

A Dead City

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Illustration:

Red Leary's gang

When the special train was at Blue Earth, in Montana, among the high mountains, there came to Jimmy Grayson an appeal, compounded of pathos and despair, that he could not resist. It was from the citizens of Crow's Wing, forty miles deeper into the yet higher and steeper mountains, and they recounted, in mournful words, how no candidate ever came to see them; all passed them by as either too few or too difficult, and they had never yet listened to the spell of oratory; of course they did not expect the nominee of a great party for the

Presidency of the United States to make the hard trip and speak to them, when even the little fellows ignored them; nevertheless, they wished to inform him in writing that they were alive, and on the map at least they made as big a dot as either Helena or Butte.

The Candidate smiled when he read the letter. The tone of it moved him. Moreover, he was not deficient in policy—no man who rises is—and while Crow's Wing had but few votes, Montana was close, and a single State might decide the Union.

„These people at Crow's Wing do not expect me, but I shall go to them,“ he said to his train.

„Why, it's a full day's journey and more, over the roughest and rockiest road in America,“ said Mr. Curtis, the State Senator from Wyoming, who was still with them.

„I shall go,“ said Jimmy Grayson, decisively. „There is a break here in our schedule, and this trip will fit in very nicely.“

The others were against it, but they said nothing more in opposition, knowing that it would be of no avail. Obliging, generous, and soft-hearted, the Candidate nevertheless had a temper of steel, when his mind was made up, and the others had learned not to oppose it. But all shunned the journey with him to Crow's Wing except Harley and Mr. Herbert Heathcote, a National Committeeman from an Eastern State.

The going of Harley with the Candidate was taken as a matter of course by everybody. Silent, tactful, and strong he had grown almost imperceptibly into a confidential relationship with the nominee, and Jimmy Grayson himself did not realize how much he relied upon the quiet man who could not make a speech, but who knew the American people so well and who was so ready of resource. As for Mr. Heathcote, being an Eastern man, he wished to see the West in all its aspects.

They started at daybreak, guided by a taciturn mountain man, Jim Jones, called simply Jim for the sake of brevity, and, the hour being so early, but few were present to see them ride up the hanging slope and into the mighty wilderness.

But it was a glorious dawn. The young sun was gilding the sea of crags and crests with burnished gold, and the air had the sparkle of youth. Mr. Heathcote threw back his slightly narrow chest, and drawing three deep breaths of just the same length, he said, „I would not miss this trip for, a thousand dollars!“

Harley said nothing, but he too looked out upon the morning world with a kindling eye. Far below them was a narrow valley, a faint green line down the centre showing where the little river ran, with the irrigated farms on either side, like beads on a string. Above them towered the peaks, white with everlasting snow.

„A fine day for our ride.“ said the Candidate to Jim.

„Looks like it now, though I never gamble on mountain weather,“ replied the taciturn man.

But the promise held good for a long time, the sun still shining, and the winds coming fresh and brisk along the crests and ridges. The trail wound about the slopes and steadily ascended. Vegetation ceased and before them stretched the bare rocks. Harley knew very well now that only the sunshine saved them from grimness and desolation. The loneliness became oppressive. It was the wilderness

in reality as well as seeming; nowhere did they see a miner's hut or a hunter's cabin; only nature in her most savage form.

The little group of horsemen were silent. The Candidate's head was bowed and his brow bent. Clearly he was immersed in thought. Mr. Heathcote, unused to such arduous journeys, leaned forward in his saddle in a state of semiexhaustion. Harley said at last to the guide, „A wild country, one of the wildest, I think, that I ever saw.“

„Yes, a wild country and a bad 'un too,“ responded Jim. „See off there to the left.“

He pointed to a maze of bare and rocky ridges, and when he saw that Harley's gaze was following his long forefinger he continued:

„I say it's a bad 'un because over there Red Perkins and his gang of horse thieves, outlaws, and cutthroats used to have their hiding-place. It's a tangled up stretch o' mountain, so wild, so rocky, and so full of caves that they could have hid there till Judgment-day from all Montana. Yes, that's where they used to hang out.“

„Used to?“

„Yes, 'cause I ain't heard much uv them fur some time. They came down in the valley and tried to stampede them new blooded horses from Kentucky on Sifton's ranch, but Sifton and his men were waitin', and when the smoke cleared away most uv the gang was wiped out. Red and two or three uv his fellers got away, but I ain't heard uv 'em since. Guess they've scattered.“

„Wisest thing they could do,“ said Harley.

