

# CARRUTHERS FOR SHERIFF.

BY RILEY H. ALLEN.

## I.

CARRUTHERS rode down from the eastern hills and out upon the red desert in the sunlight of an August morning. Ahead of him stretched the silent San Jacinto plains, already beginning to shimmer in the heat-waves. On the very edge of the western horizon, seemingly at the end of the world, rose the Hermosa Mountains, a blur of purple in the distance.

Carruthers sat his pinto cow-pony with the grace that comes from spending nine months out of every year in the saddle. One casual hand rested on his hip; his body swayed easily with the tireless lope of the pony. He wore the fringed leathern chaps of the cow-puncher, and a gay red handkerchief was knotted around his neck. His mouth was good-humored, but there was strength in the square jaw and straight nose, and he looked across the desert to the far blue hills with the level gaze of the frontier.

"You, Nebraska," he said to the horse, "I reckon you've got to travel some today. It's sixty miles to them mountains. I've got to get there sure." He swore lazily, affectionately, and slapped the pony's flank with a gentle hand. "You old stump-sucker, I'm expectin' you to hit the high places to Rawhide. I'm runnin' for sheriff, Nebraska; what do you think o' that? And you got to pike into Rawhide City to-night if you bust a leg a-tryin'. Me a sheriff! I reckon that'll make Kenard kinder sore. Didn't see him as I passed the ranch this mornin'. He'll be over at Rawhide City, Nebraska, and we better be makin' it, too!"

A quick, silent shadow crossed the trail. Looking up, Carruthers saw a buzzard skimming along on motionless wings. Idly he watched its course. The wings quivered, drooped a little, and a moment later it circled downward, more and more slowly, till it dropped into an arroyo a hundred yards to the left. It was a common sight on those plains, and Carruthers turned back in the saddle.

And then, as silent and quick as the shadow of the buzzard, a coyote loped across the trail so close before that the

cow-pony threw up its head. Half-mechanically, Carruthers saw the coyote stop at the gully where the buzzard had disappeared and crouch forward to the edge. Then it whirled in a startled flash of yellow-gray fur, and loped silently away across the desert, fading imperceptibly among the sage-bushes.

"The dern kangaroo!" said Carruthers reflectively. "Nebrasky, I sure guess there's somethin' in that waller."

He turned the pony's head and rode to the edge of the arroyo. At the bottom, on the loose red sand, crouched a forlorn little figure in a very dusty pair of blue kilts and torn blouse-waist. It sat up and looked at Carruthers out of frightened eyes.

He leaped from his horse and clambered down into the gully. The buzzard rose from a near-by rock and floated away on silent pinions. The child tried to run in a tottering, weak way, but fell at the first step. Carruthers picked him up and held him in careful arms.

"You pore lost little maverick!" he said. "Where did you come from?"

He wiped the dirty face with his big red handkerchief. The small, grimy hands were bruised, and Carruthers knew that the boy had been crawling on the rough sand.

"Been lost since yesterday mornin', I reckon. Too scared to speak," said the cow-boy impersonally. "And now let's get out o' this."

He scrambled up the arroyo with the child on one arm, and walked toward the pony. His hand was stretched out for the bridle when the animal suddenly reared, snorting loudly.

"Nebrasky," said the cowboy, "are you goin' to shy at a little feller like him? I reckon you ain't often seen me with a kid; but I'm sure ashamed of you, actin' like this!"

He tried to seize the bridle. The horse jerked up his head, trotted back to the trail, stopped till the pursuing cowboy was ten feet away, then swung about and cantered off to the eastward. Carruthers swore at him.

"Nebrasky," he said, "I must be locoed, fergettin' to drop that bridle over your mule head! I might 'a' expected it

of you—a horse that would shy at a little maverick like this!”

He regarded the boy with curious eyes. He noticed that the baby lips were drawn, the temples hot and feverish. He took a bottle from his pocket, forced a few drops into the dry mouth, and sat down on the ground with the child in his arms.

