

FICTION

Frank Harris

**Eatin Crow
and the Best
Man in Garotte**

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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EATIN' CROW.

The evening on which Charley Muirhead made his first appearance at Doolan's was a memorable one; the camp was in wonderful spirits. Whitman was said to have struck it rich. Garotte, therefore, might yet become popular in the larger world, and its evil reputation be removed. Besides, what Whitman had done any one might do, for by common consent he was a "demed fool." Good-humour accordingly reigned at Doolan's, and the saloon was filled with an excited, hopeful crowd. Bill Bent, however, was anything but pleased; he generally was in a bad temper, and this evening, as Crocker remarked carelessly, he was "more omery than ever." The rest seemed to pay no attention to the lanky, dark man with the narrow head, round, black eyes, and rasping voice. But Bent would croak: "Whitman's struck nothin'; thar ain't no gold in Garotte; it's all work and no dust." In this strain he went on, offending local sentiment and making every one uncomfortable.

Muirhead's first appearance created a certain sensation. He was a fine upstanding fellow of six feet or over, well made, and good-looking. But Garotte had too much experience of life to be won by a stranger's handsome looks. Muirhead's fair moustache and large blue eyes counted for little there. Crocker and others, masters in the art of judging men, noticed that his eyes were unsteady, and his manner, though genial, seemed hasty. Reggitt summed up their opinion in the phrase, "looks as if he'd bite off more'n he could chaw." Unconscious of the criticism, Muirhead talked, offered drinks, and made himself agreeable.

At length in answer to Bent's continued grumbling, Muirhead said pleasantly: "Tain't so bad as that in Garotte, is it? This bar don't look like poverty, and if I set up drinks for the crowd, it's because I'm glad to be in this camp."

"P'r'aps you found the last place you was in jes' a leetle too warm, eh?" was Bent's retort.

Muirhead's face flushed, and for a second he stood as if he had been struck. Then, while the crowd moved aside, he sprang towards Bent, exclaiming, "Take that back--right off! Take it back!"

"What?" asked Bent coolly, as if surprised; at the same time, however, retreating a pace or two, he slipped his right hand behind him.

Instantly Muirhead threw himself upon him, rushed him with what seemed demoniac strength to the open door and flung him away out on his back into the muddy ditch that served as a street. For a moment there was a hush of expectation, then Bent was seen to gather himself up painfully and move out of the square of light into the darkness. But Muirhead did not wait for this; hastily, with hot face and hands still working with excitement, he returned to the bar with:

"That's how I act. No one can jump me. No one, by God!" and he glared round the room defiantly. Reggitt, Harrison,

and some of the others looked at him as if on the point of retorting, but the cheerfulness was general, and Bent's grumbling before a stranger had irritated them almost as much as his unexpected cowardice. Muirhead's challenge was not taken up, therefore, though Harrison did remark, half sarcastically:

"That may be so. You jump them, I guess."

"Well, boys, let's have the drink," Charley Muirhead went on, his manner suddenly changing to that of friendly greeting, just as if he had not heard Harrison's words.

The men moved up to the bar and drank, and before the liquor was consumed, Charley's geniality, acting on the universal good-humour, seemed to have done away with the discontent which his violence and Bent's cowardice had created. This was the greater tribute to his personal charm, as the refugees of Garotte usually hung together, and were inclined to resent promptly any insult offered to one of their number by a stranger. But in the present case harmony seemed to be completely reestablished, and it would have taken a keener observer than Muirhead to have understood his own position and the general opinion. It was felt that the stranger had bluffed for all he was worth, and that Garotte had come out "at the little end of the horn."

