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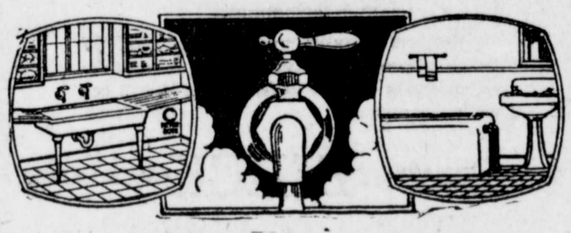
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WHY INTEREST WANED

By JACK BROWNING

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IT WAS not a long bench; and two men and a widow exceeded its capacity by about one man. The partners smiled nervously and pulled at their whiskers. "If you was either of you alone," the widow tittered, "I ain't sure I'd let you set by me on this narrow bench."

"Oh, we wouldn't hurt you!" Peter dared to protest.

"Course not!" Andy breathlessly assured her.

"Well," the widow replied, wisely, "men are to be trusted, but a man ain't. What I came up to see you about, though, is this. The Grays are going to move back East, as you've maybe heard, and Mrs. Gray give me these two hens and these two settings of eggs." She pointed to the hens which lay, legs tied, near by, then let her eyes droop to the basket of eggs at her feet. "They're good setters, Mrs. Gray says, and she's been careful with the eggs. And now," the widow went on, "I want you to take care of my hens while I'm gone. Just make 'em a nest—each one in a box by itself so's they won't fight—and your table scraps 'll be feed enough."

"And I'll tell you what we'll do—something to make it kind of interesting. Each one of you take a hen, and I'll bring a prize to the one that's got the most chicks when I get back—something nice!"

By lantern light the partners drew from the preciously few wisps of straw in their bunk and made nests for the hens; and they stayed up late, watching anxiously even after the hens had shown every sign of contentment. With good-humored banter, each already claiming the prize, they went finally to bed.

After breakfast on the morrow came the first hitch—the division of the table scraps. A last crust in a famine camp, a last drop under a desert sun, a lucky strike—simple things to share, these; but a plump, bright-eyed widow—not so simple, she. Still, this first morning, their inborn fairness and long-tried friendship made a jest even of this trying situation.

That evening, supper finished, the division was made in silence. Afterwards, Peter, instead of sitting down with his pipe, began to drive palings about his hen's nesting box.

"We got to have fair play—both of us wants it," he explained, apologetically, in reply to Andy's look of inquiry. "Why, I've heard tell of one hen stealing eggs from another—chicks, too. And I don't want my hen snouging from yours, and you don't want your hen snouging from mine—do we?"

"That's right," Andy agreed. "We'll just make two coops and let the hens go it alone." Then he began to drive palings.

By employing tact and jest, the partners half hid the jealous intent of the osier wall; but they could not quite escape the pricking realization that for the first time in their long intimacy they had permitted a division of their interests; that, in short, a fence had been raised between them.

The days passed. The coops were finished, had received the final touches; but from the fence between there rose and extended, higher and farther, a shadowy projection which, lengthening, turning, twisting with impish resistlessness, gradually divided the table, the bench, the bunk, the trail to the prospect, the prospect itself. The scraps were apportioned in silence, but it was by no means the silence of indifference. Each man was fairly starving himself in order that his hen might eat. And to these daily occasions, standardized by their regularity, were added sporadic incidents that made silence an achievement.

For example, when Andy came up from camp one day with a small sack of wheat, which his cunning and a telegram had brought from Cheyenne, indignant words crowded even to Peter's whiskers. But he restrained himself and ordered a larger sack of wheat and a package of ground bone. In such ways as this the shadowy projection of the fence was made higher, longer, blacker.

On the morning of the twenty-first day of the dominion of the hens, the partners looked each into his own coop and listened anxiously; but except for the solemn hens, there was no sign of life. So they packed their lunch and toiled as usual up to their hole in the mountain of lures.

The prospect, almost a mine now, showed extraordinary promise this day; the partners worked without zeal. While the pay streak widened, their thoughts turned to the crisis below; while their drills pierced the shell of the mountain, perhaps the tap of a fingernail there below would free a too frail chick—and win the prize. Long before the usual hour they quit by tacit consent and hurried down to the cabin.