The air grew perceptibly hotter, the heat waves shimmered above the greasewood and stunted sahuaros. Carruthers shook himself; watching the color come into the child's face, he had forgotten the desert.

“Little maverick,” he said gently, “it's goin' to be mighty hot to-day. Let's be hittin' the trail.” He stood up, looking over the red plain. Behind him lay the hills he had left in the morning. To the west were the Hermosas. “I'm mighty sorry, little maverick,” he said. “I cain't go back; no, I just cain't. It ain't far across, and there ain't no water back there. I got to be at Rawhide tomorrow. I said I'd come, and I reckon I ain't goin' to let Kenard scare me out!”

The child looked at him gravely, out of steady, unwinking eyes. Carruthers gulped a mouthful of brandy and went forward.

Higher rose the sun. Behind the plodding cowboy the sage-bushes and cactus passed in dull, unending rows, and the trail stretched on. In his arms the child dozed, waking up at short intervals with low cries of fear, then dropping back into uneasy slumber.

At noon they stopped under the scant shade of a huge thorn-cactus and rested for an hour; then on again. The afternoon sun struck blindingly upon Carruthers' face, and the long rows of sagebrush seemed to move more slowly; but by night the eastern hills were far distant, and he calculated he had covered twenty miles. The child slept heavily in his arms as he lay down under the greasewood to sleep.

In the night Carruthers woke, thirsty. The moonlight fell upon the face of the boy.

“Pore little feller!” he said softly. “You must be mighty near tired. You got to be brave, little feller,” he whispered; then he went back to sleep in spite of his thirst, for he was very tired.

In the morning, before the sun had topped the hills to the eastward, he started on. The child was awake now, and still it never spoke, only stared at him out of red, frightened eyes. His own

felt strangely blurred, and his limbs were shot with pangs, for the western cowboy spends his life in the saddle.

As the white-hot sun burned its course higher up the sky, the boy panted in his arms, and his own brain swam in the fierce air. About eleven o'clock, as he guessed, he had to stop under a cactus to ease the pain in his shoulders. He stayed there all the afternoon, now and then giving the precious brandy to the boy, drop by drop. When the shadows slanted in long rows to the east, he started forward again, looking steadily at the blue foothills of the Hermosas.

The child seemed weaker, Carruthers thought, and then a feeling struck him that the baby understood everything he said, and was reproaching him.

“It's like this,” Carruthers explained. “There's a man in Rawhide City who says I cain't be sheriff. He's a mighty mean man, little maverick, Kenard is. I says to him, ‘I'll be there at the election, Kenard,’ and he says, ‘I'll shoot you if you come.’ I ain't that kind of a man. But I says to him, ‘I'll be there,’ and I will. It was hard luck of Nebrasky to run away. Yes, that cert'nly was mighty hard luck, but it's only twenty miles now, maverick!”

The full moon rose over the wide desert, turning the ragged greasewood and chaparral into tawny sprays of strange beauty. After a while the dry air grew cooler. Carruthers gave the last of the brandy to the boy, and smiled as he did so, though his own mouth was harsh and dry. He went on over the arid plain.

The moon sank lower and lower, one by one the stars paled, and a gray light shot out of the east. The gray glowed, crimsoned; day dawned. Up over the eastern hills sprang the sun and shone hotter and hotter on the San Jacinto desert. The dry sand slipped under Carruthers' feet. The child in his arms panted in hoarse, short sobs.

Carruthers dared not stop. He could see the distant Hermosas, blue and inviting in the west, with cool, dark canyons and green valleys. His throat felt caked and his lips split open. The trail blurred before him; red dust filled his lungs. His arms and back ached with intolerable surges of pain from the weight of the child, but he set his teeth and kept his eyes on the Hermosas. Somewhere at the foot of those hills lay the gray walls of Rawhide City, and at the thought of his mission he set his teeth afresh.

