

THE WINNING OF BARBARA WORTH

BY

HAROLD BELL WRIGHT

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

While this story is not in any way a history of this part of the Colorado Desert now known as the Imperial Valley, nor a biography of anyone connected with this splendid achievement, I must in honesty admit that this work which in the past ten years has transformed a vast, desolate waste into a beautiful land of homes, cities, and farms, has been my inspiration.

With much gratitude for their many helpful kindnesses, I acknowledge my indebtedness to H. T. Cory, F. C. Hermann, C. R. Rockwood, C. N. Perry, E. H. Gaines, Roy Kinkaid and the late George Sexsmith, engineers and surveyors identified with this reclamation work; to W. K. Bowker, Sidney McHarg, C. E. Paris, and many other business friends and neighboring ranchers among our pioneers; and to William Mulholland, Chief Engineer of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

I am particularly indebted to C. K. Clarke, Assistant Manager and Chief Engineer of the California Development Company, and to Allen Kelly, whose knowledge, insight and observations as a journalist and as a student of Reclamation in the Far West have been invaluable to me.

To my friend, Mr. W. F. Holt, in appreciation of his life and of his work in the Imperial Valley, this story is inscribed. H. B. W.

Tecolote Rancho, April 25, 1911.

"Give fools their gold, and knaves their power;
Let fortune's bubbles rise and fall,
Who sows a field, or trains a flower,
Or plants a tree, is more than all."

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Drawn by F. GRAHAM COOTES

OFTEN AS BARBARA SAT LOOKING OVER THAT GREAT BASIN HER HEART CRIED OUT TO KNOW THE SECRET IT HELD.

HE HAD LIFTED THE CANTEEN AND WAS HOLDING IT UPSIDE DOWN.

"BUT I DON'T RIDE, YOU KNOW."

MORE TO REGAIN HIS COMPOSURE THAN BECAUSE HE WAS THIRSTY, HELPED HIMSELF FROM THE EARTHEN WATER JAR.

"ADIOS. TELL BARBARA I'M ALL RIGHT."

WITHOUT A WORD—FOR NO WORD WAS NEEDED—THEIR HANDS MET IN A FIRM GRIP.

The Winning of Barbara Worth

CHAPTER I.

INTO THE INFINITE LONG AGO.

Jefferson Worth's outfit of four mules and a big wagon pulled out of San Felipe at daybreak, headed for Rubio City. From the swinging red tassels on the bridles of the leaders to the galvanized iron water bucket dangling from the tail of the reach back of the rear axle the outfit wore an unmistakable air of prosperity. The wagon was loaded only with a well-stocked "grub-box," the few necessary camp cooking utensils, blankets and canvas tarpaulin, with rolled barley and bales of hay for the team, and two water barrels—empty. Hanging by its canvas strap from the spring of the driver's seat was a large, cloth-covered canteen. Behind the driver there was another seat of the same wide, comfortable type, but the man who held the reins was apparently alone. Jefferson Worth was not with his outfit.

By sending the heavy wagon on ahead and following later with a faster team and a light buckboard, Mr. Worth could join his outfit in camp that night, saving thus at least another half day for business in San Felipe. Jefferson Worth, as he himself would have put it, "figured on the value of time." Indeed Jefferson Worth figured on the value of nearly everything.

Now San Felipe, you must know, is where the big ships come in and the air tingles with the electricity of commerce as men from all lands, driven by the master passion of human kind—Good Business—seek each his own.

But Rubio City, though born of that same master passion of the race, is where the thin edge of civilization is thinnest, on the Colorado River, miles beyond the Coast Range Mountains, on the farther side of that dreadful land where the thirsty atmosphere is charged with the awful silence of uncounted ages.

Between these two scenes of man's activity, so different and yet so like, and crossing thus the land of my story, there was only a rude trail—two hundred and more hard and lonely miles of it—the only mark of man in all that desolate waste and itself marked every mile by the graves of men and by the bleached bones of their cattle.

