

The Boomerang

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

EDITOR'S NOTE.—This is one of Mr. Curwood's most effective short stories. It tells of a man who makes much money by the sale of "salted" mines, but is not conscious of the wickedness of his doings. His love for a young woman of fine character and keen conscience works his reform. He makes restitution so far as he can, but the partner from whom he separates succeeds in swindling the young lady's guardian out of \$100,000—her entire fortune.

THERE were times, and plenty of them, when you would say that Rodney Stone was a rascal. Put a swallow-tail coat on him, a silk hat and the right sort of a collar, and you'd be willing to go odds that he was a preacher, a high-toned sort, or maybe one of those smooth-tongued, good Samaritan lobbyists sent out by the mining interests. But always, whether he was dressed in his swallow-tail or his mining boots, he was a philanthropist—one of the softest-hearted fellows you ever met when it came right down to every-day misery-in-a-cottage. I've seen him gurgie all over with delight when he had just done some smooth job of turning other people's money into his own pockets, and ten minutes later I've seen him, almost with tears in his eyes, digging down into those same pockets to help some one out of trouble.

He had as shrewd a brain as they make, and yet he couldn't get rich and didn't want to. Money went from him as easily as it came. One day he cleaned up a couple of thousand from a rich investor in a way that would have made an owl laugh, and the next day, almost to an hour, he handed that two thousand over to a poor chap he knew, who had a pretty little wife dying of consumption. "Take her out of this cursed climate," he said. "I don't need the money. If it saves your wife, just write me about it." That was his way. You couldn't help liking him. He'd lose a hundred dollars himself rather than beat a poor man out of a dollar; but when it came to people with money—then was the time to look out for Roddy Stone. Likely as not he would have ended up in a penitentiary—if the girl hadn't come along just at the right time. What she didn't do to Roddy Stone isn't worth remarking about. Esther Collard was her name, a slim, blue-eyed little thing, with a voice as sweet as a bird's, and brown curls that danced and tumbled about her head no matter how she did up her hair.

At the time of their meeting, Roddy was doing some slick jobs at "salting" up in the Canadian gold fields about Sturgeon Lake. I believe that Roddy could have bamboozled a syndicate into the purchase of a pickle mine. He had cleaned up eighty thousand dollars in six months, when along came a scientist from some Eastern college, hunting for the bones of prehistoric monsters, and it was the scientist who indirectly brought about his meeting with pretty Esther Collard. Roddy loved a joke better than his dinner, and the professor turned up just at the right moment. At this time Rodney was the owner of a worthless shaft and knew of a man back in the bush who had found a lot of mastodon bones and fossilized fish. It took him just a week to "salt" the shaft so that it looked like a rich deposit of prehistoric natural history, and he sold out to the scientific gentleman for a thousand dollars.

He pulled the deal off in the morning, and in the afternoon he turned the check over to a committee that was trying to scrape up enough money to build a church and hire a real preacher. There were three women in that committee, and Esther Collard. Esther had come along merely as a friend of one of the three, but the moment her eyes met Roddy's, something happened. This was about the time

"And I—I love you!"

That was all, but a thousand words could not have marked the dawning of a sweeter love story than theirs. That night, at the gate, from which they gazed off into the starry north where the aurora was sending up its silvery shafts, Rodney drew the girl close up to him again and said,

"I'm going to tell you something to-morrow—or next day—or pretty soon, little girl—something about myself—that you won't like. It's—it's pretty rough up here, you know, and sometimes we do things—well, that you wouldn't like. Now, if I was a gambler—"

There was a frightened look in her blue eyes. "You're not!" she whispered almost aggressively. "You're not!"

"But if I was," he persisted, "would it make any difference with you?"

"I'd love you—just the same," she replied. "But you'd—never—gamble again—"

"Whatever I've done that's wrong, I'll never do again!" he cried gently. "Before my God I swear that! Good-night—"

Her face was lifted to him, radiant with love and faith.