During the remainder of the afternoon they hung over their hens, each brought by anxiety to an open disregard for the eyes of the other. First one and then the other would become rigid and breathless when, on his side of the fence, a fluffy ball part way protruded from maternal feathers and timid yeeps were answered by reassuring clucks; then would wilt despairingly when the yeeps and clucks were echoed beyond the fence. Yet neither dared to disturb his hen long enough to make a count; and neither hen was obliging enough to move from its nest and show the complete result of its weeks' patience. The partners went finally to bed; and, since the same pair of blankets covered them, they were compelled to maintain a simulation of sleep even at the expense of straining and breaking muscles.

On the morrow they rose with great deliberation, extended the deliberation through breakfast, and reinforced it with absolute unconcern when they went out to feed the hens.

The hens were scratching importantly, and, cluttering about each, as much as if they had spent a year instead of a night in the willow compound, were nine chicks. Each nest held four dismal eggs.

"Looks like a tie," Peter observed uninterestedly. And Andy, in the same tone, replied, "Uh-huh."

"Better settle it now," Peter went on indifferently, "that the winner'll be the one that's got the most when the widow gets back—huh?" And Andy, equally indifferent, replied, "I reckon."

So ended the weeks of hatching and began the weeks of brooding. With every manner of zeal lavished on them, the chicks prospered and grew fat. But no word came from the widow.

By and by the coops could no longer hold the chicks; they feathered their wings and escaped to the freedom of the yard. The partners viewed these early escapes with all the trepidation of a mother on discovering her toddler's first attempts streetward; but by and by they overcame their misgivings, deciding that the chicks, in spite of danger from prowlers, must have exercise. There seemed little likelihood that the two broods would become mixed, for each collected at twilight in its own coop; and besides, each man was confident that he could sort his own chicks to the last feather—with the possible exception of two white cockerels. The likeness of these made positive identification out of the question, but it also made a possible interchange of no consequence.

So the chicks grew to young chickenhood, fine rewards for patient care. But one evening as the partners approached the cabin at the close of day, they stopped abruptly, and Peter raised his voice hoarsely in rage and dismay. At his feet lay a speckled pullet, dead. Andy said nothing; it was Peter's pullet.

A step farther on, however, came Andy's turn. His black cockerel, in whose trim tail and pink suggestion of a comb he had taken much pride, lay at his feet, like Peter's pullet, dead. As hoarsely as Peter, he raised his voice. Then Peter a second time; and Andy again.

The roof poles of the cabin projected beyond the sod covering; and on these roosts of refuge they found all that were left. Near the top they saw Andy's hen and a pullet; lower down Peter's hen and a pullet; in between was a white cockerel.

From the cockerel to each other, back to the cockerel, and then to each other again, the partners turned many a stern look. But in his heart neither could say, "It is mine." It was a tense moment; but though lips moved, the inborn fairness of each withheld an open-spoken claim.

"Well," said Peter, at last, "we'll leave it to the hens." And Andy agreed.

This plan, however, failed to work out. As twilight thickened in the gulch, the hens, each with its pullet, fluttered down to their coops and in pairs went to roost. But the white cockerel, perhaps prematurely advanced by the disaster to full chickenhood, clung to its pole. In the early morning, as if to prove that the terrors of night had in no wise weakened its resolve to begin a new life of solitary endeavor, it attempted its first crow. During the day it condescended to scratch with the others; but at twilight it returned to its high perch.

As this happened night after night, the partners fell more and more into moody silence. They interrupted oftener and oftener the steady routine of their days and sought with increasing frequency the fount of forgetfulness in the camp below. Returning late from these visits, they looked invariably up to the roof pole and invariably the white cockerel was there.

One evening as they stood at the bar, side by side from force of habit, but in reality far, far apart, a voice emerged from a circle behind them and came to their ears.

"Yes," said the voice, "I seen the widow in Cheyenne—just before she started for Kansas on her honeymoon. Looked chipper as a girl. Some old sweetheart, I heard tell—some feller she knowed before her first husband. They run together accidental in Cheyenne, and—"

But the rest was left for the circle. The partners departed and swung off through the night toward their cabin, neither speaking. As they came up, both, from force of habit, looked toward the cockerel. Then Peter spoke:

"Say, Andy, there's one way to settle it."

"Uh-huh," Andy replied. "You build a fire while I cut his head off."

So, at midnight, the partners sat down to fried chicken. And the shadowy projection of the fence between had disappeared.

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