

The Fight at Red Fork Creek

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

BILLY MORGAN, foreman of Thorpe's ranch, was half awake when the knock came at the door of his shack. Instinctively he reached for his gun, while his eyes were opening. Along the Arizona border midnight knocks at cabin doors were not welcome in this year of watchfulness and caution along the frontier.

A moment later, following a second knock, he heard Thorpe's voice outside. With his gun still in his hand he went to open the door, shuddering a little as he thought of the message that Thorpe might be bringing him. In the big ranch house a pistol shot away lay Thorpe's wife and the tiny bit of humanity that had come into the world that morning. Billy was thirty and had never loved a woman. At least, that was what he told himself. And yet, deep down in his heart, so deep down that no one had ever found the secret, he knew that he could have loved and perhaps did love this brown-haired, blue-eyed woman who looked to Thorpe as the one and greatest man in the whole world. Billy had left the light burning, and he saw that the ranch owner's face was white when he entered.

"How—is she?" he asked.

"Better, thank God!" said Thorpe, and he held out a hand that was cold and clammy when Billy took it.

"And—the kid?" whispered Billy.

"Fine!" replied Thorpe. He took off his hat and wiped his face. Billy noticed that his hand trembled, which was not like Thorpe.

"Look here, Jack, what's up?" he demanded. "Are you sick?"

"I was—five minutes ago," said Thorpe. "Listen! That's Rusty Smith's horse you hear out there. Rusty just came in from the Red Butte ranch to tell us that a big band of Apaches are going down the valley straight for MacCauley's. My God! you know what that means, Billy! They're going to strike at Mac because they know he's the weakest of the bunch. He's cleaned down to half a dozen men, and—there ain't—three—good fighters—among them."

He said no more, but Billy understood. Ten days before Esther Thorpe had gone over to visit her girl chum at the MacCauley ranch, twenty miles down the valley. Everything had appeared safe then. It was not thought that the Apaches would strike so far east. Billy was already dressing.

"We'll hike over and get her," he said cheerfully, though inside him his heart was pounding like an engine, for two-thirds of Thorpe's men were at a round-up ten miles in the opposite direction. "I'll start on ahead," he added, "and you can send word over for some of the boys to come on and meet us. I'll hit the crick bottom both ways. We'll have Essy back here for breakfast."

Thorpe's tense face relaxed a little at Billy's confidence. They went out together and saddled Billy's mare. As they passed close to the ranch house, Thorpe approached his wife's open window. Then he turned and called softly to Billy. Both looked in. The woman's pale, beautiful face was smiling at them. She looked wonderfully sweet and girlish and happy, her loose hair a shimmer of gold and brown in the lamp glow, her blue eyes bright with the starlight of motherhood; and Billy felt again, as he had felt a thousand times before, that strangling grip of a strange joy and a strange grief at his heart. For

see, the Indians are causing trouble, and your father wants you at home."

"Oh!"

In a flash he saw that she understood, even as the woman might have understood. But she said nothing more until they were riding off together.

"Why don't we take the valley trail, Billy-O?" she asked, calling him by the pet nickname she had given him. "Are they that near?"

"They're pretty near."

"And we might meet them?"

"We might."

"And we may meet them, mayn't we, Billy? Wouldn't it be fun—if nobody was hurt?—It would be a lot more exciting than playing Indian on horseback, like we've done."

"Yes, a lot more exciting," agreed Billy.

He caught her in profile as she cantared close at his side. She was bareheaded and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. Her heavy braid had come undone. Billy loved to see her shining curls blowing loose about her as they were doing now. More than once he had told her how pretty they were, and when he had last told her that, not so very long ago, she had cut off one of the prettiest of them and given it to him for "good luck." During the last week Billy had taken that curl from its hiding place in the cabin for at least a dozen times. He had worshiped it alone, had kissed it, and its warmth and sweetness had seemed that of the woman. For until this morning—until now—Esther had been only a child to him.

She turned suddenly and caught the look in his eyes. "It was the woman who looked at him, with pouting mouth, laughing eyes, and yet with a seriousness back of it all that made him tremble.

"If they did come, would you fight for me, Billy—fight real hard, like they do in books?"

Something in her words and voice made him clutch tighter at his carbine.

"Yes, I would, Essy. I'd fight harder than they do in books."