The guide made no answer, and they plodded on in silence until about two o'clock in the afternoon, when they stopped in a little cove to eat luncheon and refresh their horses.

It was the first grateful spot that they had seen in hours. A brook fed by the snows above formed a pool in the hollow, and then, overflowing it, dropped down the mountain wall. But in this sheltered nook and around the life-giving water green grass was growing, and there was a rim of goodly trees. The horses, when their riders dismounted, grazed eagerly, and the men themselves lay upon the grass and ate with deep content.

„Shall we reach Crow's Wing by dark?“ asked the Candidate of the guide.

Jim had risen, and, standing at the edge of the cove, was gazing out over the rolling sea of mountains. Harley noticed a troubled look on his face.

„If things go right we kin,“ he replied: „bit I ain't shore that things will go right.“

„What do you mean?“

„Do you see that brown spot down there in the southwest just a-top the hills? Wa'al it's a cloud, an' it's comin' this way. Clouds, you know, always hev somethin' in 'em.“

„That is to say, we shall have rain,“ said the Candidate. „Let it come. We have been rained on too often to mind such a little thing, eh, Harley?“

The correspondent nodded.

„I don't think it'll be rain,“ said the guide. „We are so high up here that more'n likely it'll be snow. An' when there's a snowstorm in the mountains you can't go climbin' along the side o' cliffs.“

The others too now looked grave. They had not foreseen such a difficulty, but the guide came to their relief with more cheering words; after all, the cloud might not continue to grow, „An‘ it ain‘t worth while to holler afore we‘re hit.“

This seemed sound philosophy to the others, and dismissing their cares, they started again, much refreshed by their stop in the little cove. The road now grew rougher, the guide leading and the rest following in single file. By and by their cares returned. Harley glanced toward the southwest and saw there the same cloud, but now much bigger, blacker, and more threatening. The sunshine was gone and the wrinkled surface of the mountains was gray and sombre. The air had grown cold, and down among the clefts there was a weird, moaning wind. Harley glanced at the guide and noticed that his face was now decidedly anxious. But the correspondent said nothing. Part of his strength lay in his ability to wait, and he knew that the guide would speak in good time.

Another hour passed and the air grew darker and colder. Then Jim stopped.

„Gentlemen,“ he said, „there‘s a snowstorm comin‘ soon. I didn‘t expect one so early even on the mountains, but it‘s comin‘ anyhow, an‘ if we keep on for Crow‘s Wing they‘ll have to dig our bones out o‘ the meltin‘ drifts next summer. We‘ve got to make for Queen City.“

„Queen City!“ exclaimed Mr. Heathcote. „I didn‘t know there was another town anywhere near here.“

„She‘s a-standin‘ all the same.“ replied the guide, brusquely, „an‘ I wouldn‘t never hev started on the trip to Crow‘s Wing if there hadn‘t been such a stoppin‘-place betwixt an‘ between, in case o‘ trouble with the weather. An‘ let me whisper to you, Queen City‘s quite a sizable place. We‘ll pass the night there. It‘s got a fine hotel, the finest an‘ biggest in the mountains.“

He looked grimly at Mr. Heathcote, as much as to say, „Ask me as much more as you please, but I‘ll answer you nothing.“

Something cold and damp touched Harley‘s cheek. He looked up, and another flake of snow, descending softly, settled upon his face. The clouds rolled over them, heavy and dark, and shut out all the mountains save a little island where they stood. The snow, following the first few flakes, fell softly but rapidly.

„It‘s Queen City, or moulderin‘ in the drifts till next summer!“ cried Jim, and he turned his horse into a side path. The others followed without a word, willing to accept his guidance through the greatest danger they had yet faced in an arduous campaign. Despite the danger, which he knew to be heavy and pressing, Harley‘s curiosity was aroused, and he wished to ask more of Queen City, but the saturnine face of the guide was not inviting. Nevertheless, he risked one question.

Illustration:

Two miles to go

„How far is this place, Queen City?“ he asked.

„‘Bout two miles,“ replied Jim, with what seemed to Harley a derisive grin, „an‘ it‘s tarnal lucky for us that it‘s so near.“

Harley said no more, but he was satisfied with nothing in the guide‘s reply save the fact that the town was only two miles away; any shelter would be welcome, because he saw now that a snowstorm on the wild mountains was a terrible thing.