All that forenoon, on every side of the outfit, the beautiful life of the coast country throbbed and exulted. It called from the heaving ocean with its many gleaming sails and dark drifting steamer smoke under the wide sky;

it sang from the harbor where the laden ships meet the long trains that come and go on their continental errands; it cried loudly from the busy streets of village and town and laughed out from field and orchard. But always the road led toward those mountains that lifted their oak-clad shoulders and pine-fringed ridges across the way as though in dark and solemn warning to any who should dare set their faces toward the dreadful land of want and death that lay on their other side.

In the afternoon every mile brought scenes more lonely until, in the foothills, that creeping bit of life on the hard old trail was forgotten by the busy world behind, even as it seemed to forget that there was anywhere any life other than its creeping self.

As the sweating mules pulled strongly up the heavy grades the man on the high seat of the wagon repaid the indifference of his surroundings with a like indifference. Unmoved by the forbidding grimness of the mountains, unthoughtful of their solemn warning, he took his place as much a part of the lonely scene as the hills themselves. Slouching easily in his seat he gave heed only to his team and to the road ahead. When he spoke to the mules his voice was a soft, good-natured drawl, as though he spoke from out a pleasing reverie, and though his words were often hard words they were carried to the animals on an under-current of fellowship and understanding. The long whip, with coiled lash, was in its socket at the end of the seat. The stops were frequent. Wise in the wisdom of the unfenced country and knowing the land ahead, this driver would conserve every ounce of his team's strength against a possible time of great need.

They were creeping across a flank of the hill when the off-leader sprang to the left so violently that nothing but the instinctive bracing of his trace-mate held them from going over the grade. The same instant the wheel team repeated the maneuver, but not so quickly, as the slouching figure on the seat sprang into action. A quick strong pull on the reins, a sharp yell: "You, Buck! Molly!" and a rattling volley of strong talk swung the four back into the narrow road before the front wheels were out of the track.

With a crash the heavy brake was set. The team stopped. As the driver half rose and turned to look back he slipped the reins to his left hand and his right dropped to his hip. With a motion too quick for the eye to follow the free arm straightened and the mountain echoed wildly to the loud report of a forty-five. By the side of the road in the rear of the wagon a rattlesnake uncoiled its length and writhed slowly in the dust.

Before the echoes of the shot had died away a mad, inarticulate roar came from the depths of the wagon box. The roar was followed by a thick stream of oaths in an unmistakably Irish voice. The driver, who was slipping a fresh cartridge into the cylinder, looked up to see a man grasping the back of the rear seat for support while rising unsteadily to his feet.

The Irishman, as he stood glaring fiercely at the man who had so rudely awakened him, was without hat or coat, and with bits of hay clinging to a soiled shirt that was unbuttoned at the hairy throat, presented a remarkable figure. His heavy body was fitted with legs like posts; his wide shoulders and deep chest, with arms to match his legs, were so huge as to appear almost grotesque; his round head, with its tumbled thatch of sandy hair, was set on a thick bull-neck; while all over the big bones of him the hard muscles lay in visible knots and bunches. The unsteady poise, the red, unshaven, sweating face, and the angry, blood-shot eyes, revealed the reason for his sleep under such uncomfortable circumstances. The silent driver gazed at his fearsome passenger with calm eyes that seemed to hold in their dark depths the mystery of many a still night under the still stars.

In a voice that rumbled up from his hairy chest—a husky, menacing growl—the Irishman demanded: "Fwhat the hell do ye mane, dishturbin' the peace wid yer clamor? For less than a sup av wather I'd go over to ye wid me two hands."

Calmly the other dropped his gun into its holster. Pointing to the canteen that hung over the side of the wagon fastened by its canvas strap to the seat spring, he drawled softly: "There's the water. Help yourself, stranger."

The gladiator, without a word, reached for the canteen and with huge, hairy paws lifted it to his lips. After a draught of prodigious length he heaved a long sigh and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he turned his fierce eyes again on the driver as if to inquire what manner of person he might be who had so unceremoniously challenged his threat.

The Irishman saw a man, tall and spare, but of a stringy, tough and supple leanness that gave him the look of being fashioned by the out-of-doors. He, too, was coatless but wore a vest unbuttoned over a loose, coarse shirt. A red bandana was knotted easily about his throat. With his wide, high-crowned hat, rough trousers tucked in long boots, laced-leather wrist guards and the loosely buckled cartridge belt with its long forty-five, his very dress expressed the easy freedom of the wild lands, while the dark,

thin face, accented by jet black hair and a long, straight mustache, had the look of the wide, sun-burned plains.

