

THE LIBERAL SHORT STORY

GUNS

By Gertrude Gordon

Time had turned back fifty years for Porterville. Its smooth macadam streets were hidden under hundreds of loads of dirt. Its wide pavements were covered with wooden sidewalks.

Drab, unpainted false fronts covered the facades of its modest stores and comfortable modern homes. The usually trimly-garbed residents roamed the streets in long, awkward dresses, strangely cut suits, hats which looked as though they had been dragged out of a rummage sale.

But Porterville was happy, as all these uncouth changes meant money. For the famed Stellar Motion Pictures Company has descended on the town to film what was slated to be a "colossal, super-masterpiece," the life of Tim Reyner.

Fifty years before Tim had made his name a terror throughout the whole West. He robbed trains, held up private vehicles, rode into towns at the head of his bandit crew and gutted banks, stores, express and railroad terminals, before the local law force could be organized to stop him. Then, away to the hills, leaving a swearing, angry community behind him.

But he had been a national figure. He never had hurt a child or a woman and had killed only in self-defense. He never stooped to kidnapping, and he usually robbed those who could more or less afford it. So, when Hollywood suddenly went into a fever of putting real personages on the screen, and became tired of diplomats, cardinals, scientists, et al, Stellar decided to turn to American names, and, even though Tim had been a robber, yet he was a romantic legend. He had been the hero of innumerable "dime novels" and small boys even of today knew his name. He had led a colorful life, and with some of the most unsavory episodes deleted, he would be a dashing figure on the screen.

Many of the extras were drawn from the town's population, but there also was a heavy contingent of Hollywood notables, and these found more or less difficulty in filling their leisure time, with the scant entertainment the town provided. Gambling dens there were but only on the surface as the state many years ago had passed a law against gambling. Palaces of gilded sin were so only in seeming as the town was painfully respectable. The few motion picture houses soon were exhausted as a means of recreation. The few players congregated in the hotel lobbies, in the stores, in the restaurants, even at the railroad station. The clever ones stocked in their brains many feature bits of appearance and talk and mannerisms they would be able to use later. And among these was Jackson Derrick, director of the coming masterpiece.

Non-temperamental, quiet, efficient, Derrick turned out a greater percentage of really believable pictures than any other director on the Stellar lot. His touches of genius lifted many a Class B film into the box office A rating. He was an important figure, even to movie folk who became accustomed to importance, so, this evening he was the centre of a group in the cigar store

where the "takes" of the day were being discussed.

James Wayne was there. He played Reyner's young brother in the film, as, of course, Tim couldn't be the hero and there had to be romance. Glamorous dainty Janet Korlin furnished the feminine lure. She didn't happen to be in the cigar store as the Emerson Study Club was giving her a home reception. Porterville had grown far away from the old days of roistering and murder and primitive passions. It was not so large or important, but it had its Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, its schools and cinemas and, every once in a while, some far-seeing politician who was "swinging around the circle" decided this would be a good central focal point from which to radiate his charm and so paid Porterville a flying visit.

The Portervillians were canny, too. From all over the state visitors were flocking in to see the players and prosperity had rocketed skyward. So nothing was too good for these men and women of the screen. Residents of the town were reconciled to tramping through the foot-high dirt roads, carrying water from pumps, stacking cords of wood beside their transformed homes.

The actual arrival of the company had been a time of speeches and giving of keys to the city, of welcoming by the Mayor and early letting-out-of-school for the children. Teachers knew there would be little A B C and two-times-two learned while the great motor trucks of equipment rolled through the streets and hotels and boarding houses were filled with the strangers.

Derrick's experienced eye soon picked out the extras he wanted. But he ever was the centre of a hopeful crowd of men and women, boys and girls who wanted to "get in pictures." Tonight in the cigar store, he had been talking to several young men when Wayne, Ralph Baker who was to be Tim, Ken Logan who was the bandit's Nemesis and some of the other actors strolled in. They were talking of the day's work.

"I don't need a double for that jumping scene," insisted Baker. "The ravine is only about seven feet wide. The focus can make it look wider. But I suggest the posse doesn't fire so many shots. Strikes me they hit better than that in those days. Why not have a pile of rocks the other side of the ravine and I can dodge behind them and ride away?" He turned to Derrick, who nodded.

"Good idea," he commended. "I thought myself that there seemed a waste of bullets — if the scene had been real."

"I think I should go out with Tim on some of his trips," suggested Wayne. "You can't make me look like a stay-at-home. The audience will be booing me and wondering why the girl didn't take Tim."

Derrick nodded again. He did not always take suggestions, but he was too wise ever to squelch them. "If I get one good one out of twenty offered," he had been heard to say, "the percentage warrants listening."