The guide led on, Jimmy Grayson with bent head followed; Mr. Heathcote, shrunk in his saddle, came next, and Harley, who had dropped back, brought up the rear. Now and then the vast veil of snow parted before the wind, as if cleft down the centre by a sword-blade, and the correspondent looked upon a grand and awful sight. Before him were all the peaks and ridges rising in white cones and pillars against the cloudy sky, and the effect was of distance and sublimity. From the clefts and ravines came a desolate moaning. Harley felt that he was much nearer to the eternal here than he could ever be in the plains. Then the rent veil would close again, and he saw only his three comrades and the rocks twenty feet away.

They turned around the base of a cliff, rising hundreds of feet above them, and Harley caught the dull red glare of brick walls showing through the falling snow. He was ready to raise a shout of joy. This he knew was Queen City, lying snugly in its wide valley. There was the typical, single mountain street, with its row of buildings on either side; the big one near-by was certainly the hotel and the other big one farther on was as certainly the opera-house. But nobody was in the streets, and the whole town was dark; not a light appeared at a single window, although the night had now come.

Harley rode up by the side of the guide.

„The place looks lonesome,“ he said.

„Maybe they’ve all gone to bed; there ain’t anythin’ here to keep ‘em awake,“ replied the guide, with the old puzzling and derisive smile.

Harley turned coldly away. He did not like for any one to make fun of him, and that he saw clearly was the guide’s intention. Jimmy Grayson was still thinking of things far away, and Mr. Heathcote, chilled and shrunk, seemed to have lost the power of speech.

The guide rode slowly toward the large brick building that Harley took to be the hotel, and at that moment the snow slackened for a little while; the last rays of the setting sun struck upon the brick walls and gilded them with red tracery; some panes of glass gave back the ruddy glare, but mostly the windows were bare and empty, like eyeless sockets. Harley looked farther, and all the other buildings—the opera-house, the stoves, and the residences—were the same, desolate and decaying. About the place were snow-covered heaps, evidently the refuse of mining operations, but they saw no human being.

The effect upon all save the guide was startling. Harley saw the look of chilled wonder grow on Jimmy Grayson’s face. Mr. Heathcote raised himself in his saddle and stared, uncomprehending. Harley had been deep in the desert, but never before had he seen such desolation and ruin, because here was the body, but all life had gone from it. He felt as one alone with ghosts. The guide laughed dryly.

„You guessed it,“ he said, looking at Harley. „It’s a dead city. Queen City has been as dead as Adam these half-dozen years. When the mines played out it died; there was no earthly use for Queen City any longer, and by and by everybody went away. But I’ve seen the old town when it was alive! Five thousand people here. Money a-flowin’; drinks passin’ over the counter one way and the coin the other, the gamblin’-houses an’ the theatre chock-full, an’ women, any kind you please. But there ain’t a soul left now.“

The snow thinned still more, and the buildings rose before them, gaunt and grim.

„We'll stop to-night at the Grand Hotel—that is, if they ain't too much crowded,“ said the guide, who had had his little joke, and who now wished to serve his employers as best he could. „But first we'll take the horses into the dinin'-room; nobody will object, I've done it afore.“

He rode toward a side door, but over the main entrance Harley saw in tessellated letters the words „Grand Hotel“, and he tried to shake off the feeling of weirdness that it gave him.

The door to the dining-room, which was almost level with the earth, was gone, and with some driving the horses were persuaded to enter. They were tethered there, sheltered from the storm, and when they moved their feet rumbled hollowly on the wooden floor. The Candidate and his two friends, driven by the same impulse, turned back into the snow and re-entered the house by the front door.

They passed into a wide hall, and at the far end they saw the clerk's desk. Lying upon the desk were some fragments of paper fastened to a chain, and Harley knew that it was what was left of the hotel register. It spoke so vividly of both life and death that the three stopped.

„Would you like to register, Mr. Grayson?“ asked Harley, wishing to relieve the tension.

The Candidate laughed mirthlessly.

„Not to-night, Harley,“ he said, „but gloomy as the place is we ought to be thankful that we have found it. See how the storm is rising.“

The snow drove in at the unsheltered windows, and a long whine arose as the wind whirled around the old house. The guide came in with cheerful bustle and stamp of feet.

„Don't linger here, gentlemen,“ he said. „The house is yours; come into the parlor. We've had a piece of luck. Now and then a lone tramp or a miner seeks shelter in this town, just as we have done; they come mostly to the hotel, and some feller who gathered up wood failed to burn it all. I'll have a fire in the parlor in five minutes, and then we can ring for hot drinks and a warm dinner. I'll take straight whiskey, an' after that I ain't partic'lar whether I get patty-de-foy-graw or hummin'-bird tongues.“

His good humor was infectious, and they were thankful too for the shelter, desolate though the place was. All the wood had been stripped away except the floors, and the brick walls were bare. In the great parlor they had nothing to sit on save their saddles, but it was a noble apartment, many feet square, built for a time when there was life in Queen City.

