

IN THE SAME CATEGORY

Frank Kelley, '48

Michael Creelman closed the door of the lounge car behind him and stood motionless for a moment, his eyes searching among the occupants for a familiar face. He harbored little hope of finding any of his friends on this eastern bound train. Wealthy and impatient, his circle usually travelled by air. The passengers before him were the dissimilar group always found on transcontinental trains. A couple of soldiers talking to a red headed girl, three business men drinking whiskey and complaining about priorities, a married looking woman giving a redundant account of her son's tonsils to a bored girl, who was eying the red head enviously.

Michael moved farther along the thick carpet. At the far end of the car a girl was sitting pensively, seemingly oblivious of all around her. She frowned prettily at a folded manuscript on her knee. Looking up to crush a cigarette in an already overflowing ash stand, she observed a tall young man coming towards her. Recognition flashed across her face.

"Why, Micheal Creelman!" she cried, "This is a surprise."

"Hello Pat," he said, "How's the Tucson exile?"

"Better than I deserve to be," she answered as they shook hands. "It must be nearly two years since I've seen you, Micheal. Is that possible?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," he confirmed. "It's really too long."

"A lot of things have happened since we worked for the good old *World Wide*. According to the trade papers you've written three hits in a row. Not bad, Mr. Creelman."

He gave her a cynical smile. "No, not bad if you mean from a commercial point of view. The rabble liked them so they were box-office. But you should read what the critics called them. For instance Mack Long said: '*Broken Paradise* is the worst example of modern cinema to come out of Hollywood since the *Shanghai Gesture*. Its written as you might expect by Michael Creelman, the pulp fiction emigrant.' Not very enthusiastic was he?"

"Oh, but you could write something really great if you half tried, Michael," she said.

He shook his head. "No, that's for deep thinkers like you, Pat. And, by the way, congratulations on that last job. If Patricia Farby doesn't get an award for *Men of the Sail* I'll wring Wagner's neck!"

"I'm afraid I haven't got a chance," she said laughingly. "I think I'd better start writing horse operas if I want to be famous."

Michael's brown eyes met her blue ones. "You don't want to be famous though. Do you?" he said.

Patricia Farby turned her golden head to the window. "That's true Michael. I just want to write pictures that will do some good in this awful world. Stories that will make people proud of their great heroes and scientists and of their country, their—"

"Yes, I know," he interrupted. "'Picture with a message' stuff."

She turned to him again and smiled, he thought, rather sadly. "Yes, I suppose you would call them that," she said.

A colored waiter appeared in the car and announced that dinner would be served in the diner till two.

As the waiter withdrew Michael said. "I had an early breakfast and I'm rather hungry. Will you join me?"

"I suppose I should," replied Pat, folding her papers together. "They say the best way to renew a friendship is over a chicken salad."

"Make mine tuna," said he. She laughed. "The same old Michael."

Seated at a table in the dining car Michael gave their orders and for several minutes they just sat in silence watching the desert scenery go by. Spring sun shone down strongly on the sandy wastes, while in the distance the blue foothills almost blended with the sky. Quite truthfully might the travel folder call it "an inspiration to the poet, a challenge to the artist."

Michael was the first to break the silence. "Going back to Tucson are you, Pat?"

"Certainly I go to the coast only when I have to. And you know, Michael," she added, "I have not the slightest idea where you're bound for."

He grimaced. "It's strickly business. Linda Terry got it into her pretty head that she wanted to make a horror picture, so J. C. told me to start pounding the type. I couldn't seem to get into the mood of the thing. Finally I decided what I needed was atmosphere. At present I've got my mind on a little ghost town near the border."

"You're not going there alone are you?" she asked aghast.

"Of course. If I get frightened, as I hope to, I'll be able to write all the better. Take the case of a Paramount writer I know. A few years ago he was writing a screenplay about a parachutist, but he couldn't get it to ring true. No realism. What do you think he did?"

"Made a parachute jump?"

"Exactly," confirmed Michael. "The experience gave him just what he needed. After that he knew what he was writing about. The picture turned out to be a hit."

"That's all very interesting," said Pat. "But frankly, I wouldn't fancy the idea of staying in a ghost town, and by yourself—heavens! There's no telling what might happen!"

"Nothing to worry about. Nobody there except the ghosts."

She asked him seriously. "Do you believe in such things, Michael?"

Again the cynical smile. "I believe in nothing I can't see."

"What about God?" she asked.

He turned his gaze to the desert again as he answered. "Ghosts and God are in the same category."

Looking at his register Michael thought he must be nearly there. The gas station attendant had said it was a ten mile drive to Santa Rosa, the ghost town, and according to the register he had gone nine and three quarter miles. He deeply regretted that he was so near his destination, for he was enjoying the moonlight drive across the desert in the blue Sedan he had been lucky enough to rent.

Suddenly the car's headlights revealed the first suspicions of a ghost town. Five feet in from the road an old shack with broken windows stood doggedly resisting time. More tumble down buildings revealed themselves and then—there

was Santa Rosa. Now dead and forgotten, it had once been a booming gold town till the precious dust had exhausted itself. Michael slowed the car down till it barely moved and with one hand on the wheel and a flashlight in the other he began his first inspection of the necropolis.

