

When Burkhardt Quit

by Walter Adolphe Roberts

BURKHARDT came out of the office shack, his jaw slugged forward like that of a prizefighter. The mob spirit outside had been growing in violence, and now the men were massed ominously, threatening the water well at the center, converging upon the tool-houses of corrugated iron at either end of the camp.

Cries of "Scab boss!" "Kill the blasted coyote!" "We gotta have water!" "Scab!" "Scab!" rang out, staccato, above the general roar that greeted his appearance.

The crowd surged a little nearer. A rush that would bear him down and mangle his body underfoot seemed only a matter of moments.

But the wave of passion ebbed as quickly as it had risen. A heavy silence fell as Burkhardt, emotionless as a sentry at a jail gate, patrolled once, twice, three times the distance between the office and the far end of the well.

He was unarmed, but he glanced, in a manner inexpressibly significant, at the roofs of the tool-houses and the office shack and the barricades of scrapers and dirt wagons that had been thrown up around the well. Men were stationed there, roughnecks as grimly tempered as the workers below them; and each nursed loosely in the crotch of his arm a short military carbine. Under orders not to fire without the

foreman's signal, they divided their attention between his face and the mob.

The atmosphere was electric with the tension of battle.

After making his third round, Burkhardt stopped abruptly before the door of the shack, his long arms hanging loosely and bowed slightly from his body. Standing in the blinding Arizona sunshine, he faced the men who one week before had been his fellow-laborers and comrades.

To-day he held them as rebels, strikers who had stabbed the company in the back and defied his own authority. He disdained to speak before they did.

The giant Matthew Nolan, whose personality dominated the workers, shouldered forward.

"The show-down's got to come right now," he said tersely. "You cut off the water at noon yesterday, and every man, and woman and child, too, is raging mad with thirst. Call your guards off, or we'll rip the guts out of this camp."

Burkhardt thrust out his chin.

"Try!" he snarled. "That's up to you. The general manager's told me to close the well until you're back on the job. I'm here to obey orders."

"It's a rotten way to fight," said Nolan with unexpected patience. "You might as well shut off the air we breathe. We'd die quicker. The next water's twenty miles away. Strike or no strike, we've got a human right to drink."

"The company sank the well. It owns the water."

"It brought us to the desert and knew, without being told, it would have to give us water."

"Yes!" roared Burkhardt. "The company brought you here and gave you not only water, but the wages you asked for and tents to sleep in and good grub to eat. You took all that, and as good as signed and sealed a contract to finish the job. Yet two weeks before the date when the next fifty miles of grade has got to be done, you strike for a ten per cent increase. You think you've got the boss by the neck; but Pratt Brothers Construction Company'd rather lose the year's profits than back down to a bunch of thugs."

The veins in Nolan's neck and face were gorged with blood.

"The old capitalist bunk," he answered furiously. "We've always been robbed of the fruits of our labor, and a strike's fair fighting. You're hitting below the belt."

"Fair fighting! Yah! What about the half mile of grade you dynamited after you'd taken our money to build it?"

"We struck at property, not at human life."

"Well, you struck first. You declared war, and war you've got. Stand back!"

"By God, Burkhardt—"

"Stand back, I say!"

The foreman's body was hunched as if ready for a spring. His glance again swept the strike-breakers, the men with carbines, and sullenly Nolan fell back, the truce parley a failure.

The return of Matthew Nolan was the signal for a new outburst of passionate protest.

Men gathered around his huge form and implored him to lead an immediate attack. He

climbed upon a barrel and thrashed the air with wide, formidable gestures, as he advised a little more delay.

"We're going to be shot to pieces when we do start in," he told them. "Those scabs have regular guns. Very few of us have even revolvers."

A little man in a black cotton shirt, a soiled white tie hitched carelessly around his neck, clamored insistently to be heard.

"We're ten to one. We ain't afraid. They may git one or two, but that's better than dyin' o' thirst. We ain't afraid!"

A handful of women—hard featured, flat-chested wives of the camp—had now worked their way to the front rank.

Children were pulling at their skirts. The faces of the little ones were swollen and unnaturally red. They were whimpering for water.

"Burk!" shrieked a mother, shaking her fist at the foreman. "Ain't you got no heart? You gotta back down. It's life and death for us."

Burkhardt's mask-like face relaxed for the fraction of a second.

"You know the answer, Mrs. Larsen. Tell your husband to go back to work. Tell all these fools to call off their strike."