„I've heard the Governor of Montana speak to more than two hundred people in this very room.“ said Jim, reminiscently. „He was to have spoke in the public square, but snow come up, an' Bill Fosdick, who run the hotel and run her wide open, invited 'em all right in here, an' they come.“

Harley could well believe it, knowing, as he did, the miners and the mountains and by report early Montana.

At one end of the room was an immense grate, and in this Jim heaped the wood so generously left by the unknown tramp or miner, igniting it with a ready match.

The ruddy blaze leaped upward and threw generous shadows on the floor. The men, sitting close to it, felt the grateful warmth and were content.

„An old hand travellin' in the mountains always provides for a snowy day,“ said the guide, and he took from his saddle-bags much food and a large bottle.

They drank a little and ate heartily. The last touch of cold departed, and the fire still sparkled with good cheer, casting its comforting shadows across the stained floor.

„I've brought in the horse blankets,“ said the guide, „an' with them under us, our overcoats over us, an' the fire afore us we ought to sleep here as snug an' as warm as a beaver in its house.“

Harley walked to the window and looked out. The night was black, save for the driving snow, and when he glanced back at the room it seemed a very haven of delight. But the strangeness of their situation, the weird effect of the dead city, with the ghost-like shapes of its houses showing through the snow, was upon his nerves, and he did not feel sleepy.

Muttering some excuse to the others he went into the hall. It was dark, and a gust of cold air from the open window at the end struck him in the face. At the same moment Harley saw what he took to be a light farther down the hall, but when he looked again it was gone.

It might be a delusion, but the matter troubled him; if a lone tramp or miner were in the building he wished to know. Any stranger would have a right in the hotel, but there was comradeship and welcome in Jimmy Grayson's party.

Harley's instinct said that all was not right, and taking off his boots he crept down the hall and among the cross halls with noiseless feet. He did not see the light again, but he heard in another room the hum of voices, softened so that they might not reach anyone save those for whom they were intended. But they reached Harley, crouching just behind the edge of the door, and, hearing, he shuddered. A great danger threatened the nominee for the Presidency of the United States. Such a thing as the present had never before happened in the history of the country.

The door was still on its hinges, and it was still slightly ajar. Harley, peeping through the crack, saw the faint light from the window, saw the five occupants of the room, and because the man who did the talking and who showed himself so evidently the leader had red hair he knew him instinctively. It was Red Leary and the remnant of his gang, not scattered to the winds of the West, as Jim and everyone else had thought, but here in Montana in their old haunts. And Harley, listening to their talk, measured the extent of their knowledge, which was far too much; they knew who Jimmy Grayson was, they had known of his departure from Blue Earth, and they had followed him here; presently they would take him away and the whole world would be thrilled. No such prize had ever fallen into the hands of robbers in America, and it would be worth a million to them.

Harley was in a chill as he listened, and then his professional instinct leaped up. What a tremendous piece of news the kidnapping and holding of Jimmy Grayson for ransom would be! And he alone—if he survived—would have it. But it was only a momentary thrill; above it and beyond it swelled his sense of comradeship and duty and of devotion to the man whom he had come to regard as his chief. The Candidate must be saved!

But Harley, thinking his hardest, could not think how. There were five men well armed in the room before him; the guide probably had a pistol, but he had none, and he was sure that Jimmy Grayson and Mr. Heathcote were without them. He paused there a long time, undecided, and at last he crept down the hall again and toward the great parlor. Then he put on his boots, re-entered the room, and spoke in a low voice to his comrades.

The guide's fighting blood was on fire at once. „I've a revolver,“ he said; „we kin barricade the room and hold them off. There are but two windows here, opening out on the snow, but they are so high they can hardly reach 'em with their hands. We kin make a good fight of it.“

„No,“ said Jimmy Grayson, „there's not a shot to be fired, because I've a better plan. How long do you think it will be before they come for me, Harley?“

„About fifteen minutes I should say, at least that is what I gathered from their talk.“

„And they have not examined the building or the town?“

„No, they merely came down the trail behind us and slipped into that room, waiting their chance.“

„Very good. Jim, you told me a while ago that the Governor of Montana once spoke to two hundred people in this room; it was a fortunate remark of yours, because I shall speak to as many people to-night in this same room. Shut the door there, put the saddles before it, and then build the fire as high as possible.“

A Desperate Expedient

The Candidate's voice was sharp, decisive, and full of command. The born leader of men was asserting himself, and the guide, without pausing to reason, hastened to obey. He shut the door, put the saddles before it, and heaped upon the fire all the remaining wood, except a stump, reserved by Jimmy Grayson's express command. The fire leaped higher and the room was brilliantly lighted.

