West Wind Drift

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

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HE HAD reached the pinnacle of happiness in believing that the girl he loved was in his arms. He was blind and deaf with ecstasy. The awakening had a shock. His senses reeled for an instant—and then Ruth Clinton went out of his thoughts entirely!

"Damn you!" he cried again, and drew her close. "She hates me—she will always hate me," he was mumbling. "Why should I care? Why should I refuse to take——" Her lips were on his again, warm, firm, voluptuous, drawing his heart's blood with the resistless power of a magnet.

They did not hear the rapid approach of footsteps—heavy, swift as of one running. A dark, panting figure raced past them, and then another but a few paces behind.

Percival's senses were released. They cast off the bewitching bonds. His head went up again. In a flash his brain was clear. His arms were still about her, she was still lying close against him—but the current of passion that consumed both of them was checked.

"What was that?" she gasped, as if coming out of a dream.

He released her, and sprang out into the path to peer fruitlessly after the unseen runners. The sound of footsteps was rapidly diminishing.

They were suddenly aware of women's voices far away to the right. They were indistinct but there was a sinister significance in the ever-increasing volume.

"There's trouble out there," said Percival. "Something wrong. Come—come along! You must get indoors at once." He grasped her arm and started rapidly off in the direction of her cabin. She stumbled at first, but quickly fell into stride with him. Men's shouts were now added to the clamor.

"I know—I know," she cried in his ear. "It has happened, just as I said it would. Some of these men are honest."

"Then there's hell to pay," he grated.

They reached her cabin just as the door was thrown open. The three startled coryphees filled the entrance. Recognition was followed by a clatter of agitated voices. Olga was fairly dragged into the cabin.

"Bolt your door," was Percival's command as he turned away.

She stood in the door for a moment, looking after him. He passed out of the radius of light. The chorus of voices grew louder down the way—like the make-believe mob in the theatre.

Then she closed the door slowly, reluctantly. The three girls watched her in silence as she stood for many seconds with her hand on the knob, her eyes tightly shut.

She turned and faced them. There was a wry smile on her lips as she shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands in a gesture of resignation.

"Yes—bolt the door," she said. As Alma hesitated, her eyes grew hard, her voice imperative. "Do you know of any reason why you should not do as both Mr. Percivall and I have commanded?"

"No—no madame," cried Alma hastily.

As the heavy wooden bolt fell into place, Olga again shrugged her shoulders and threw herself into a chair in front of the fireplace.

"Put on your clothes," she ordered. "What is happening, madame? What is all the noise about?" questioned one of the girls.

But there was no answer. Olga was staring into the fire.

CHAPTER XVIII

Percival's blood was still in a tumult as he ran down the line of cabins. From every doorway men were now stumbling, half-dressed, half-asleep. Behind them, in many cabins, alarmed, agitated women appeared. Farther on there were lanterns and a chaotic mass of moving objects. Above the increasing clamor rose the horrible, uncanny wail of a woman. Percival's blood cooled, his brain cleared. Men shouted questions as he passed, and obeyed his command to follow.

The ugly story is soon told. Philippa, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Pedro, the head farmer, had gone out from her father's cabin at dusk to fetch water from the little reservoir that had been constructed alongside Leap Frog river a short distance above the cabins. The pool was a scant 200 yards from her home. It was a five minutes' walk there and back. Half an hour passed, and she had not returned. Her mother became uneasy. Pedro reassured her. He laughed at her fears.

"She could not have fallen into the pool," he said. "You forget the fence we have built around it."

"I am not thinking of the pool, Pedro," she argued. "Go you at once and search for her. She is a laggard. She has not stopped in to see one of the girls."

And Pedro went grumpily forth to search for his daughter. An hour later he came staggering down from the woods above the pool to meet the dozen or more friends and neighbors who had set out some time earlier to look for the two of them, father and daughter.