"They won't do that, Burk. They'll kill you and your strike-breakers first."

The gleam of pity that had flashed in his eyes was extinguished, and he gave her back his hard, lidless stare of a bird of prey.

"If you women have got any sense left," he said, "you'll lie low in your tents. It's not up to you to be shot."

A throaty bellow went up from the strikers; but Mrs. Larsen swung around, threw both her arms above her head, palms outward, and quelled the tumult.

"Let me talk to him. He's got to listen. Dan Burkhardt, you're a laboring man like the rest. By rights, you should be with us. Do you think any wages we could make Pratt Brothers pay

would be too much?

"Look at Larsen with two fingers gone from his right hand. Look at Long Pete with one eye and black powder in his cheeks. Did they ever get what they earned? Did *you* ever get what you earned?"

The brittle crunching of sand under the foreman's feet was his answer. He was pacing in front of the office shack, scrutinizing his defences, watching Nolan for the first aggressive move the strike leader might make.

"Deep down in your heart, you don't want to see us whipped," vociferated the woman. "Could you sleep nights after you'd clubbed the spirit out of men of your own kind?"

"He cain't whip us," yelled the little man in the black shirt. "We'll take the blasted well. We ain't afraid!"

Mrs. Larsen's lean body had become as taut as a violin string. She pushed in front of her own little daughter, and holding the child at arm's length, she made her supreme plea.

"Burkhardt, our men are on strike, and they'll stick to the last gap. We're with them, we women; but the kids are too young to understand. Don't fight the kids. If there's going to be shooting, let them drink first. Let them through to the water."

A muscular spasm twisted the foreman's face.

"Go over to Gila River," he said. "It's only twenty miles. Go, the whole crew of you."

"In this hellish heat? We're too thirsty now. We'd die on the road."

"Why didn't you go yesterday when I closed the well?"

"We thought you was bluffing. No one guessed you'd do the employer's dirty work this way."

Burkhardt's throat clicked harshly, in the semblance of a laugh.

"You make it hard," he said. "I'm a man of my word. I thought the camp knew that much."

"Will you let the children drink?"

"I can't do it," he rasped. "I've taken pay to obey orders. Get back to your tents."

He swung on his heel and with terrific momentum strode by the well, then back to within a few feet of the muttering strikers. His pugilist's jaw was savagely undershot; his small blue eyes flashed points of fire, and the words of his ultimatum were bitten off short.

"Quit talking! Knuckle under, or fight! I give you five minutes! If you're still standing here when the time's up, by all that's holy I'll come in among you and get Matt Nolan with my own hands! The gunmen can attend to the rest."

Nolan plowed his way to the front.

He was literally strangled with rage and could not speak. The two strong men posed in the lurid setting of the desert camp like tiger cats watching for an opening.

A hush, appalling in its completeness, pervaded the scene. A minute dragged by as slowly as an hour, and then a sudden restless stir to the right, on the outskirts of the crowd, broke the almost unbearable tension.

Some one was coming by the tool-house at that end of the camp.

Men craned their necks to see over the heads of their fellows. Even Burkhardt glanced aside. He caught a flash of scarlet, and with a start he abandoned his position and stepped back to the door of the office, whence he could command a view down the camp.

A little girl was approaching slowly, a child in a red dress. She carried an empty water pail, and stepped out bravely through the hot sand and under the stare of scores of hostile eyes.

"It's Simpson's kid!" gasped Nolan. "The nerve of the measly runt to send her here!"

Burkhardt signaled to the child to come on, but his brows were contracted anxiously. Simpson, the bookkeeper, had been guilty of almost incredible folly in having her go to the well at this crucial moment.

But Simpson, he reflected, was not any too brave, and perhaps thought that she would be

less likely to be attacked than he.

"Hurry up, Gertie!" he cried. "The pump's just back of the big dirt wagon."

The strikers stood for a moment inactive in the face of this final challenge. They stared at the child until she reached the well and laid her capable little brown hands upon the pump.

She was hardly equal to the task; but she worked valiantly, and presently a clear, cold stream rushed out, filling her pail and overflowing onto the ground.

The parched sand sucked it down ravenously, audibly. The sound rang in the ears of the thirsty men and women like the plashing of a brook, goading them to a fury greater than any they had known.

"Simpson sha'n't drink if we don't!"

"Where's the low-down coyote? Why don't he come himself?"

"You're a dead man, Burkhardt, if you try to put this over."

