TRUE STORIES of Adventure

The Race for Life

A True Story of the Adventures of Carlos E. Christy, a Young American Mining Engineer in Mexico.

BY CHARLES E. CHRISTY.

There was nothing particularly alarming in the fact that the rebel, or probably a band of brigands and Yaqui Indians masquerading as rebels, had posted manifestos on trees and roadmarks threatening death to all Americans who were not out of Mexico before April 17, 1911. Nevertheless we all thought it best to have the women leave Benito Juarez mine before real danger arose.

Accordingly, we had them throw together all the articles which seem absolutely necessary for feminine comfort and packed them off to San Luis, where they took the Mexican National Railroad for the States. We didn't take the manifestos seriously, but we felt a whole lot better when the women were out of the way. Later it proved fortunate. Things went along just about the same as usual after the 17th of April. The peons and Yaquis were just about as sullen as ever and quite as lazy, but there was no outbreak.

About the first of May there were rumors of rebel victories from all over the republic, and then we had to close up shop, not because of any violence, but because every man within a radius of fifty miles flocked to the Maderist armies, lured by the hope of plunder. We wired New York, and our bosses told us to pack up and quit until the country became settled again. Jimmy Hargan, my chief; Duncan Macfarlane and myself rode the seventy-five miles to San Luis without mishap and took train for Vera Cruz to return to New York by water.

San Luis looked like a county town at fair time. The hotels were packed overflowing and a whole lot of people were sleeping in the plaza and on the outskirts of the town in tents. Every train which left was crowded to overflowing, and it was impossible to get more than one train a day out of the town. Some[illegible] that missed fire, [illegible] there was no schedule time for departure. It was first come first served on any train the railroad could get out of the city.

We waited four days for our turn and then one night had to satisfy ourselves with a grimy day coach, but it was not more than a thirty-six hours' trip to Vera Cruz, and we comforted ourselves by being glad it wasn't a week. The train rattled along merrily for a time, then stopped almost as suddenly as though we had rammed a stone wall. We had not gone far from San Luis, and it was about 10 o'clock.

There were many women among the passengers, and they became panicky right away. Most of the men tumbled out of the coaches to see what was the trouble. Just as I jumped off a platform a big fellow on a horse and brandishing a sabre which looked to me about as long as a fish-pole, galloped up and shouted, "Quien vive?"

That means, "Who lives?" I didn't know what to reply at first, but I wanted to please him, for that sabre looked mighty deadly.

"Madero!" he yelled, and I repeated, "Madero!"

"Get back in the train," he said. I had no pistol and there were at least fifty of the mounted soldiers surrounding the train, so I obeyed with the rest of the passengers who had detrained.

By the time I returned to my car there were half a dozen armed men in each coach, covering the passengers with rifles or revolvers and commanding the men to surrender their arms. There was not a chance to fight and the men were speedily disarmed.

In the midst of the trouble the conductor entered our car and boldly ordered the intruders off the train. Their answer was to beat him with the flats of their swords and to throw him onto the floor of the car.

Then they began to collect all the jewelry and money from the people in our coach. We could do nothing but look on while they took rings from the fingers of the women and went through the pockets of the men, taking everything of value. Before they had finished their work someone shouted an order to march the passengers from the train. We all lined up alongside the tracks and the Mexicans stood opposite, covering us with their rifles.

Meanwhile another band had rifled the express car, blown open the safe and the strong box and smashed the cash drawer in the ticket office.

On the train I had made the acquaintance of a Mr. and Mrs. William M. Moran, and when the trouble first came Moran whispered to me to keep close to him in order to protect his wife. I was more than glad to do so, for she was a charming woman, and I knew that if her husband was injured or killed she would be liable to all sorts of insults.

It must have been an hour that we were lined up by the railroad track while a party of soldiers went ahead and burned a bridge to prevent the train being sent through to Mexico City if the engineer should succeed in breaking away.

A man in uniform, who called himself Col. Nicolas Torres, was in command, and after the burning of the bridge he gave orders that we should be marched to a sort of shed that stood near a siding. They formed us in double file and we were herded into a sort of shed and the doors barred. Outside we could hear the tramping of horses and the occasional sound of firing at some distance. I climbed to a small window and saw a line of mounted guards outside the shed. There was a small town about two miles distant and a red glare in the sky showed that the brigands were burning and pillaging. Cries and shouting added to the terror of the women.