He bore in his arms the limp, apparently lifeless form of Philippa. He was covered with blood, he was chattering like a madman. Out of his incoherent babble the horrified searchers were able to put together the cruel story. It seems he had heard a faint cry far back in the dense wood—another and yet another. Then utter silence. Even the nightbirds were still. Swift, paralyzing fear choked him. He tried to call out as he rushed blindly up from the pool into the forest, but only hoarse, unnatural gasps left his lips. He fell often, he crashed into the trunks of trees, but always he went onward, gasping out his futile cries. He knew not how long he beat through the forest. He was not even sure that it was Philippa's cry he had heard, but his soul was filled with a great, convincing dread. He knew that his beloved Philippa, the idol of his heart, the sunshine of his life, was up there in the woods. Frequently he stopped to listen. He could hear nothing save the pounding of his own heart, and the wheezing of his breath, thick and labored.

Then, at last, during one of those silences, he heard something moving in the darkness near at hand. Something—some one was coming toward him through the underbrush! He called out hoarsely: "Philippa!" The sound ceased instantly, and then he heard a whispered execration. Wild rage possessed him. He plunged forward into the brush. Something crashed down upon his head, and he felt himself falling forward. The next he knew, he was trying vainly to rise to his feet. Something hot was running into his eyes—hot and sticky. He lifted his hand to his head; it came away wet. He put his fingers into his mouth—and tasted blood. It was enough. His strength came back. He sprang to his feet and rushed onward, shouting, cursing, calling upon God! He had no recollection of finding his girl. Apparently everything was a blank to him until long afterward he saw lights moving among the trees, and voices were calling his name.

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Percival and other cool-headed men were hard put to check the fury of the mob. Men and women, bent on vengeance, made the night hideous with their curses, howls and shrieks. In their senseless fury they prepared to kill. They had heard the stories about Manuel Crust and his disciples. Only the determined stand taken by the small group that rallied to Percival's support kept the maddened crowd from seeking out these men and rending them limb from limb. The sailors from the Doraine were the first to listen to the pleas of the level-headed—just as they had been the first to demand the lives of Manuel Crust and his gang. Individually they were rough men and lawless; collectively they were the slaves of discipline. It was to their vanity that Percival and the others appealed—only they called it honor instead of vanity. The mob spirit was quelled for the time being, at least. No one was so foolish as to believe that it was dead, however. Unless the man guilty of the shocking crime was found and delivered up for punishment, the inevitable would happen.

"We'll get the right man," said the voice of universal fury, "if we have to cut the heart out of every one of Manuel Crust's gang."

The women were the worst. They fought like wildcats to reach the cabins occupied by the known followers of Manuel Crust. With knives and axes and burning fagots they tried again and again to force their way through the stubborn wall of men that had been raised against them.

As for Manuel Crust and his little group of radicals, they had vanished. They had mingled with the mob at the outset. There were many who recalled seeing this one and that one, remembered speaking to him, remembered hearing him curse the ravisher. But as their own names began to run from lip to lip, they silently, swiftly disappeared.

Dawn found the camp awake, but grimly silent. No one had gone to bed. With the first streak of day, the manhunt began in earnest. All night long the camp had been patrolled. Every cabin had been searched, even those occupied solely by women. This search had been conducted in an orderly, businesslike way under the supervision of men chosen by Percival. The folly of beating the woods during the night was recognized even by the most impatient; there was time enough for that when the blackness of night had lifted.

Throughout the long night the restless crowd, with but one thought in mind, hung about the cabin of Pedro the farmer. The doctors and several of the nurses were there. Down at the meeting house a bonfire had been started, and here were grouped the men to whom the leaders had intrusted firearms and other weapons—men of the gun crew, under officers from the Doraine, the committee of ten and others.

It was accepted as a fact that two men were involved in the heinous deed. Percival's account of the mysterious runners seemed definitely to establish this. He called upon Olga Obosky to verify his statement. If she was surprised by his admission that he was in her company when the men rushed past them in the darkness she did not betray the fact.

She indulged in a derisive smile when he went on to explain that it was so dark he had failed to recognize her until she spoke to him. She agreed with him that the two men must have come into the open a very short distance above them, having sneaked out between the cabins before suddenly breaking into a run. Avoiding the beaten roadway, they had laid their course twenty or thirty feet to the right of it, keeping to the soft, springy turf.