He was at the back of the store. Wayne and Baker at the counter, lighting the cigarettes they had bought, when the door was pushed open violently and swung back. A tall, slender figure stepped inside, his back to the door, watching the street and the inside of the store at the same time with quick, nervous glances. His right elbow was pressed close to his side. An automatic showed in his tightly clenched hand.

"Put 'em up!" he ordered sweeping the gun in a small arc. "This is a stick-up."

The group seemed turned to stone. Then Wayne stepped forward, but the youth stopped him with a low "I mean it. Get back there! Keep quiet! You," to the rotund proprietor who was staring open-mouthed, "empty the cash drawer. And no conversation."

He was obeyed. Wayne and Baker stepped back beside Derrick, who had not moved. The proprietor tremblingly opened the drawer, gathered the money in his shaking hand and held it toward the robber.

"Put it in a bag," ordered the youth. He stepped forward. An advertising sign with a swinging arm which cleared the majority of persons who came into the store was a quarter of an inch too low for the tall, slender figure and, as he moved, the bar caught his hat and knocked it to the floor. He let it lie, but stopped again, his fierce young eyes glaring at the group. An unruly mass of fair hair fell

over his forehead. The boy, for now they could see he scarcely had reached man's estate, flung it back angrily, but the cowlick brought it down again. His cold blue eyes sparkled incongruously through the fringe. His chin was square under the ragged young beard.

Suddenly Derrick laughed. All eyes, even those of the robber turned towards him.

"You sure have put it over, son," chuckled Derrick. "If it's any satisfaction to you, you've got the job, but we'll see what we can make out of you." He walked steadily forward and laid his hand masterfully on the youth's arm. He turned to the others.

"This lad has been pestering me for a job almost every day," he explained. "I didn't recognize him at first, but I remember him now." He turned to the staring youth again. "This was a great stunt, kid, and with a cigarette case, too," he gently took the gun from the boy's hand, looked at it, laughed again and dropped it into his pocket. "When you take a chance of being shot down as a real bandit, just to get my attention, you deserve a break." He gently urged the boy toward the door. "Come on, we'll find the casting director and fix things up for you." They went out.

The man in the store drew a united breath of relief. Then they saw the humor of the situation and howled. "Good for the kid," said Wayne. "Look out, Baker, or he'll be getting your job."

Outside, Derrick kept hold of the boy's arm. The youth was trembling now. "When did you eat last?" asked the director. His voice had a different tone.

"Three days ago," said the boy miserably.

"Where did you come from?" "I came in an a freight. I—" But Derrick interrupted.

"Food first," he decided, "then we'll talk."

In the restaurant Derrick watched the boy put away steak and potatoes, cabbage and beets, bread and butter and pie and coffee — three cups. At last the cavernous region below the slender waist seemed filled and the boy leaned back.

"That gun," he was hesitant. "It's real, not a cigarette case."

"I know," Derrick took it out of his pocket. "But I didn't want them to know, even if it wasn't loaded. How did you get it?" Find it?"

The boy nodded. "I was hungry and I heard them talking of the old time hold-up men and I thought I'd try it. I never did before." His wretched eyes strained into Derrick's. Derrick nodded.

"But why," the boy leaned forward. Why did you do this for me?"

Derrick laughed. "I can tell when a kid's hungry and desperate and not accustomed to being a bandit. Besides, when you mean to fire a gun, you don't hold your hand over the barrel — the grip is for your hand."

"I don't know much about guns," the boy confessed.

"You'll need some lessons for this picture," Derrick laid the gun on the table. But the boy was persistent.

"Why did you help me? Why didn't you let them arrest me? Why didn't you let me go to jail. I know now I couldn't have got away with it. Why?"

Derrick turned the gun around and around on the table with his finger. He did not look at the lad.

"When your hat was knocked off" — he stopped. He began again. "I have a warm spot in my heart for a tow-head with a cowlick and blue eyes. I had a kid brother like that once — tow-head with a cowlick and blue eyes. He died with a gun in his hand — a real gun — at Chateau-Thierry!"

Teaches Farley To "Draw Long Bow"



Keen appreciation of the wonderful playground Canada possesses in the Canadian Rockies was expressed by Jim Farley, postmaster-general of the United States and organizer of the Democratic Party, who spent a pleasant few days with his daughters Ann and Betty at the Banff Springs Hotel. While at the mile-high playground, they took part in the various activities usually enjoyed by the international colony there and thoroughly explored the surrounding country by motor. Mr. Farley, who is noted for the fact that he can call people by their first names years after a single meeting, will have a hard time forgetting Jacob Two Young Man, chief of the Stoney Indian tribe, snapped showing him how to handle a bow and arrow in the accepted Indian style. Interested in the spectacle of their daddy taking orders from anyone less than President Roosevelt himself are Ann, left, and Betty.

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