We had been in the shed about two hours when an officer entered and, singling out eight men and women, ordered a guard to conduct them into the train yards. They were gone about twenty minutes and then eight more were marched out. Mr. and Mrs. Moran and myself were in the third party of eight who were ordered into the yard. Once there, the bandits forced us to stand with our backs against a stone wall, then what appeared to be a firing squad faced us with level rifles.

An officer, who was so intoxicated that he reeled about unsteadily on his feet, stood a little to one side and explained to us in ludicrously polite language.

"When I have the pleasure of addressing to you the question, 'Quien vive,' you will very kindly shout, 'Madero.' Those who do not so honor me will be respectfully shot down."

I knew there were some of the party who might not understand Spanish, so I hurried to explain the meaning of the officer's threat.

Presently he shouted, "Quien vive?"

"Madero!" we all yelled at the top of our lungs, for we were taking no chances with the ugly black muzzles of the rifles held steady, not more than forty feet from our breasts.

Three times in the next two hours this performance was encored for the pleasure of some officer who had missed the previous spectacle. Each time we left the shed we could see that the bandits were pillaging and burning in the town, and things began to look pretty serious, with the Mexicans getting drunker and drunker every minute.

Moran and I were in a corner with a man named Phelan, whispering over a plan to escape with his wife, when four men in shabby uniforms, whom we had noticed scrutinizing the faces of all the prisoners, stepped up to us and, touching Phelan and myself on the shoulder, said:

"Come with us; we want to see you!"

The dangerous end of a revolver pressed against my ribs was more eloquent than any oratory, and we went with our captors. I should say we walked about a mile up into the mountains, far away from the main body of the bandits. Two of our guards I recognized as men who had rifled the pockets of the passengers in my car, and as they had not reached me by the time the officer ordered us all from the train I began to suspect that they hoped to get money from us. As a precaution, I had sent all my money to a friend in Vera Cruz, keeping only enough in my clothes to cover the incidental expenses of the trip. I did not know how much Phelan had with him.

From the height to which we climbed we could see almost the whole of the neighboring town in flames. In a lonely spot in the woods we were halted and the spokesman addressed me. In less serious circumstances his extreme courtesy would have been humorous.

"Senores," he said, bowing, "I regret to inform you that when we collected from the cash drawer in the railroad station we were disappointed. The funds did not meet our expectations. In fact, they fell short by $5,000. This is a very regrettable incident, and we realize that you, senores, are not responsible. But you are Americans, and we feel sure that your generous impulses will prompt you to make up the deficit."

"In other words," I retorted, "you would blackmail us for $5,000. And what if we refuse to submit?"

"I regret that a very severe and sudden malady might in that case terminate your existence," said the spokesman.

"But we have not $5,000 between us," I argued.

"Well," said the brigand, "some men hold life very cheap. I am disappointed that you do not value yours as high as $2,500. We have not long to wait, and I would suggest that in ten minutes you make up your minds to pay us the amount. Otherwise—" His sentence ended with a shrug of the shoulders.

"I will lay here and rot before I give you a penny voluntarily," I almost shouted, for the insults which had been heaped on us, one after another, had stung me into desperation.

"Wait a minute," said Phelan in Spanish. "Senores, my friend speaks a little hastily. He is exasperated quite as much by the thought that you were so grievously disappointed in the cash box as he is by what he considers your unfair demands. I think you are entirely in the right. I ask only for a few moments to consult with him."

The brigands smiled and relaxed their belligerent attitude at this. They even ceased to finger their pistols.

"Look here," said Phelan to me. "You know these fellows as well as I do. The only way to treat them is to play their own game. Salve them a little. It doesn't mean anything to us, but it is their way. Besides, there is a good deal of bravado about them. We will beat them yet."

Then he walked back to the leader and said to him: "My friend and myself are sorry that we cannot give you what you ask, but we will gladly turn over to you every centavo in our possession. Will that not be fair?"

The brigand grumbled, but invited us to be quick about giving him the money. Phelan and I went down in our jeans and pooled $37.71. That was every penny we could scrape together. The leader snatched it greedily and began to count the gold and silver. Phelan and I meanwhile turned our pockets inside out to show that we were playing fair.

"Senores," said the spokesman, presently, "you are more than generous. I fear that we would embarrass you should we ask you to return to the train without a single centavo. It is my desire that you should accept at our hands the odd change."

With a grand flourish he returned to Phelan the 75 cents, which was his idea of the acme of generosity. The four began to haggle over the main booty, quarreling about the division of it. The leader claimed the lion's share and the three others were banded against him. They seemed to have forgotten us completely.