Percival had issued orders for the entire camp to congregate on the green at the first sign of day. The cold gray light of dawn fell upon vague, unreal forms moving across the open spaces from all directions. There was no shouting, no turmoil, scarcely the sound of a voice. The silent, ghostly figures merged into a compact, motionless mass in front of the meeting-house. It was not necessary for Percival to call for order when he appeared on the steps and began to speak. The only sounds were the shuffling of feet, the rustling of garments, the deep, restrained breathing of the mass.

He spoke partly in English and partly in Spanish, and he was brief.

"You know what we are here for and what is ahead of us. I don't have to tell you the story of last night. You know it as well as I. You will be glad to hear the latest word from Dr. Cullen. Philippa is conscious. He thinks she will recover. She is having the best of care and attention. I will explain why we are all here now. The first thing for us to do is to count noses. We will go about it as rapidly as possible. After that, we will get down to business. Mr. Landover and Mr. Malone will check off the name of every man, woman and child. As your names are called, come forward, answer and then move over beyond the corner of the building. We've got to find out just who is missing—if any one is missing at all."

He raised his voice. "I want you all to keep cool. Don't forget that we are after the men who committed this crime. We have no right to say that Manuel Crust or any of his crowd did this thing until we have positive proof of the fact. It may not have been any of Manuel's until we have positive proof of the fact. It may not have been any of Manuel's gang, don't forget that, people. We must make no mistakes. I am saying this to you now because I see Manuel Crust and some of his friends standing over there at the edge of the clearing. Stop! Don't make a move in their direction. We've all had time to think—we've all had time to get ourselves in hand. There is a right and a wrong way to handle this thing—and we've got to be sure we're right. The guilty cannot escape. They haven't a chance, and you know it. So, let's be sure—let's be 'dead' sure before we accuse any man. We have no right to charge Manuel's gang with this crime. The guilty men may be here among us—absolutely unsuspected. Chisler! You and Soapy Shay go over and tell those men that we are taking a count of all the people in this camp. Tell them to come and answer to their names. They will be safe."

The count was never completed. Manuel Crust did not wait for his name to be called. He pushed his way through the crowd, leaving his followers behind. Advancing to the foot of the steps he cried out hoarsely to Percival:

"If you want your men, I—I, Manuel Crust, will lead you to one of them. He is up there in the wood. Three men are guarding him. He is Sancho Mendez, the blacksmith.

"Listen, I will tell you. It is the God's truth I tell. There were seven of us hiding out there in the wood. We were scared. We heard our names called out. We had heard the threats to burn us alive. We ran away. We were not cowards—but still we ran away. We would wait till the crowd cooled off. That was my advice. Then we would return—then we would help to find the man who did it—and then we would help to burn them alive. An hour ago Sancho Mendez crawled out of the brush up there above the landing and begged us to protect him. His leg was broken. He had fallen over a log. You all know Sancho Mendez. He was a good boy. He was the friend of Boss Percival. He was no friend to me. But he swears he will be my slave forever if I will save him. Then he tells us everything. When I ask him why the hell he run away, he says he lose his mind or something. He just go crazy, he says. He say everybody was chasing him—he could hear them in the bushes, he could hear that girl screaming out his name—and all that. He was going to jump in the water and drown, because he says people tell him always it is the easy way to die. But he falls down and breaks his leg—here below the knee. He cannot run no more. It is all up. He is afraid to breathe. People are all around him with knives and axes and clubs. He can hear them in the brush. Then the daylight comes and he sees us down below in the woods and he says he thanks God. I will be his friend—I will save him because I am an angel from heaven! Bah! I spit in his face. We tie him to a tree with our belts, and then I come down to tell Boss Percival we have his man—his good and loyal friend."

"Stop!" yelled Percival, as the crowd began to show symptoms of breaking away. "Listen to me! I give you fair warning. I don't want to do it, but, by God, I'll order these men to shoot the first who tries to start anything. We're going to have law and order here. This man Sancho is going to have a fair trial. What's more, he had a companion. What does he say of the other man, Manuel Crust?"