"God, what a raw deal!"

"You turned our kids down! Turn down his!"

The cries assailed the foreman from all sides. There was a hint of weariness in his eyes as he squared his shoulders to the new battle of wills. But he faced his enemies, insolently indomitable as before.

"Simpson's not a striker. Sure he gets water. So do I. So does any one who does his duty by Pratt Brothers Construction Company."

"Put the kid in the office!" roared Nolan. "Hell's a going to break loose!"

"Gertie Simpson," said Burkhardt with bitter emphasis, "is safer 'n she'd be in her mother's arms. The man that raised a finger against her 'd be shot like a hound dog!"

He shouted to the gunmen to be ready to fire at the drop of the hat, and taking the child by the shoulder, pushed her gently in the direction from which she had come. It was her only way to safety. To hold off the storm, he knew that he must not weaken.

Sagging to one side with the weight of the pail of water, Gertie trod soberly the path home.

Her red dress flamed like a torch in the white light of the desert. Her mouse-colored hair hung down, guiltless of a ribbon, below her wide straw hat.

A daughter of camps, she was not afraid.

But when a man suddenly fired a revolver in the air, and she saw his face distorted with a frenzy that seemed directed against her, she stopped, bewildered. There was a yell and a surging movement from end to end of the mob.

Gertie turned, panic-stricken, and, still gripping the handle of her pail, rushed headlong into the arms of Matthew Nolan.

The thing was done so quickly as to paralyze the defenders of the well. The strikers closed around the child. The gunmen could not fire without killing her to a certainty.

Yet Burkhardt went single-handed to the rescue.

Buffeted by a score of fists, felled twice to the ground, bleeding, and driven back, he saw Nolan seize the pail and raise it to his lips. With a sob wrenched from his very vitals by the rage of defeat, he flung his right arm across his eyes and stumbled aside.

Nolan's voice reached his ears, recalling him to action.

"So you're thirsty, kid?" the strike leader was saying.

"Yes—vewy thirsty, mister."

Burkhardt swung sharply around. Nolan had not drunk a drop of the water. He had returned the pail, and was patting Gertie on the shoulder.

"Run along home," he said. "There's no one in this crowd mean enough to fight you, kid."

The huskies, to whom his word was law, fell back on either side. They made a clear pathway for the child and cheered her hoarsely.

A mist was in Burkhardt's eyes as he watched the red-clad figure zigzag across the stretch of sand and pass safely between Simpson's tent-flaps.

"And now," said Nolan, striding over to the foreman, "you and I—"

"You and I," repeated Burkhardt dully. "Huh! You want to fight?"

"You bet your life! We're a going to get to the well."

"There was water in Gertie's pail. Why didn't you drink that?"

"We ain't Pratt Brothers' kind. We fight men."

A nerve seemed to snap behind Burkhardt's temples. He turned, bellowing to the strikebreakers on the roofs and barricades.

"Hennessey! Heinholz! Doyle! One of you run this show! I'm through!"

But the gunmen did not fire. Outnumbered from the beginning, they had been held in line by Burkhardt's iron will; and, like all mercenaries, were spineless without a leader.

As pandemonium broke loose, they threw down their carbines and joined the strikers. The defenses of the well were swept away without a shot being fired.

Men and women swarmed to the water. As they turned back, satiated, they sought out Burkhardt, jostling him off his feet, attempting to shake his hand.

He thrust them aside and fought his way stubbornly to the center of the camp.

His horse was standing, saddled, behind one of the tents. As he leaped upon its back he heard Nolan's voice raised in a triumphant harangue.

"We gotta give Burk credit," said the strike leader. "He's a nervy cuss. He fought according to his lights. But blood's thicker'n water. He couldn't quite forget he belonged to the working class, and he's on the right side now."

A cheer went up, and yells of "Burkhardt!" "Here's Burkhardt!" greeted the ex-foreman as he spurred his bronco to the edge of the well where the victorious leader was standing.

"Matt Nolan," he ground between his clenched jaws, "the hide's whipped off of me. I've eaten dirt to-day; but by the Almighty, if you tell this crowd I quit to them, you or I has got to die! I quit to the kids! You played Gertie for your trump card and won. Pratt Brothers shouldn't have set me to keep water from women and kids."

He drove his spurs into the bronco's flanks, and rode headlong into the desert. The men who had been his enemies watched silently until horse and man were lost on the shimmering horizon.