With a grunt that might have expressed either approval or contempt, the Irishman turned and groping about in the wagon found a sorry wreck of a hat. Again he stooped and this time, from between the bales of hay, lifted a coat, fit companion to the hat. Carefully he felt through pocket after pocket. His search was rewarded by a short-stemmed clay pipe and the half of a match—nothing more. With an effort he explored the pockets of his trousers. Then again he searched the coat; muttering to himself broken sentences, not the less expressive because incomplete: "Where the devil— Now don't that bate—Well, I'll be—" With a temper not improved by his loss he threw down the garment in disgust and looked up angrily. The silent driver was holding toward him a sack of tobacco.

The Irishman, with another grunt, crawled under the empty seat and climbing heavily over the back of the seat in front, planted himself stolidly by the driver's side. Filling his pipe with care and deliberation he returned the sack to its owner and struck the half-match along one post-like leg. Shielding the tiny flame with his hands before applying the light he remarked thoughtfully: "Ye are a danged reckless fool to be so dishturbin' me honest slape by explodin' that cannon ye carry. 'Tis on me mind to discipline ye for sich outrageous conduct." The last word was followed by loud, smacking puffs, as he started the fire in the pipe-bowl under his nose.

While the Irishman was again uttering his threat, the driver, with a skillful twist, rolled a cigarette and, leaning forward just in the nick of time, he deliberately shared the half-match with his blustering companion. In that instant the blue eyes above the pipe looked straight into the black eyes above the cigarette, and a faint twinkle of approval met a serious glance of understanding.

Gathering up his reins and sorting them carefully, the driver spoke to his team: "You, Buck! Molly! Jack! Pete!" The mules heaved ahead. Again the silence of the world-old hills was shattered by the rattling rumble of the heavy-tired wagon and the ring and clatter of iron-shod hoofs.

Stolidly the Irishman pulled at the short-stemmed pipe, the wagon seat sagging heavily with his weight at every jolt of the wheels, while from under his tattered hat rim his fierce eyes looked out upon the wild landscape with occasional side glances at his silent, indifferent companion.

Again the team was halted for a rest on the heavy grade. Long and carefully the Irishman looked about him and then, turning suddenly upon the still silent driver, he gazed at him for a full minute before saying, with elaborate mock formality: "It may be, Sorr, that bein' ye are sich a hell av a conversationalist, ut wouldn't tax yer vocal powers beyand their shtrength av I should be so baould as to ax ye fwhat the divil place is this?"

The soft, slow drawl of the other answered: "Sure. That there is No Man's Mountains ahead."

"No Man's, is ut; an' ut looks that same. Where did ye say ye was thryin' to go?"

"We're headed for Rubio City. This here is the old San Felipe trail."

"Uh-huh! So *we're* goin' to Rubio City, are we? For all I know that may as well be nowhere at all. Well, well, ut's news av intherest to me. *We* are goin' to Rubio City. Ut may be that ye would exshplain, Sorr, how I come to be here at all."

"Sure Mike! You come in this here wagon from San Felipe."

At the drawling answer the hot blood flamed in the face of the short-tempered Irishman and the veins in his thick neck stood out as if they would burst. "Me name's not Mike at all, but Patrick Mooney!" he roared. "I've two good eyes in me head that can see yer danged old wagon for meself, an' fwhat's more I've two good hands that can break ye in bits for the impedent dried herrin' that ye are, a-thinkin' ye can take me anywhere at all be abductin' me widout me consent. For a sup o' wather I'd go to ye—" He turned quickly to look behind him for the driver was calmly pointing toward the end of the seat. "Fwhat is ut? Fwhat's there?" he demanded.

"The water," drawled the dark-faced man. "I don't reckon you drunk it all the other time."

Again the big man lifted the canteen and drank long and deep. When he had wiped his mouth with the back of his hairy hand and had returned the canteen to its place, he faced his companion—his blue eyes twinkling with positive approval. Scratching his head meditatively, he said: "An' all because av me wantin' to enjoy the blessin's an' advantages av civilization agin affther three long months in that danged gradin' camp, as is the right av ivery healthy man wid his pay in his pocket."