"There is only one man I couldn't love," she said, "even if he were you," and she pouted her lips for him to kiss.

"And that man—"

"Would be a thief," she said; and she wondered at the strange look that came into Rodney Stone's face as he turned away from the little gate.

Through all that night Rodney Stone fought the hardest and bitterest fight of his life. It was dawn when he went to his office, white and haggard and covered with dust. But he had won. He threw off his coat and hat, and for hours he searched out innumerable papers from his desk, and made column upon column of figures until his fingers were cramped. Then he began writing letters. When he was done, a score of them lay upon his desk, and in each letter there was a check. He went over the columns of figures again, and found that he was paying back to the people he had "done" just seventy thousand dollars of the seventy-five thousand which he possessed. If it had been in his power, he would have given back three for one, to show the other man that was in him the depths of his love for Esther Collard.

Thief! The word rang over and over again in his brain; it stared at him from the pages he wrote. He had never looked at it in that light. He despised a thief. Until the girl had uttered that word, he had credited everything that he had done to cleverness and brains. But he saw himself now as she would see him—if she knew—and a cold chill crept into his veins as he thought of what it would mean to him to give up this girl who had come into his life like a beautiful star, to lead him out of darkness into dawn. But need she ever know? He asked himself that, and slowly he became conscious of an uncomfortable heat in his face. His hands gripped hard at the edges of the desk. He had gone this far—and he would go farther. He would tell her everything

I'm morally responsible just the same. I concede that I can't pull you out, Wilkins. I wish I could. It's quits for me. Roscoe, out in Colorado, has offered me a job, at five thousand a year, to take charge of the Big Smoke mine and I'm going. I'm sorry for you, Wilkins. Perhaps—some day—you'll meet a girl—"

"Rot!" said Wilkins.

It was a week later before Rodney felt that the propitious moment had come for him to wipe the slate clean. At the end of that time his aggregate capital was only five hundred dollars.

In the little room where he had first told Esther of his love, he began his confession. He began at the beginning, as he had planned to do—starting at the first little "deal" he had carried through when scarcely more than a boy. For ten minutes the girl listened to him, her eyes growing bigger and darker and never leaving his face. "I haven't any excuse for what I've done, Esther," he finished, "except that I thought it was fair. None of it would have happened—if the mother had lived—I've been a thief. I almost stole—a hundred thousand dollars—yesterday. I pulled out of the deal, but I couldn't stop Wilkins. I'm morally a thief—even in that." "Rodney!"

Her hands crept to his shoulders. Her face was pale—whiter than he had ever seen it—but back of the startled glow in her eyes there shone a pride and a triumph that were roused by the strength of the man who was telling her these things.

"He sold the mine yesterday," he went on. "It's worthless—and he got a hundred thousand dollars. I couldn't find who the buyer was or I would have warned him. Wilkins left for parts unknown this morning, but before he left he told me who the man was. I'm going to see him, and I'm going to try hard to make it right—some day. He's in Winnipeg." "Winnipeg!" gasped the girl. Her hands tightened on his shoulders.

"Yes. His name is Barton—Geoffrey Barton."

With a strange, low cry Esther sprang a step back from him. For a brief space Rodney remained speechless and without movement as she stood swaying in the centre of the room.

"Esther!"

Her face was covered with her hands when he went to her. Gently he drew them away.

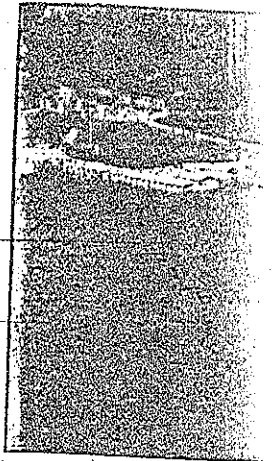
"Esther—don't you think—I can make good?" he pleaded. "Don't you? I'll work hard—all my life—"

Again, as on that first night, her arms groped out to him.