"Little maverick," he said, "I got to do it. There ain't no other way. I told Kenard I'd be there. To-day's election day, and they're expectin' me to come."

So he went forward toward Rawhide City and the man who would kill him on sight. It was the thought of his word that kept him on the trail—that, and the child in his arms. He felt a strange companionship with the boy, intangible, yet real.

"Little maverick," he muttered, "I got to keep goin', keep goin'—to—Rawhide—City."

He laid the child gently under a chaparral bush, stumbled, and fell beside it.

After a while the scant shade of the chaparral revived him. He looked across the grim desert—down the faint white line of the trail—back over the route he had come. He saw not one living thing, not even a skulking coyote. He looked up at the burnished sky and saw a dark buzzard, wheeling in languid circles, lower and lower over the chaparral.

He tried to shout—his voice was rusty and hoarse. He lifted his arms to the sky and cried aloud. He swore, but there was prayer in the despairing tones. The child panted heavily; its eyes, unwinking as ever, were haunted with fever.

Carruthers looked wildly across the desert to the cool Hermosas.

"Little feller," he said, "I got to leave you. There ain't no other way. But I'll come back right soon. Yes, I'll cert'nly come back. You got to be mighty brave, and I'll go as fast as I can. I—I'm mighty near tired out."

He covered the face of the motionless child with the sombrero, and, taking out his red handkerchief, tied it to the chaparral bush.

"Good-by, little feller!" he called. "I'll sure be back soon." Then he started toward Rawhide City, ten miles away across the burning sands, and the buzzard circled lower and lower above the chaparral.

## II.

WHERE the desert died away in a last endeavor to encroach upon the caked adobe huts of Rawhide City, stood the schoolhouse—bare, hot walls painted on a grimy canvas. Inside, the election for sheriff of Paloma County was being held, and the sound of rude laughter, oaths, and incipient quarrels came to a dark-faced man outside, sitting heavily upon his calico cow-pony, with a Winchester

across the pommel of his fringed Mexican saddle.

A cowboy came out of the schoolhouse and lounged toward the rider.

"Bill," he said, "better come on in and vote."

The man on the horse swore.

"I'm goin' to stay here till them polls close. It ain't long now."

"Sundown, I reckon," answered the other. "And Carruthers ain't showed up yet."

"How's the election goin', Charlie?" asked the watcher.

"They's a lot of fellers waitin' to see whether Carruthers 'll come before they vote. He told 'em he'd be here by sundown. If he ain't, he'll never be no sheriff in God's world. Oh, no, they won't vote for a coward. It ain't long now," he concluded, looking judicially at the western sun.

The man on the horse spoke fiercely.

"I'll kill the hound if he does come! I'll show Carruthers they won't be no dude sheriff of Paloma County. I've been layin' for him ever sence he come into the cattle country, and he's got to leave the law alone!"

"You goin' home to-night, Bill?" asked the other.

"Yes, I reckon so. Been gone four days now. Told my wife I'd be home yeste'day. She and the kid are all alone. The kid rode part way down to the Jacinto with me." He spoke as if ashamed. "When I put him down he ran up the trail mighty lively." Then the man's face hardened again. "I've been hangin' round here waitin' to finish with Carruthers and this confounded election business."

"It ain't long till sundown now," said Charlie.

Out on the San Jacinto trail a figure came into view. As they watched, it reeled and fell, then rose again and staggered on.

"Some drunk, I reckon," said Bill.

They watched it indifferently. The man fell again, got upon his hands and knees, and crawled along the red trail. They could see his upturned face.

"Bill," said Charlie, "it's Carruthers!"

He started forward. The man on the horse raised his rifle with an oath.

"Stop that!" said Charlie. "You let him come—if he can."