The teamster laughed softly. "You was sure enjoyin' of it a-plenty."

The other looked at him with quickened interest. "Ye was there?" he asked.

"Some," was the laconic reply.

The Irishman scratched his head again with a puzzled air. "I disremember entire. Was there some throuble maybe?"

The other grinned. "Things was movin' a few."

Patrick Mooney nodded his head. "Uh-huh: mostly they do under thim circumstances. Av course there'd be a policeman, or maybe two?"

"Five," said the man with the lines, gently.

"Five! Howly Mither! I did mesilf proud. An' did they have the wagon? Sure they wud—five policemen niver walked. Wan av thim might, av ut was handy-like, but five—niver! Tell me, man, who else was at the party? No—howld on a minut!" He interrupted himself, "Thim cops stimulate me mimory a bit. Was there not a bunch av sailor-men from wan av thim big ships?"

The driver nodded.

The other, pleased with the success of his mental effort, continued: "Uh-huh—an' I was havin' a peaceful dhrink wid thim all whin somewan made impedent remarks touchin' me appearance, or ancestors, I disremember which. But where was you?"

"Well, you see," explained the driver in his slow way, "hit was like this. That there saloon were plumb full of sailor-men all exceptin' you an' me. I was a heap admirin' of the way you handled that big hombre what opened the meetin' and also his two pardners, who aimed to back his play. Hit was sure pretty work. The rest of the crowd sort o' bunched in one end of the room an' when you began addressin' the congregation, so to speak, on the habits, character, customs and breedin' of sailor-men in general an' the present company in particular, I see right there that you was a-bitin' off more 'n you could chew. It wasn't no way reasonable that any human could handle that whole outfit with only just his bare hands, so I edged over your way, plumb edified by your remarks, and when the rush for the mourners' bench come I unlimbered an' headed the stampede pronto. Then I made my little proposition. I told 'em that, bein' the only individual on the premises not a sailor-man nor an Irishman, I felt it my duty to

referee the obsequies, so to speak, and that odds of twenty to one, not to mention knives, was strictly agin my convictions. Moreover, bein' the sole an' only uninterested audience, I had rights. Then I offers to bet my pile, even money, that you could handle the whole bunch, takin' 'em two at a throw. I knowed it were some odds, but I noticed that them three what opened the meetin' was still under the influence. Also I undertook to see that specifications was faithfully fulfilled."

"Mither av Gawd, fwhat a sociable!" broke in the Irishman. "An' me too dhrunk to remimber rightly! Did they take yer bet? Ye sun-burned limb av the divil—did they take ut?"

"They sure did," drawled the driver. "I had my gun on them all the time."

"Hurroo! An' did I do ut? Tell me quick—did I do ut? Sure I could aisy av nothin' happened."

"You laid your first pair on top of the three, then the police called the game and the bets were off."

"They pinched the house?"

"They took you an' me."

"Sure! av course they would take us two. 'Tis thim San Felipe police knows their duty. But how could they do ut?"

"I forget details right here, bein' temporarily incapacitated by one o' them hittin' me with a club from behind. I woke up in a cell with you."

The Irishman rubbed the back of his head. "Come to think av ut, I have a bit av a bump on me own noodle that 'tis like helps to exshplain the cell. But fwhat in the divil's name brung us here in this Gawd-forsaken Nobody's Place? Pass me another pipeful an' tell me that av ye can."

The driver passed over the tobacco sack and, stopping his team for another rest, rolled a cigarette for himself. "That's easy," he said. "This here is Jefferson Worth's outfit. He wanted me to start home this morning, so he got me off. I don't know how he done it; mostly nobody knows how Jefferson Worth does things. There was a man with him who knowed you and, as I was some disinclined to leave you under the circumstances, Mr. Worth fixed it up for you, too, then we all jest throwed you in and fetched you along. Mr. Worth with the other man and his kid are comin' on in a buckboard. They'll catch up with us where we camp to-night. I don't mind sayin' that I plumb admired your spirit and action and—sizin' up that police

bunch—I could see your talents would sure be wasted in that San Felipe country for some time to come. There'll be plenty of room in Rubio City for you, leastwise 'till you draw your pay again. If you don't like the accommodations you're gettin' I reckon you'd better make good your talk back there and we'll see whether you takes this outfit back to San Felipe or I takes her on to Rubio City."