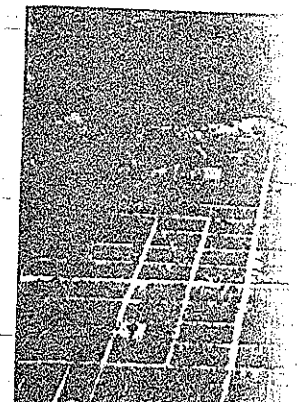
"Yes—you'll make good," she whispered. After a time, with her face still against his breast, she said, "I—I don't think it necessary for you—ever to pay back this man, Geoffrey Barton, for you see—there was the glory of love and happiness in her eyes as she peered up at him—"you see, he is my uncle!"

"Your uncle! My God!"

"Rodney, dear Rodney—I don't care—I'm glad it



The Battery, New York, municipal building in the background. The Battery Park is taken with a moving picture camera.



A real birdseye view of the outskirts of a town. In the foreground, at the center of the extreme right, intersected by silver, clearly shown, despite the fact that the

saves your wife, just write me about it." That was his way. You couldn't help liking him. He'd lose a hundred dollars himself rather than beat a poor man out of a dollar; but when it came to people with money—then was the time to look out for Roddy Stone. Likely as not, he would have ended up in a penitentiary—if the girl hadn't come along just at the right time. What she didn't do to Roddy Stone isn't worth remarking about. Esther Collard was her name, a slim, blue-eyed little thing, with a voice as sweet as a bird's, and brown curls that danced and tumbled about her head no matter how she did up her hair.

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He pulled the deal off in the morning, and in the afternoon he turned the check over to a committee that was trying to scrape up enough money to build a church and hire a real preacher. There were three women in that committee—and Esther Collard, Esther had come along merely as a friend of one of the three, but the moment her eyes met Roddy's, something happened. Things come about in that way sometimes. None of the others could see or feel what was going on inside of Rodney Stone's rough mining coat, and they didn't notice the strange glow that came into Esther's blue eyes or the flush that deepened just a trifle in her cheeks. For ten years Rodney had been waiting for the look that he saw in the girl's face and for the sweetness that he saw in her eyes. He had been waiting—without knowing it or hoping for the ultimate thing, for women had played but a small part in his life. At thirty-five the one woman who filled his heart was still the sweet memory-face of his mother, who lay in a little country churchyard many hundreds of miles away. But now she divided it with Esther Collard.

The second evening after the committee had gone with its thousand-dollar check, Rodney called upon Esther Collard, and he called every evening after that for a week. It was on a Sunday evening that Esther sat down at the piano, with her soft curls shining in the lamp glow and her cheeks as pink as the inside of a shell, and played and sang for him the old pieces that he hadn't heard for years and years. She had an angel's voice, with a child-like sweetness in it that went right to his soul, and when on that Sunday evening she turned the light a little lower and sang to him "Silver Threads among the Gold" and "Home, Sweet Home," the tears ran down his face and he forgot to wipe them away. She saw them there, and suddenly there came a wonderful change in her face and her voice broke. And Rodney Stone reached out and took her face between his two big, strong hands, looked straight into her pure, blue eyes, and said simply,

"Sweet Esther—I love you!"

Like a child she put her hands up to his shoulders, and, with her face hidden against him, he heard her whisper,

"I love you—just like you love me." "That was his way. You couldn't help liking him. He'd lose a hundred dollars himself rather than beat a poor man out of a dollar; but when it came to people with money—then was the time to look out for Roddy Stone. Likely as not, he would have ended up in a penitentiary—if the girl hadn't come along just at the right time. What she didn't do to Roddy Stone isn't worth remarking about. Esther Collard was her name, a slim, blue-eyed little thing, with a voice as sweet as a bird's, and brown curls that danced and tumbled about her head no matter how she did up her hair.