Carruthers got to his feet again, and came unsteadily forward, fell, and once more began crawling upon his knees. His mouth opened and showed the

tongue, black and swollen. His eyes were red-rimmed and ghastly. His sombrero was gone, and the setting sun glowed redly upon his face as he came to the man on the horse.

Kenard cocked his rifle, leveling it steadily at the distorted face below him. Carruthers tried to speak, but the words came slow and uncertainly, as if from long disuse.

"The little feller," he said. "Out on—the San Jacinto. Found him—Nebrasky—locoed—tried to make it—out there."

"You dirty hound!" said Kenard. "What did you find?"

"Baby—boy—maverick," came from the cowboy's black lips. "Just after Storch's Canyon. Little feller—yellow curls—blue—blue clothes." He raised his arm and swept it to the east. "Kenard, cain't you go? He's dyin' out there."

"Where did you find him?" Kenard was beside the muttering cowboy, forcing whisky between his lips. "Charlie, it must be Tim—and he never went home!"

Carruthers wandered into delirium.

"Little maverick," he murmured, "I'll come back soon. Yes, I'll cert'nly come back right away!" The whisky brought him once more from his stupor. "That wagon," he whispered. "I'll go back to him."

The two men carried him to the wagon and laid him on the floor.

"He's a scoundrel," said Kenard fiercely. "It ain't the truth, I tell you!"

And yet he took the reins. Charlie, in the rear, sat beside Carruthers, again in delirium, while Kenard lashed the ponies forward. Men poured out of the schoolhouse. To them Charlie shouted back the news—Kenard's boy lay dying somewhere on the desert; Carruthers was dying, too, and he was the only one who could find the boy.

As for Carruthers, he felt the rush of the wagon dimly. He heard Kenard raging at the horses, and at intervals threatening the man who had deserted his child. Somewhere there was a boy—a maverick—lying under the chaparral, with a red rag to point him out. Carruthers' throat was burning up, his head throbbled intolerably, but he knew he must not faint. The wheels ground out the same pulsing refrain, "A red—a red—a red," and his brain mocked him with the fantastic images of a thousand red, red banners floating above the sentinel yuccas.

He raised himself on his arm and pointed to the right.

"Across—across!" he cried. "The red handkerchief!"

Kenard turned the plunging buckboard. As they drove up to the bush a buzzard floated away and circled above their heads.

"I've come, little feller!" said Carruthers.

Kenard turned upon him fiercely.

"Curse you for deserting him!"

Then he bent over the baby face beneath the sombrero.

### III.

The foremost men from Rawhide City, running down the trail, met the returning buckboard, with Charlie driving the galloping ponies. The men turned, running along with the wagon, calling to Charlie: "Is the kid dead?" And then: "Is *he* dead?"

Kenard sat in the rear, the child in his arms. Beside him lay Carruthers. The crowd thickened. The schoolhouse came in sight, with all Rawhide City before it. Charlie stood up on the seat.

"They're alive!" he shouted, while the men around him cheered.

The echo was taken up along the trail; the men at the schoolhouse cheered. It was to the sound of cheering that Carruthers and the child were carried into the grimy building. The men worked over them.

Kenard laughed brokenly when they told him the baby would live. They trickled cool water into Carruthers' mouth drop by drop and dashed painful after painful over his quivering body.

He lifted his head and looked at the child.

"Little maverick," he said anxiously, "cain't you speak to me?"

"He's all right, Jim," said Charlie.

Carruthers smiled.

"Hello, Charlie!" he murmured. "I sure reckon I called the bluff!"

Kenard came over, holding out his hand.

"Jim," he said, "they say you're sheriff all right."

The cowboy took Kenard's hand.

"Aw now, Kenard," he stammered, embarrassed. He stopped, and looked guiltily around him. "Well, Bill," he said finally. Then he stopped again. Apparently he could think of nothing to say. Once more he stared deprecatingly at Charlie. "Say, Charlie," he murmured sheepishly, "cain't you stop them men makin' that fool noise? I ain't no derved Indian massacre!"