She laughed mischievously, and yet there was a tremble in the laugh.

"In books they—they die for—for—"

"For the girl one loves," finished Billy. "Well, I'd do that, Essy."

They had come to the top of the second ridge. The glow in Esther's face was like that of a wild flower. She looked on far ahead, searching the edge of the mountains and the bottom, lighted now by the first red glow of the sun. They had stopped their horses, and she looked again at Billy. Billy had turned in his saddle and was staring behind.

"Do you know, Billy," she said, "I wish I could see them, all in paint and war feathers, and riding like you've told me they ride. I wish"—and there was a woman's sweet coquetry in her voice—"I wish they'd come riding down the mountain there, so you could fight for me just like they do in books!"

Billy turned his face slowly to her, and it was whiter than death.

"Good God, little girl, your wish is coming true!" he said, and pointed behind. "Look there!"

Less than half a mile away a score of horsemen were heading swiftly down upon them. Even at that distance they could see the half-naked bodies and feathered heads of the Indians. Billy threw back the breach of his carbine with a sharp click.

the earth. In another instant he was out of his saddle. Esther had dragged herself from the stirrups and was swaying on her feet when Billy caught her in his arms. Even as he held her close to him, thanking God that she was unharmed, the fallen horse struggled to one foreknee, and fell back with a groan. In that futile effort to rise Billy saw that its leg was broken. He uttered no word, but swung Esther up behind his own saddle. Then he cried, tremblingly, "Hold tight—little sweetheart. We'll beat them yet!"

Her arms were about his neck. He felt the warmth of her sweet face against him. Her soft curls clustered about his shoulders and blew over his lips. He knew—now. After all he had only loved the woman because the girl was a child. But now—it was different.

"We'll beat them!" he cried again.

"We'll beat them, Billy-O!" repeated the girl, and something warm and soft and thrilling pressed for an instant against his cheek. He knew that she had kissed him, and as there came from far behind the savage yell of their pursuers Billy's lungs cleared themselves in one wild whoop of defiance.

From the beginning of that hopeless flight Billy knew what he must do. The Indians would overtake them within half an hour at the longest, and in that time there was no hope of Thorpe's men appearing. Billy figured that they were just about leaving the ranch, sixteen miles away. A mile ahead of them the mountain swung in close to the creek, which ran through a deep chasm at that point. Here he would dismount and hold back the Indians while Esther rode on alone. If he could fight them off for fifteen minutes Esther would be safe. He told her this, while the yells of their pursuers came louder and clearer behind them. Esther's arms tightened about his neck.

"I'm not going to leave you, Billy—never, never. NEVER!" she said, her lips close to his ear. "Let me take the revolver. I can shoot!"

"It's your one chance, Essy," he persisted. "You've got to ride on alone."

"And you, Billy—you—you—YOU?"

"I'll lick the stuffin' out of them while you're going, Essy."

"You can't!" she cried almost fiercely. "I know what you're planning to do, Billy. You mean to hold them back while I get a start. But you can't do it long. They'll kill you. I WON'T GO!"

An inspiration came to him then. He lied hopelessly.

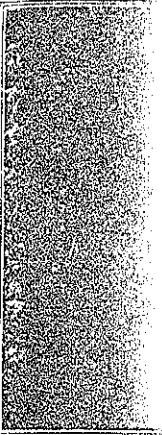
"No, I won't die—if you hurry, Essy. The boys must be pretty near us now. I'm sending you to hurry 'em up. I can hold the Indians back for an hour in that narrow place. If you don't go—if you WON'T go—there's no hope for either of us. But if you will, and ride hard, you can save us both. There's the place—just ahead. My God, you'll go, won't you, dear? You'll ride hard—as hard as you can, and tell the boys that I'm here, fighting 'em back? You'll do that—for me—won't you?"

"Billy—you're—you're not lying—to me?"

"God strike me dead if I am!"

"Then—I'll go—and I'll ride hard, Billy. And if you've lied—and they kill you—"

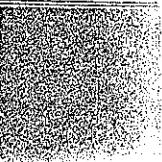
Wood



A hunting lion



Preparing



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For three hours Billy rode into the east. Dawn was breaking when he looked down from the last range upon MacCauley's ranch and he gave a deep breath of relief when he saw that all was right. Fifteen minutes later he was breaking the news to MacCauley.