A day or two later Charley Muirhead, walking about the camp, came upon Dave Crocker's claim, and offered to buy half of it and work as a partner, but the other would not sell; "the claim was worth nothin'; not good enough for two, anyhow;" and there the matter would have ended, had not the young man proposed to work for a spell just to keep his hand in. By noon Crocker was won; nobody could resist Charley's hard work and laughing high spirits. Shortly afterwards the older man proposed to knock off; a day's work, he reckoned, had been done, and evidently considering it impossible to accept a stranger's labour without acknowledgment, he pressed Charley to come up to his shanty and eat. The simple meal was soon despatched, and Crocker, feeling the obvious deficiencies of his larder, produced a bottle of Bourbon, and the two began to drink. Glass succeeded glass, and at length Crocker's reserve seemed to thaw; his manner became almost easy, and he spoke half frankly.

"I guess you're strong," he remarked. "You threw Bent out of the saloon the other night like as if he was nothin'; strength's good, but 'tain't everythin'. I mean," he added, in answer to the other's questioning look, "Samson wouldn't have a show with a man quick on the draw who meant bizness. Bent didn't pan out worth a cent, and the boys didn't like him, but--them things don't happen often." So in his own way he tried to warn the man to whom he had taken a liking.

Charley felt that a warning was intended, for he replied decisively: "It don't matter. I guess he wanted to jump me, and I won't be jumped, not if Samson wanted to, and all the revolvers in Garotte were on me."

"Wall," Crocker went on quietly, but with a certain curiosity in his eyes, "that's all right, but I reckon you were mistaken. Bent didn't want to rush ye; 'twas only his cussed way, and he'd had mighty bad luck. You might hev waited to see if he meant anythin', mightn't ye?" And he looked his listener in the face as he spoke.

"That's it," Charley replied, after a long pause, "that's just it. I couldn't wait, d'ye see!" and then continued hurriedly, as if driven to relieve himself by a full confession: "Maybe you don't *sabe*. It's plain enough, though I'd have to begin far back to make you understand. But I don't mind if you want to hear. I was raised in the East, in Rhode Island, and I guess I was liked by everybody. I never had trouble with any one, and I was a sort of favourite.... I fell in love with a girl, and as I hadn't much money, I came West to make some, as quick as I knew how. The first place I struck was Laramie--you don't know it? 'Twas a hard place; cowboys, liquor saloons, cursin' and swearin', poker and shootin' nearly every night. At the beginning I seemed to get along all right, and I liked the boys, and thought they liked me. One night a little Irishman was rough on me; first of all I didn't notice, thought he meant nothin', and then, all at once, I saw he meant it--and more.

"Well, I got a kind of scare--I don't know why--and I took what he said and did nothin'. Next day the boys sort of held off from me, didn't talk; thought me no account, I guess, and that little Irishman just rode me round the place with spurs on. I never kicked once. I thought I'd get the money--I had done well with the stock I had bought--and go back East and marry, and no one would be any the wiser. But the Irishman kept right on, and first one and then another of the boys went for me, and I took it all. I just," and here his voice rose, and his manner became feverishly excited, "I just ate crow right along for months--and tried to look as if 'twas quail.

"One day I got a letter from home. She wanted me to hurry up and come back. She thought a lot of me, I could see; more than ever, because I had got along--I had written and told her my best news. And then, what had been hard grew impossible right off. I made up my mind to sell the stock and strike for new diggings. I couldn't stand it any longer--not after her letter. I sold out and cleared.... I ought to hev stayed in Laramie, p'raps, and gone for the Irishman, but I just couldn't. Every one there was against me."

"I guess you oughter hev stayed.... Besides, if you had wiped up the floor with that Irishman the boys would hev let up on you."

"P'raps so," Charley resumed, "but I was sick of the whole crowd. I sold off, and lit out. When I got on the new stage-coach, fifty miles from Laramie, and didn't know the driver or any one, I made up my mind to start fresh. Then and

there I resolved that I had eaten all the crow I was going to eat; the others should eat crow now, and if there was any jumpin' to be done, I'd do it, whatever it cost. And so I went for Bent right off. I didn't want to wait. 'Here's more crow,' I thought, 'but I won't eat it; he shall, if I die for it,' and I just threw him out quick."