# A CUSTOM-MADE POET.

BY EDWARD BOLTWOOD.

## I.

THE skirmish had been short and hot. The routed book-agent, white of face, escaped from Mr. Flitchett's private office.

"Great clams!" he groaned to the clerk in the outer room. "That old hyena is the worst I ever—" Mr. Flitchett's call-bell rang, and the agent breathed heavily. "Here, let me out with my life," said he, skulking to the corridor like a guilty thing.

The mist of battle still enveloped Cyrus Flitchett as he glowered at the clerk in the doorway. Cyrus was a prosperous manufacturer of axle-lubricant, a solemn, hard-jawed little man of oppressively puritanical appearance in his ill-fitting brown clothes.

"McPherson!" he snapped. "Who let in that drummer?"

"Robert, the office-boy, sir," said the clerk.

Flitchett screwed his mouth wrathfully. Looking down at his desk, his eyes fell on a gay circular headed "Happy Half Hours with Master Poets." The phrase seemed to excite him strangely, and he hurled the paper into the wastebasket. A shrill voice was heard singing beyond the partition.

"Robert!" thundered Mr. Flitchett. "We'll dispense with your services after next week. Your tastes are too annoying. What's your last name?"

"Longfellow," said the boy.

"That settles it!" snorted Flitchett. "You'll have to go. Longfellow! Long fiddlesticks!"

Precisely at five he pulled down the top of his desk, reversed his cuffs, changed his coat, and took the subway up-town. The Flitchett residence was on a funereal side-street, and the family assembled for dinner in their funereal basement dining-room—Cyrus, Sarah, his wife, and Alonsita, his daughter. Alonsita was an extremely pretty girl with romantic blue eyes and a musical voice which vaguely irritated her father.

"Dear Bartholomew is coming this evening, papa," she said. "I hope—"

"Mr. Plomza has had my reply," interposed Flitchett. "There is nothing to add to my negative, Alonsita."

"But at least you must approve of Bartholomew's income, Cyrus," suggested his wife timidly. "That legacy from his uncle in Bombay, together with the proceeds of his books—"

"Oh, his books!" fumed Flitchett. "Poetry books! All poets are freaks. We'll have no freaks in this family, Sarah. Pass the butter."

After dinner Mr. Plomza was announced, and Cyrus Flitchett met him in the parlor.

Bartholomew Plomza was a young man to look at twice, being tall and wiry, with a black, closely-clipped beard and dark eyes, oddly lustrous. In whatever land he happened to be—and he had wandered to many strange parts—Plomza was regarded as a foreigner. New Yorkers, for example, called him a Brazilian, but in Rio Janeiro he passed for a Yankee.

Mr. Flitchett held this puzzling personality to be unbusiness-like and objectionable. He declined Plomza's hand, and waved him coldly to a patent rocking chair. The parlor was furnished like a doctor's waiting-room, and in its austerity Plomza's oriental figure appeared distinctly out of place.

"Our interview must be brief," proclaimed Cyrus. "I don't intend to let you marry Alonsita, and that's all there is to it."

"I love her," said Plomza. "She loves me. I shall marry her. Perhaps your consent—"

"Is superfluous?" demanded the father. "Is that what you mean?"

"Oh, I think I shall marry her with your full consent, Mr. Flitchett."

"Then, sir, if you'll permit me, you think like a fool!"

Bartholomew smiled placidly, but his eyes gleamed like tiny bundles of needle-points, and Mr. Flitchett was embarrassed by some slight discomfort.

"I speak in an impersonal sense, of course," Cyrus explained lamely. "Your profession—if anything so absurd as poetry is a profession—naturally makes men foolish."

"Take care how you insult the Muses, sir!" laughed Plomza complacently.

"Why not?" asked Cyrus with growing heat.

"Because they are likely to be re-