"It was the work of seconds to unbar the doors of the train shed."

"Now is our time," whispered Phelan, and with the words he landed a good stiff punch on the jaw of the leader. The man toppled backwards, sprang to his feet again and tore off through the brush without waiting for more. In the fall his revolver had clattered to the ground, and I pounced upon it. Before the others could tackle Phelan I had fired and struck one man in the arm. It hung limply at his side, and his friends dragged him away with them into the bushes. From there they fired at us, but the shots went wild, and we started to run down the trail.

Hearing the bandits crashing after us, we leaped behind a tree, and I used two of my remaining cartridges. There was a yell, and I judged that I had hit one of them. We waited silently for more trouble, but the Mexicans knew there was much loot to be had elsewhere for little or no fighting and apparently decided to give us up for something easier.

I had paid strict attention to the route we followed from the train shed to the point where the fight with the robbers had taken place, and we retraced our steps as fast as we could in the darkness. About 200 yards from the building we came out on the railroad track and ran squarely into a cloaked figure hurrying in the direction of the shed.

I was not in the mood for any more bullying, and without ceremony I levelled the pistol at the stranger's head and shouted to him to stand.

"Who are you?" asked Phelan.

For reply the man threw open the cloak and we saw that he wore the garb of a priest.

"I am a friend," he said. "Perhaps you need help. If so, I am at your service. I have done my best to restrain these marauders, but they have gotten away from us."

We explained to him the situation at the train shed and he promised to help us.

"They have just left for the next town," he said. "I think they will be there for more than two or three hours. If you could escape meanwhile it would be well. They have left a guard at the train shed, but I think you might get away. If there are any among you who know how to run a locomotive you might take the train out of danger."

On the way to the building we talked over plans for escape. The bandits had left a guard, but they had been attracted by the possibility of more pillage, and it looked to us as though all but one of the men had left their posts. Hiding behind trees and rocks, we crawled closer to the building, and were relieved to find that there was actually only the single armed man between the prisoners and liberty.

"You take care of him," whispered the priest when we were very close, "but do not take life. It will not be necessary."

Phelan and I had no desire to kill the man, but we were determined to free our friends. When we were within thirty feet of the brigand we leaped at him, Phelan in the lead and I behind him with the pistol I had taken from our captors. I was not to shoot unless Phelan was in danger.

The man was not ready and my friend seized his rifle with both hands, crashed the barrel up against the Mexican's chin and had him sprawling on the grass. Both of us were on top of him in a second, I holding my hand over his mouth. The sound of running behind us made me start, but I turned to see our friend the priest. He dropped on his knees and quickly tied a handkerchief around the man's mouth, making an effectual gag.

"Get your friends out," he whispered to us.

We ran for the shed, and the last we saw of the priest he was sitting on the bandit's chest, reinforcing moral suasion with a little physical force.

It was the work of seconds to unbar the doors of the train shed.

"The rebels have gone to the next town," yelled Phelan. "Get out of here while you can."

There was a rush for the doors. Phelan and I found Mr. and Mrs. Moran and stuck close to them. We knew the bridge ahead was burned and we all started to run back up the railroad track. We had not gone a hundred yards when we heard a shot behind us, the yelling of men and the trampling of horses. My pistol and the rifle Phelan had taken from the guard were the only firearms we had among us. Some of the fugitives left the tracks and scrambled into the woods, but most of them, when they knew they were discovered, preferred to give themselves up rather than risk being shot.

We four and two other men kept to the track and were outdistancing our pursuers when we heard the galloping of a horse. An officer was riding us down, but just as we swerved toward the woods his mount stumbled in a sluiceway across the track and he was thrown down the embankment.

Presently we all but stumbled into a hand car resting alongside the tracks. The six of us frantically tugged it onto the rails, jumped upon it, and began to pump for all we were worth.

Mrs. Moran helped us at the levers. We had to travel on up grade, but we developed considerable speed. We were congratulating ourselves upon our escape when around a curve we had just passed jutted a bright light and we heard the rumble of an engine.

My first impulse was to grab the woman and jump from the car, but presently we rounded another curve and the light was out of sight again. The hand car twisted and turned along the face of a cliff in alarming fashion, but we began to hope that the men in the locomotive would not be able to drive it along the perilous trails as fast as we could run our hand car. We listened eagerly to the snorting of the engine, but it did not seem to grow louder. We twisted and turned recklessly, and I remembered that the train had crawled very slowly down the tortuous grade. For the locomotive, not anchored by the heavy cars behind it, the trail would undoubtedly be more dangerous.