Jimmy Grayson stood by, erect, calm, and grave.

„Now, gentlemen,“ he said, „you are a crowd, come from Crow's Wing to meet me here and to hear what I have to say. I trust that you will like it, and indicate your liking by your applause.“

The stump was placed in the middle of the floor, and Jimmy Grayson stepped upon it. His face at that height was visible through the window to anyone outside, although the others would be hidden. Just as he took his place Harley thought he heard the soft crunch of a footstep on the snow beneath the window. He felt a burning curiosity to rise and look out. but he restrained it and did not move. The guide was staring at the Candidate in open-mouthed amazement, but he too did not speak. A few big white flakes drove in at the open window, but they did not reach the men before the fire that blazed so brightly. Harley again thought he heard the soft shuffle of footsteps on the snow outside, but then the burning wood crackled merrily and Jimmy Grayson was about to speak.

The Great Speech

„Gentlemen of Crow’s Wing,“ said the Candidate, in his full, penetrating voice that the empty old building gave back in many an echo, „it is indeed a pleasure to me to meet you here. The circumstances, the situation are such as to inspire any man who has been so honored. I should like to have seen your little town, the home of brave and honest men, nestling as it does among these mighty mountains and far from the rest of the world, but strong and self-reliant. I appreciate too your kindness and your thought for me. Seeing the advance of the storm and knowing its dangers, you have come to meet me in this place, once so full of life. I find something singularly appealing and pathetic in this. Once again, if only for a brief space, Queen City shall ring with human voices and the human tread.“

The Candidate paused a moment, as if the end of a rounded period had come and he were gathering strength for another. Then suddenly arose a mighty chorus of applause. It was Harley, Heathcote, and Jim, and their act was spontaneous, the inspiration of the moment, drawn from Jimmy Grayson’s own inspiration. The guide beat upon the floor with both hands and both feet, and the other two were not less active. Moreover, the guide opened his mouth and let forth a yell, rapid, cumulative, and so full of volume that it sounded like the whoop of at least a half-dozen men. The room resounded with the applause, and it thundered down the halls of the great empty building. When it died, Harley, listening again intently heard once more the crush of feet on the snow outside, but now it was a rapid movement, as if of surprise. But the sound came to him only a moment, because the Candidate was speaking once more and he was worth hearing.

As an orator Jimmy Grayson was always good, but sometimes he was better than at other times, and to-night was one of his best times. The audience from Crow’s Wing, the consideration they had shown in meeting him here in the dead city, and the wildness of the night outside seemed to inspire him. He showed the greatest familiarity with the life of the mountains and the needs of the miners; he was one of them, he sympathized with them, he entered their homes, and if he could he would make their lives brighter.

Never had the Candidate spoken to a more appreciative audience. With foot and hand and voice it thundered its applause; the building echoed with it, and all the time the fire burned higher and higher, and the merry crackling of the wood was a minor note in the chorus of applause. But Jimmy Grayson’s own voice was like an organ, every key of which he played, it expressed every human emotion; full and swelling it rose above the applause, and Harley, watching his expressive face, saw that he felt these emotions. Once he believed that the Candidate, carried away by his own feelings, had become oblivious of time and place and thought now only of the troubles and needs of the mountain men.

The Enemy Routed

Harley’s attention turned once more to the windows. He thought what a lucky chance it was that no one standing on the ground outside was high enough to look through them into the room. He blessed the unknown builder, and then he tried to hear that familiar shuffle on the snow, but he did not hear it again.

Jimmy Grayson spoke on and on, and the applause kept pace, until at last the guide slipped quietly from the room. When he returned a quarter of an hour later

the Candidate was still speaking, but Jim gave him a signal look and he stopped abruptly.

„They are gone,“ said Jim. „They must have been gone a full hour. The snow has stopped, and I guess they are at least ten miles from here, runnin‘ for their lives. They knew that if the men of Crow’s Wing put hands on ‘em they’d be hangin‘ from a limb ten minutes after.“

Jimmy Grayson sank down on the stump, exhausted, and wiped his hot face.

„Say, Mr. Harley,“ whispered the guide to the correspondent, „I’ve heard some great speeches in my time, but to-night’s was the greatest.“

The Candidate spoke the next day at Crow’s Wing, and his audience was delighted. But Jim was right. The speech was not as great as the one he made at Queen City.