The Irishman spat emphatically over the wheel. "An' 'tis a gintleman wid proper instincts ye are, though, as a rule, I howld ut impolite to carry a gun. But afther all, 'tis a matter av opinion an' I'm free to admit that there are occasions. Anyhow ye handle ut wid grace an' intilligence. An', fists er shticks, er knives, er guns, that's the thing that marks the man. 'Tis not Patrick Mooney that'll fault a gintleman for ways that he can't help owin' to his improper bringin' up. Av ye don't mind, will ye tell me fwhat they call ye? I'll not be so indelicate as to ax yer name. Fwhat they call ye will be enough."

The other laughed. "My name is Joe Brannin. They call me Texas Joe—Tex, for short."

"Good bhoy, Tex! Ye look the divil av a lot like a red herrin', but that's not sich a bad fish, an' ye have the right flavor. How could ye help ut? Brannin an' Texas is handles to pull a man through hell wid. But tell me this—who is this man that says he knows me?"

Texas Joe shook his head and, picking out his lines, called to his team. When they were under way again he said: "I didn't hear his name but I judge from the talk that he is one o' them there civil engineers, an' that he's headin' for Rubio City to build the railroad that's goin' through to the coast. Mr. Worth told me that there would be another man and a kid to go back with us, but I know that Mr. Worth hadn't never seen them before himself."

Pat shifted his heavy bulk to face the driver and, removing his pipe from his mouth, asked with deliberation: "An' do ye mane to tell me that this place we're goin' to is on the new line av the Southwestern an' Continental?"

"Sure. They're buildin' into Rubio City from the East now."

The Irishman became excited. "An' this man that knows me—this engineer—is he a fine, big, up-standin' man wid brown eyes an' the look av a king?"

"I ain't never seen no kings," drawled Tex, "but the rest of it sure fits him."

"Well, fwhat do ye think av that? 'Tis the Seer himsilf, or I'm not the son av me own mither. I was hearin' in Frisco, where I went the last time I drewed me pay, that he was like to be on the S. an' C. extension. 'Twas that that took me to San Felipe, bein' wishful to get a job wid him again. Well, well, an' to think ut's the Seer himsilf!"

"What's that you call him?"

"The Seer. I disremember his other name but he's got wan all shtraight an' proper. He's that kind. They call him the Seer because av his talk av the great things that will be doin' in this country av no rain at all whin ignorant savages like yersilf learn how to use the wather that's in the rivers for irrigation. I've heard him say mesilf that hundreds av thousands av acres av these big deserts will be turned into farms, an' all that be what he calls 'Reclamation.' 'Twas for that some danged yellow-legged surveyor give him the name, an' ut shtuck. But most av the engineers—the rale engineers do ye mind—is wid him, though they do be jokin' him the divil av a lot about what they calls his visions."

"He didn't *look* like he was locoed," said Texas Joe thoughtfully, "but he's sure some off on that there desert proposition as you'll see before we lands in Rubio."

"I dunno—I've seen some quare things in me time in the way av big jobs that nobody thought could be done at all. But lave ut go. 'Tis not the likes av me an' you that's qualified to give judgment on sich janiuses as the Seer, who, I heard tell, has the right to put more big-manin' letters afther his name than ye have teeth in yer head."

"All the same it ain't the brand on a horse that makes him travel. A man'll sure need somethin' more hefty than letters after his name when he goes up against the desert."

"Well, lave ut go at that. Wait 'til ye know him. But fwhat's this yer tellin' me about a kid? The Seer has no family at all but himsilf an' his job."

Texas grinned. "Maybe not, pard; but he's sure got together part of a family this trip."

"Is ut a gurl, or a bhoy?"

"Boy—'bout a ten-year-old, I'd say."

The Irishman shook his head doubtfully. "I dunno. 'Tis a quare thing for the Seer. Av it was me, or you, now—but the Seer! It's danged quare! But tell me, fwhat's this man, yer boss? 'Tis a good healthy pull he must have to be separatin' us from thim San Felipe police."