"Sancho Mendez says he was alone. There was no other man."

Percival looked hard into Manuel Crust's bloodshot eyes. An appalling thought had suddenly flashed into his mind. Many seconds passed before he dared to open his lips. As if by divine revelation the situation lay bare before him—the whole Machiavellian scheme as conceived by Manuel. Sancho Mendez was to be sacrificed!

Even as he stood there speechless, the plan began to work toward its well-calculated end. Manuel's friends started to harangue the crowd. They were growling hoarse invectives, shaking their fists in the direction of the wood, fanning the pent-up fury of the mob into a whirlwind that would sweep everything before it. Once the tide turned there would be no stopping it until Sancho Mendez was torn to pieces. He would shriek his innocence into deaf ears. And that was Manuel's game.

Percival's heart leaped with joy as he saw the armed force under Lieutenant Platt move swiftly into a position barring the way to the woods. He thrilled with a mighty pride in the shrewd intelligence and resourcefulness of this trained fighting man from the far-off homeland.

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THE GUMPS—Looking Back — By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—The Boss Keeps Stewin' Around — By Hayward

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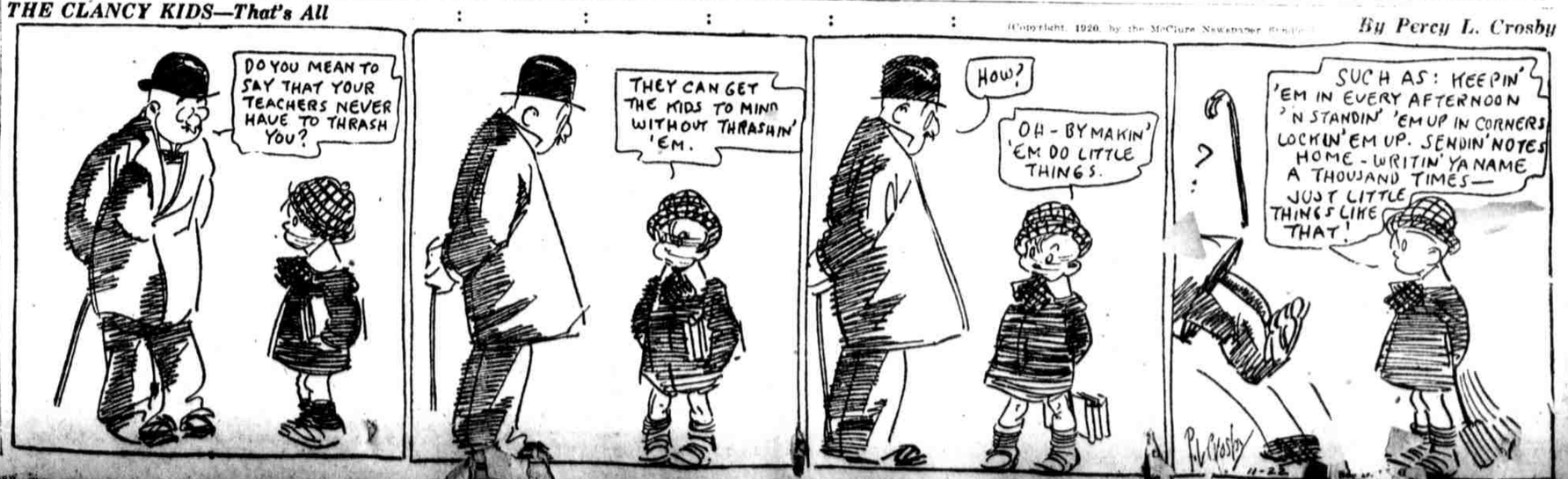
The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says Mr. Carpentier won his first contest over here easily enough, but wait till he goes up against Coveleskie.

THE TERRIBLE-TEMPERED MR. BANG — By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS — By DWIG

PETEY—Simply Necessary — By C. A. Voight

THE CLANCY KIDS—That's All — By Percy L. Crosby

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