, it may be that only to the strong does love inevitably come as a glory and a fulfillment. As to Claire—well, I believed life had one or two lessons in store for her. Somehow the evening passed. At five next morning the telephone roused me. It was Bud at the lower ranch. "Those greasers have rustled fifty cows and they're driving them toward the border." Then he exploded the bomb. "Billy's hiding after them—told me to phone you, then get out the boys..." "Billy went alone?" "All alone. This cursed leg kept me out. He pulled out soon as he heard..." "Phone Sam at Number Four to saddle all the horses he's got. I'll drive over in fifteen minutes..." "As I hung up Claire stood in the doorway. "What about Billy?" she asked. "So I told her while I gathered up an armload of miscellaneous artillery. I saw her face go white, then I called three of the boys and ran for the car. Claire jumped into the front seat. "You're not going," I announced. (Continued on page 3, Col. 3.)