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It was almost eight o'clock—time for Wilkins, his partner, to appear. He smiled grimly as he thought of what Wilkins would say, especially as the biggest deal of their lives was just about to be pulled off. Two months before they had "salted" a mine. So skillfully had they placed the gold quartz, the shale, and the trap that many an expert would have been fooled. They were ready to sell. Wilkins, who had done the promoting, had found a purchaser. The price was one hundred thousand.

A little after eight Wilkins came in, rubbing his hands and glowing with exultation. He stared in astonishment at his partner, in whose grim, white face there was none of the old cheery greeting.

"What in thunderation's up?" he cried. "Feeling bad, Roddy?"

For the next five minutes Wilkins only stared, struck speechless by what Rodney Stone was saying to him.

"I've cut it all," Rodney finished. "We haven't been clever. We're only a couple of thieves. I'm giving back every cent I have. Our partnership is ended. This big deal of ours is closed."

Wilkins's voice was almost fierce when he spoke. "You're a fool!" he exclaimed. "Cut it out if you wish, but don't pretend that you have the authority to carry me with you. Cut out this deal? Throw away a hundred thousand? You must be mad! I've hunted down a buyer. I've got him hard. He's mine—more mine in this instance than yours. Back down if you want to, but I'm going on. Why, do you know, you haven't given me your check for five thousand for a half share in the ore! Even that is mine!"

For the first time that morning a look of relief shot over Rodney's face.

"So it is!" he said. "And I'm glad. But I'm—"

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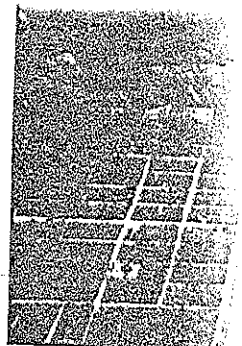
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"Rodney, dear Rodney—I don't care—I'm glad it happened—with him. You'll never have to pay it back, and we'll be so happy—happier than I've ever dreamed of being, even if we do start in poor. You've been honest and brave and a man, dear, and I know you'd pay this back—if it took a lifetime. But it wouldn't be fair to me, and you mustn't. Besides—you see—Uncle Geoffrey was making an investment for me. It was my money that bought Wilkins's mine!"

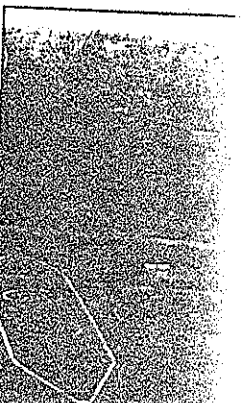
The Burden of Pensions.

NO SYSTEM of government pensions yet devised has fully justified itself. The frauds and impositions connected with our Civil War pensions are notorious, and in no other department of government is there such slackness in punishing offenders. The net result of the pension experiments of recent years is that those pension systems are best in which the beneficiary has made a contribution of money as well as of years of faithful service.

According to Dr. Ferdinand Friedensburg, who has lately retired as president of the senate in the Imperial German Insurance Office, workingmen's insurance in Germany has been far from a success. Not only has the system been abused by all manner of fraud, but its support has become a tremendous financial burden, without having afforded the relief promised, not having materially improved the condition of the working class. Between 1888 and 1902 the cost of indemnities rose from \$1,475,000 to \$38,775,000. Nor is this the end. The Essex Chamber of Commerce estimates that soon there will be a burden of over \$300,000,000 each year laid upon industrial activity, solely for purposes of social insurance. Every workman in the land feels this financial loss, and the general social unhappiness and unrest are greater than ever before.



A real birdseye view of the mine. In the foreground, at the extreme right, intersected by a clearly shown, despite the fact



The Heaton (England) aerodrome. The various airways are seen. In the foreground, the circular structure is the boiler house. The circle is made of concrete and is 300 feet in diameter. A bit more to the right is a highway tunnel.



The extreme western edge of Crossin's old Castle William, once a military camp and at the base are obsolete work. Immediately back of the main the post exchange. In the extreme right, the photograph was made high. The spray shield