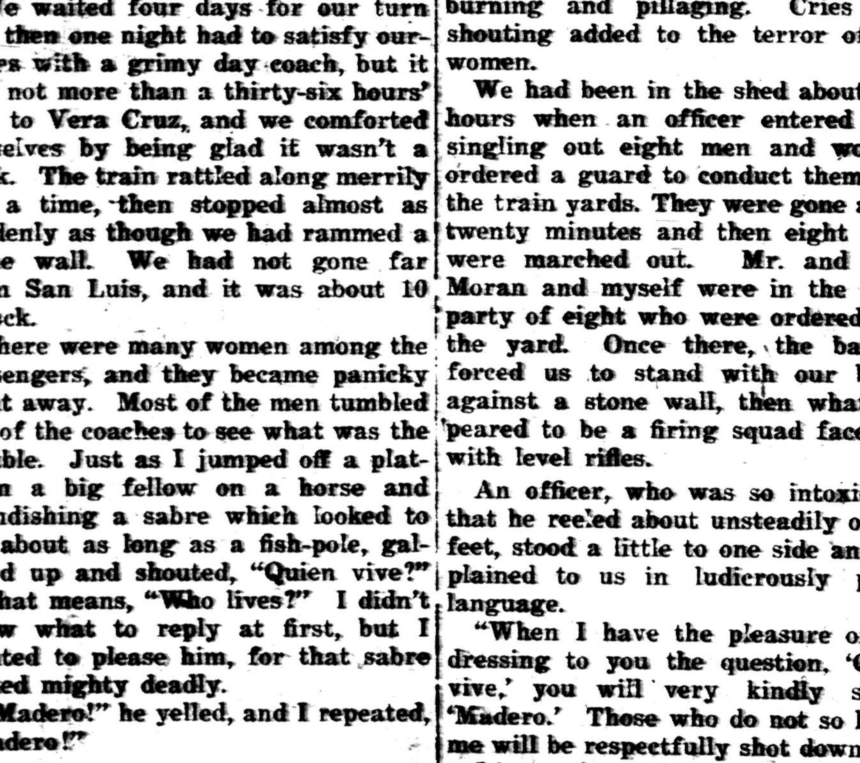
Afterward I learned that the bandits had found an engine with steam up in the railroad yards at the town we had seen burning. One of their number claimed to be an engineer. At any rate he was enough of one to start the locomotive, which our pursuers had taken past the stalled train by means of the siding.

We seemed to hold our own in the race and, unless forced to, were unwilling to jump from the hand car. We dared not slow down for fear of being smashed by the engine. On one side the precipice dropped probably 500 feet, and on the other side there was so narrow a margin of level ground that we were afraid of being dashed lifeless against the rocky wall if we jumped at the speed we were travelling.

Our backs ached as though they were breaking. Mrs. Moran's breath came in short sobs, but she stuck to her task with the rest of us. Even when the puffing of the locomotive grew dimmer we dared not relax, for if we should come to a straight reach of track our pursuers would have the advantage. The headlight was never visible now, but sometimes we heard the snorting of the engine. At last even that died aday.

It seemed weeks that we had driven our hand car, although it could not have been more than three hours, when red and green signal lights shone ahead of us in a window high above the roadbed, and we knew that we were approaching the San Luis signal tower. The grade changed there and we could coast down into the town, but we stuck to the levers not to let the car get away from us.

As we passed the tower Mrs. Moran groaned, her hands slipped from the lever and she would have fallen if her husband had not caught her. She was exhausted, but she was game to the last. We reported to the rurales in San Luis and a band went to the relief of the prisoners at the train shed. The bridge was repaired in two days and we all proceeded to Vera Cruz. The two men who had been on the car with us were James Churchwarden, an Englishman, and Robert Phillips of Boston.



"And I think I hit the man."

Sir Charles A. Parson, English scientist, wants to sink a granite-lined shaft 12 miles into the bowels of the earth and use as a source of boundless power the heat of the earth's interior.

S.S. LESSON

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ANALYSIS.

I. A MAN OF THE PHARISEES, 1, 2.
II. BORN AGAIN, 3, 4.
III. NEW BIRTH EXPLAINED, 5-9.
IV. FURTHER EXPLANATION, 9-15.
V. THE EVANGELIST'S COMMENT, 16, 17.