"I see," said Crocker, with a certain sympathy in his voice, "but you oughter hev waited. You oughter make up to wait from this on, Charley. 'Tain't hard. You don't need to take anythin' and set under it. I'm not advisin' that, but it's stronger to wait before you go fer any one. The boys," he added significantly, "don't like a man to bounce, and what they don't like is pretty hard to do."

"Damn the boys," exclaimed Charley vehemently, "they're all alike out here. I can't act different. If I waited, I might wait too long--too long, d'you *sabe*? I just can't trust myself," he added in a subdued tone.

"No," replied Crocker meditatively. "No, p'raps not. But see here, Charley, I kinder like you, and so I tell you, no one can bounce the crowd here in Garotte. They're the worst crowd you ever struck in your life. Garotte's known for hard cases. Why," he went on earnestly, as if he had suddenly become conscious of the fact, "the other night Reggitt and a lot came mighty near goin' fer you--and Harrison, Harrison took up what you said. You didn't notice, I guess; and p'raps 'twas well you didn't; but you hadn't much to spare. You won by the odd card.

"No one can bounce this camp. They've come from everywhere, and can only jes' get a livin' here--no more. And when luck's bad they're"--and he paused as if no adjective were strong enough. "If a man was steel, and the best and quickest on the draw ever seen, I guess they'd bury him if he played your way."

"Then they may bury me," retorted Charley bitterly, "but I've eaten my share of crow. I ain't goin' to eat any more. Can't go East now with the taste of it in my mouth. I'd rather they buried me."

And they did bury him--about a fortnight after. July, 1892.

THE BEST MAN IN GAROTTE.

Lawyer Rablay had come from nobody knew where. He was a small man, almost as round as a billiard ball. His body was round, his head was round; his blue eyes and even his mouth and chin were round; his nose was a perky snub; he was florid and prematurely bald--a picture of good-humour. And yet he was a power in Garotte. When he came to the camp, a row was the only form of recreation known to the miners. A "fuss" took men out of themselves, and was accordingly hailed as an amusement; besides, it afforded a subject of conversation. But after Lawyer Rablay's arrival fights became comparatively infrequent. Would-be students of human nature declared at first that his flow of spirits was merely animal, and that his wit was thin; but even these envious ones had to admit later that his wit told, and that his good-humour was catching.

Crocker and Harrison had nearly got to loggerheads one night for no reason apparently, save that each had a high reputation for courage, and neither could find a worthier antagonist. In the nick of time Rablay appeared; he seemed to understand the situation at a glance, and broke in:

"See here, boys. I'll settle this. They're disputin'--I know they are. Want to decide with bullets whether 'Frisco or Denver's the finest city. 'Frisco's bigger and older, says Crocker; Harrison maintains Denver's better laid out. Crocker replies in his quiet way that 'Frisco ain't dead yet' Good temper being now re-established, Rablay went on: "I'll decide this matter right off. Crocker and Harrison shall set up drinks for the crowd till we're all laid out. And I'll tell a story," and he began a tale which cannot be retold here, but which delighted the boys as much by its salaciousness as by its vivacity.

Lawyer Rablay was to Garotte what novels, theatres, churches, concerts are to more favoured cities; in fact, for some six months, he and his stories constituted the chief humanizing influence in the camp. Deputations were often despatched from Doolan's to bring Rablay to the bar. The miners got up "cases" in order to give him work. More than once both parties in a dispute, real or imaginary, engaged him, despite his protestations, as attorney, and afterwards the boys insisted that, being advocate for both sides, he was well fitted to decide the issue as judge. He had not been a month in Garotte before he was christened Judge, and every question, whether of claim-boundaries, the suitability of a nickname, or the value of "dust," was submitted for his decision. It cannot be asserted that his enviable position was due either to perfect impartiality or to infallible wisdom. But every one knew that his judgments would be informed by shrewd sense and good-humour, and would be followed by a story, and woe betide the disputant whose perversity deferred that pleasure. So Garotte became a sort of theocracy, with Judge Rablay as ruler. And yet he was, perhaps, the only man in the community whose courage had never been tested or even considered.