"If they make an attack this morning it will be some time within the next hour," said Billy. "I'd like to stay, Mac, but I've got to get away with Easy. I've promised that. Will you get her up—and give us a couple of fresh horses?"

Billy was alone when Esther ran in to meet him. A little over two years before, when Billy had first come to the Thorpe ranch, he had thought that he had never seen a more beautiful creature than Esther. In two years she had grown to look wonderfully like the woman. Her eyes were bluer and filled a little more with the sunlight of laughter, and there was a shade more of gold in the lovely hair that rippled about her pretty face in a way that always made Billy think of a marvelous painting he had once seen before he came West.

"You—you want me home?" she asked, and Billy could see that her heart was breaking with fear. "Is—mother—"

"Mother just wants you to come home and take a look at little brother," he laughed softly; and suddenly, as he looked at her, he saw again the sweet face of Thorpe's wife, the blue of her eyes, the gold and brown of her shining hair. And for a strange, wonderful moment Esther's eyes were the eyes of a woman, and he felt his heart thrill at a thought that had never entered it before. They looked at him steadily.

"You're sure—that's all—Billy?"

"That's mostly it," assured Billy. "Then, you

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"Billy, Billy, Billy—oh, I'm so sorry—so sorry I said that—"

His strong, white teeth gleamed in a smile and there was a look in his face she had never seen there before. He was the old, fighting Billy—the Billy men had feared on the other side of the range in the gun-record days before he had come under the influence of a good and beautiful woman.

"Ride, and ride hard, little girl," he urged. "We've got to beat them out!" They started in a gallop down the slope and had almost reached level ground when Esther's mount stumbled. Billy swung his head in time to see both horse and rider crash to

A Commencement Romance.

I SAW her on Commencement Day
All gowned in girlish white,
With roses on her maiden breast
And in her tresses bright.
I met her later at the ball,
And we together danced,—
I hung upon her every look,
Her lightest word, entranced.

I took her in my motor-car
Next morning for a spin,
And breathed to her my fond desire
Her heart and hand to win.
But when I clasped her fingers small,
She drew her hand away,
And coyly murmured, "I'm engaged
To old Professor Gray."

—MINNIE IRVING.

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"God strike me dead if I am!"

"Then—I'll go—and I'll ride hard, Billy. And if you've lied—and they kill you—"

He had pulled in his horse, and now sprang to the ground.

"Hurry, Essy—hurry—if you care anything—about me," he pleaded.

She reached down and took his head in her arms. "I'll hurry, Billy-O," she whispered, "and I'll never, never, never love any other man in all my life like I love you!"

In another moment she was gone, and Billy dropped behind the rocks.

Billy knew how hopeless the whole thing was. Esther had gone scarcely three hundred yards when his first shot rang out and urged her on still more fiercely toward the help which he had told her was only a little way ahead. The Indians had not expected this, and as one of their horses went down with a bullet that had fallen too low for its rider they swung rapidly in toward the mountain. Billy leaped high up on one of the rocks and fired three times in plain view. He wanted them, to know that he was dismounted, and his ruse worked. The Indians sprang from their horses and began to crawl up among the rocks. He saw a head, and fired. Half a dozen shots replied from different quarters, and spat among the stones about him. Close to the mountain there was a narrow break, and suddenly one of the Indians broke across this like a deer, making for the higher cover. Billy stopped him midway with a single shot. Another followed, and a third shot sent him almost across the body of the first. Billy laughed, and reloaded. It was an unpleasant, hopeless sort of a laugh, for he saw that the redskins were doing what he had figured they would do. They were sneaking up the mountain. He changed his position, drawing back still deeper among the rocks and nearer to the edge of the creek chasm. He looked at his watch. Esther had been gone seven minutes. He placed the timepiece face up on a stone and waited. Another minute—two—three—five passed, and he saw nothing. Then, so close ahead

(Continued on page 51)

WHEN the Great White men, with fat faces, and I w...
By the time I had...
creatures of en...
hat-house grow...
sprouting up li...
had, no doubt, th...
civilization he...
age in no wise i...
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today would be...
peradoes than i...
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qualities are m...
qualities are de...
James Creech...
only hope of a...
power rests in u...