INTRODUCTION.—John's Gospel contains many striking character studies, and of these one of the most important is that of Nicodemus. Last lesson told of the way in which five disciples gave their hearts in loving surrender to Christ. They were impelled by a true and living faith and Jesus had given himself to them. But this faith of the five is here placed in contrast with another kind of faith. Some were drawn to Christ by seeing the wonders which he wrought, and in such cases of imperfect faith Jesus could not give His best gifts. This is explained in Ch. 2: 23-25. Nicodemus is introduced as an example of the class whose faith is of a less noble type and which needs correction. He is impressed by the signs wrought by Jesus and draws an inference that this must be a great leader. It is an intellectual faith, not a full surrender of the heart to Christ. Nicodemus is an educated Jew, prejudiced, but honest, and timid about taking any bold course. He is mentioned on two other occasions (7:51) where he tries to defend Jesus in an indirect manner, and 19:38 where he helps in the entombment of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels are silent about him, but later tradition represents him as a true follower of the Lord.

I. A MAN OF THE PHARISEES, 1, 2.

The Pharisees were the popular leaders of the people and were intent upon fulfilling the law. They were held in high regard by the nation and represented much of what was best in Judaism. Paul was one of this class, "a ruler of the Jews" a member of the Sanhedrin which was the great Jewish court. He was evidently a man of considerable importance.

V. 2. Came . . . by night; to escape the notice and criticism of the people and also to have a private interview with Jesus. He disliked publicity. Miracles; better "signs." We know that the Jews were eagerly looking for signs or outward work by which the new kingdom was to be introduced. The Jews require a sign, 1 Cor. 1-22. This approach shows a measure of earnestness, but it also suggests traces of self-sufficiency. He has the pride of his nation and is a bit patronizing. He does not recognize the sublime grandeur of Jesus, as Nathanael did.

II. BORN AGAIN, 3, 4.

The story of Nicodemus is a frame in which to present the great lesson which Jesus would teach. It is "the crowning miracle of the second birth."

V. 3. Verily, verily. Found only in John. The Synoptics have the simple "Amen." It means "in truth" or "truly." See Luke 4:25.

V. 3. Born again. Two translations are given (1) "from the beginning," "over again," or (2) "from above," "from heaven." Jesus would have Nicodemus know that the change which he has brought is so radical that no mere teacher can suffice; neither does membership in the Jewish nation involve membership in the kingdom of God. The change is so great that it is like a new birth. There is a boundless heritage waiting all who accept Christ, v. 4. The confusion of Nicodemus is complete. He almost suggests that Jesus' statement is absurd.

III. NEW BIRTH EXPLAINED, 5-9.

V. 5. Born of water and of the Spirit: "Water refers to baptism, the act of admission to this outward membership. "Spirit" refers to the divine agency which works in the heart of all who open their lives to Christ. Nicodemus thought he had this salvation by birthright. Jesus tells him he must come as all others do by humble submission and willing acceptance of God's spirit. Nicodemus is the gospel equivalent to Paul before conversion. Paul expected to be saved by law, but found out that he must accept salvation as a gift from God. The kingdom of God involves a new heart. Flesh begets only flesh. In Matt. 18:3 we have the same truth put in a different form. The new birth corresponds to conversion.

V. 8. The wind. Jesus illustrates his lesson by the wind which perhaps at this time was rustling the leaves of the trees. The sound was heard, the power was invisible. God's Spirit was unseen, but the effects were manifest. The Spirit is God in action.

IV. FURTHER EXPLANATION. 9-15.

Jesus now proceeds to interpret things more fully and in doing so criticizes the dullness of Nicodemus.

V. 10. Art thou a Master of Israel? One who had read such books as Hosea, Isaiah, Psalms ought to know about the spiritual work of God.

V. 11. We speak that we do know. Jesus and those in his group had had direct and personal assurance of the new life. Experience is the best proof.

V. 13. Son of man. Jesus has come down from heaven and He alone, therefore, can guide men back to God.

V. 14. The future is shadowed forth in a mysterious way. The brazen serpent was lifted up and all who looked were healed. So Jesus would be lifted up on the cross and this would be the crowning splendor of the Saviour's life. Thus early did Jesus realize that he was to die for the world.

V. THE EVANGELIST'S COMMENT, 16, 17.

The verses contain the heart of the gospel and were probably a commentary on the mission of Christ made by John. The entire plan of God is determined by the love of God. If other things are mysterious, love is not, and we may trust entirely to our heavenly Father who has given us his best gift. The meaning of the new birth is found in the love of God.