One afternoon a man came to Garotte, who had a widespread reputation. His name was Bill Hitchcock. A marvellous shot, a first-rate poker-player, a good rider--these virtues were outweighed by his desperate temper. Though not more

than five-and-twenty years of age his courage and ferocity had made him a marked man. He was said to have killed half-a-dozen men; and it was known that he had generally provoked his victims. No one could imagine why he had come to Garotte, but he had not been half an hour in the place before he was recognized. It was difficult to forget him, once seen. He was tall and broad-shouldered; his face long, with well-cut features; a brown moustache drooped negligently over his mouth; his heavy eyelids were usually half-closed, but when in moments of excitement they were suddenly updrawn, one was startled by a naked hardness of grey-green eyes.

Hitchcock spent the whole afternoon in Doolan's, scarcely speaking a word. As night drew down, the throng of miners increased. Luck had been bad for weeks; the camp was in a state of savage ill-humour. Not a few came to the saloon that night intending to show, if an opportunity offered, that neither Hitchcock nor any one else on earth could scare them. As minute after minute passed the tension increased. Yet Hitchcock stood in the midst of them, drinking and smoking in silence, seemingly unconcerned.

Presently the Judge came in with a smile on his round face and shot off a merry remark. But the quip didn't take as it should have done. He was received with quiet nods and not with smiles and loud greetings as usual. Nothing daunted, he made his way to the bar, and, standing next to Hitchcock, called for a drink.

"Come, Doolan, a Bourbon; our only monarch!"

Beyond a smile from Doolan the remark elicited no applause. Astonished, the Judge looked about him; never in his experience had the camp been in that temper. But still he had conquered too often to doubt his powers now. Again and again he tried to break the spell--in vain. As a last resort he resolved to use his infallible receipt against ill-temper.

"Boys! I've just come in to tell you one little story; then I'll have to go."

From force of habit the crowd drew towards him, and faces relaxed. Cheered by this he picked up his glass from the bar and turned towards his audience. Unluckily, as he moved, his right arm brushed against Hitchcock, who was looking at him with half-opened eyes. The next moment Hitchcock had picked up his glass and dashed it in the Judge's face. Startled, confounded by the unexpected suddenness of the attack, Rablay backed two or three paces, and, blinded by the rush of blood from his forehead, drew out his handkerchief. No one stirred. It was part of the unwritten law in Garotte to let every man in such circumstances play his game as he pleased. For a moment or two the Judge mopped his face, and then he started towards his assailant with his round face puckered up and out-thrust hands. He had scarcely moved, however, when Hitchcock levelled a long Navy Colt against his breast:

"Git back, you -----"

The Judge stopped. He was unarmed but not cowed. All of a sudden those wary, long eyes of Hitchcock took in the fact that a score of revolvers covered him.

With lazy deliberation Dave Crocker moved out of the throng towards the combatants, and standing between them, with his revolver pointing to the ground, said sympathetically:

"Jedge, we're sorry you've been jumped, here in Garotte. Now, what would you like?"

"A fair fight," replied Rablay, beginning again to use his handkerchief.

"Wall," Crocker went on, after a pause for thought. "A square fight's good but hard to get. This man," and his head made a motion towards Hitchcock as he spoke, "is one of the best shots there is, and I reckon you're not as good at shootin' as at--other things." Again he paused to think, and then continued with the same deliberate air of careful reflection, "We all cotton to you, Jedge; you know that. Suppose you pick a man who kin shoot, and leave it to him. That'd be fair, an' you kin jes' choose any of us, or one after the other. We're all willin'."

"No," replied the Judge, taking away the handkerchief, and showing a jagged, red line on his forehead. "No! he struck *me*. I don't want any one to help *me*, or take my place."