Shining the light on every building he passed he became acquainted with Joe Birch's general store, Carter's Hotel and Saloon, Hiram Johnson's general store, and many little two story houses, all with window's broken their dark interiors challenging him. When the car came to the end of the town's only street Michael stopped it and looked back. There were no more than fifty buildings in all.

He did not consider himself recreant, yet he began to wish he had waited till the morning to come to Santa Rosa. The dark stillness of the little town was enough to appall braver men than he. With an effort he turned the car about and went back.

"Get hold of yourself, Creelman!" he said. "This is what you wanted!"

Alighting from the car he surveyed Carter's Hotel and Saloon. It appeared to be the most habitable structure, so with a small suitcase and his flashlight guiding him he mounted the porch. Inside he made his way between overturned tables and chairs, so dusty it was impossible to tell their color. He read with interest the signs above the bar. "Wells Fargo leaves every Thursday," "Pack your hardware before the game," and a well corseted lady entreating him to buy Lillian Russell Cigars.

Michael moved past the bar to where a clerk's desk stood. He was dismayed and angry to find the flashlight was shaking in his hand.

"Don't be a fool, Creelman," he addressed himself. "Wouldn't Pat laugh if she could see you now? Wandering about like a ham in a Karloff picture." He laughed and on an impulse rang a little bell that at one time must have been used to summon the clerk. "Hey, how about a room?" he cried in defiance of his nerves. "How about a room, you—"

"What kind of a room would you like?"

Michael almost dropped the light. With a hammering heart he turned slowly in the direction of the voice.

Standing in the kitchen doorway was the biggest man he had ever seen. He was dressed in an untidy suit of a vague

colour. He wore huge riding boots. A flaming mop of red hair ran down his jaws into a beard. His great tobacco stained teeth were revealed in a mighty grin. He chuckled deeply.

"Frightened you, eh?"

Michael gave a sigh of relief. "I'll say you did! Who are you anyway? I thought this town was deserted."

"Not quite," said the giant. "My name's Red Carter. I been livin' here a long time an' I still ain't figurin' on leavin'. Who are you and what are you doin' here, if you don't mind me askin'?"

"My name is Michael Creelman. I'm—" Michael hesitated. Red Carter did not look like the kind of person who would understand a writer coming to a ghost town for atmosphere to breed a story. He decided not to tell the truth. Instead he said, "My car broke down a few minutes ago. I don't like the idea, but, I guess I'll have to spend the night in this burg."

"Well," said Red Carter genially, "It's a long time since I had a guest, but, I'll see what I can do. Come along."

"Don't you ever get lonesome living in this town all by yourself?" asked Michael as they ascended the stairs. Somehow he felt completely at ease.

Red Carter shook his head. "No! I got memories for company. Lots of 'em too! See that room there," he pointed to a door at the head of the stairs. "Billy the Kid slept in there one night. He scared away every guest in the whole Hotel." The huge shoulders shook as he chuckled reminiscently.

"I'll bet he didn't scare you away!" smiled Michael.

"No, he didn't. The Kid and I got along all right. He even paid his bill when he left." The big fellow paused for a minute, his face becoming harder. "You ever hear of Charlie Smith," he asked.

"Vaguely," answered Michael.

"He stayed in that same room a few years later. Charlie and I didn't get along so well. A bad hombre was Charlie." The big fellow seemed to become lost in thought.

At length they came to the end of the corridor. Red waved a hairy hand at a room, the open door of which revealed a cabinet and a bed with a bare mattress. "That's

the nearest thing to sleepin' quarters left in the place. You're welcome to it."

"Thanks a lot," said Michael gratefully. "This is more than I expected to find."

"There's candles in the cabinet if you want 'em. Good-night young fellah! Sleep well!" And he left as silently as he had come.

But Michael did not go to sleep then. An idea for Linda Terry's picture was burning in his mind. After lighting a candle he took out his typewriter and worked steadily until three o'clock. Exhausted finally he stopped for a rest and unintentionally fell asleep.

Andy O'Neil halted his pack mule with an exclamation of surprise.

For more years than he could remember Andy had been passing through Santa Rosa on his daily journey to Fool's River, where he patiently and futilely panned for gold. And always as he walked through its only street, Santa Rosa had been deserted and lifeless as Death Valley itself. Now the old prospector wondered if his eyes were deceiving him. But no, they could not be. For there, plain as day was a blue car parked in front of the saloon.

"Great guns!" said Andy puzzledly.

At that moment a young man appeared in the door of the saloon. His hair was tousled and his eyes squinted as they met the hot glare of the morning sun.

Andy grinned. He thought he understood. "You picked a bad place to sleep it off, pardner," he said.

The man paid no attention to the words. He looked around him frowning slightly. He addressed Andy: "You haven't seen anyone around here have you?"

"Course not," said the prospector. "This here's a ghost town. Ain't no one lives in it."

"What about Red Carter?" asked the young man, his frown increasing.

"You crazy?" ejaculated Andy. "Charlie Smith shot big Red in the back over fifty years ago. It was right in that saloon you just come out of! Hey, what's that matter with you, mister?"

The young man was kneeling in the dust, his face lifted to the sky. No longer did the sun seem to hurt his eyes.