Texas Joe deliberated so long before answering this that Pat glanced at him uneasily several times. At last the driver drawled: "You're right there; Jefferson Worth sure has some pull."

Pat grunted. "But fwhat does he do?"

"Do?" Tex swung his team around a spur of the mountain where the trail leads along the side of a canyon to its head. Far below they heard the tumbling roar of a stream in its rocky course.

"Sure the man must do something?"

"As near as I can make out Jefferson Worth does everybody."

"Oh ho! So that's ut? I've no care for the cards mesilf, but av a man's a professional an'—"

"You're off there, pardner. Jefferson Worth ain't that kind. He's one o' these here financierin' sports, an' so far as anybody that I ever seen goes, he's got a dead cinch."

"Ye mane he's a banker?"

"Sure. The Pioneer in Rubio City. He started the game in the early days an' he's been a-rollin' it up ever since. Hit's plumb curious about this here financierin' business," continued Tex, in his slow, meditative way. "Looks to me mostly jest plain, common hold-up, only they do it with money 'stead of a gun. In the old days you used to get the drop on your man with your six, all regular, an' take what he happened to have in his clothes. Then the posse'd get after you an' mebbe string you up, which was all right, bein' part of the game. Now these fellows like Jefferson Worth, they get's your name on some writin's an' when you ain't lookin' they slips up an' gets away with all your worldly possessions, an' the sheriff he jest laughs an' says hits good business. This here Worth man is jest about the coolest, smoothest, hardest proposition in the game. He fair makes my back hair raise. The common run o' people ain't got no more show stackin' up agin Jefferson Worth than two-bits worth o' ice has in hell. Accordin' to my notion hit's this here same financierin' game that's a-ruinin' the West. The cattle range is about all gone now. If they keeps it up we won't be no better out here than some o' them places I've heard about back East."

"'Tis a danged ignorant savage ye are, like the rest av yer thribe, wid yer talk av ruinin' the West. Fwhat wud this counthry be without money? 'Tis thim same financiers that have brung ye the railroads, an' the cities, an' the schools, an' the churches, an' all the other blessin's an' joys of civilization that ye've got to take whither ye likes ut or not. Look at the Seer, now. Fwhat could a man like him—an engineer, mind ye—fwhat could the Seer do widout the men wid money to back him?"

The Irishman's words were answered by a cheerful "Whoa!" and a crash of the brakes as Texas Joe brought his team to a stand near the spring at the head of the canyon. "We camp here," he announced. "This is the last water we strike until we make it over the Pass to Mountain Springs on the desert side. Jefferson Worth will be along with the Seer and his kid most any time now."

A little before dusk the banker, with his two companions, arrived.

"Hello, Pat!" The man who leaped from the buckboard and strode toward the waiting Irishman was tall and broad, with the head and chin of a soldier, and the brown eyes of a dreamer. He was dressed in rough corduroys, blue flannel shirt, laced boots, and Stetson, and he greeted the burly Irishman as a fellow-laborer.

A joyful grin spread over the battered features of the gladiator as he grasped the Seer's outstretched hand. "Well, dang me but ut's glad I am to see ye, Sorr, in this divil's own land. I had me natural doubts, av course, whin I woke up in the wagon, but ut's all right. 'Tis proud I am to be abducted by ye, Sorr."

"Abducted!" The engineer's laugh awoke the echoes in the canyon. "It was a rescue, man!"

"Well, well, let ut go at that! But tell me, Sorr"—he lowered his voice to a confidential rumble—"fwhat's this I hear that ye have yer bhoys wid ye? Sure I niver knew that ye was a man av family." He looked toward the slender lad who, with the readiness of a grown man, was helping the driver of the buckboard to unhitch his team of four broncos. "'Tis a good lad he is, or I'm a Dutchman."

"You're right, Pat, Abe is a good boy," the Seer answered gravely. "I picked him up in a mining camp on the edge of the Mojave Desert when I was running a line of preliminary surveys through that country for the S. and C. last year. He was born in the camp and his mother died when he was a baby. God knows how he pulled through! You know what those

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