"That's right," said Crocker, approvingly; "that's right, Jedge, we all like that, but 'tain't square, and this camp means to hev it square. You bet!" And, in the difficult circumstances, he looked round for the approval which was manifest on every one of the serious faces. Again he began: "I guess, Jedge, you'd better take my plan, 'twould be surer. No! Wall, suppose I take two six-shooters, one loaded, the other empty, and put them under a *capote* on the table in the next room. You could both go in and draw for weapons; that'd be square, I reckon?" and he waited for the Judge's reply.

"Yes," replied Rablay, "that'd be fair. I agree to that."

"Hell!" exclaimed Hitchcock, "I don't. If he wants to fight, I'm here; but I ain't goin' to take a hand in no sich derved game--with the cards stocked agen me."

"Ain't you?" retorted Crocker, facing him, and beginning slowly. "I reckon *you'll* play any game we say. *See!* any damned game *we* like. D'y'e understand?"

As no response was forthcoming to this defiance, he went into the other room to arrange the preliminaries of the duel. A few moments passed in silence, and then he came back through the lane of men to the two combatants.

"Jedge," he began, "the six-shooters are there, all ready. Would you like to hev first draw, or throw for it with him?" contemptuously indicating Hitchcock with a movement of his head as he concluded.

"Let us throw," replied Rablay, quietly.

In silence the three dice and the box were placed by Doolan on the bar. In response to Crocker's gesture the Judge took up the box and rolled out two fives and a three--thirteen. Every one felt that he had lost the draw, but his face did not change any more than that of his adversary. In silence Hitchcock replaced the dice in the box and threw a three, a four, and a two--nine; he put down the box emphatically.

"Wall," Crocker decided impassively, "I guess that gives you the draw, Jedge; we throw fer high in Garotte--sometimes," he went on, turning as if to explain to Hitchcock, but with insult in his voice, and then, "After you, Jedge!"

Rablay passed through the crowd into the next room. There, on a table, was a small heap covered with a cloak. Silently the men pressed round, leaving Crocker between the two adversaries in the full light of the swinging lamp.

"Now, Jedge," said Crocker, with a motion towards the table.

"No!" returned the Judge, with white, fixed face, "he won; let him draw first. I only want a square deal."

A low hum of surprise went round the room. Garotte was more than satisfied with its champion. Crocker looked at Hitchcock, and said:

"It's your draw, then." The words were careless, but the tone and face spoke clearly enough.

A quick glance round the room and Hitchcock saw that he was trapped. These men would show him no mercy. At once the wild beast in him appeared. He stepped to the table, put his hand under the cloak, drew out a revolver, dropped it, pointing towards Rablay's face, and pulled the trigger. A sharp click. That revolver, at any rate, was unloaded. Quick as thought Crocker stepped between Hitchcock and the table. Then he said:

"It's your turn now, Jedge!"

As he spoke a sound, half of relief and half of content came from the throats of the onlookers. The Judge did not move. He had not quivered when the revolver was levelled within a foot of his head; he did not appear to have seen it. With set eyes and pale face, and the jagged wound on his forehead whence the blood still trickled, he had waited, and now he did not seem to hear. Again Crocker spoke:

"Come, Jedge, it's your turn."

The sharp, loud words seemed to break the spell which had paralyzed the man. He moved to the table, and slowly drew the revolver from under the cloak. His hesitation was too much for the crowd.

"Throw it through him, Jedge! Now's your chance. Wade in, Jedge!"

The desperate ferocity of the curt phrases seemed to move him. He raised the revolver. Then came in tones of triumph:

"I'll bet high on the Jedge!"

He dropped the revolver on the floor, and fled from the room.

The first feeling of the crowd of men was utter astonishment, but in a moment or two this gave place to half-contemptuous sympathy. What expression this sentiment would have found it is impossible to say, for just then Bill Hitchcock observed with a sneer:

"As he's run, I may as well walk;" and he stepped towards the bar-room.

Instantly Crocker threw himself in front of him with his face on fire.

"Walk--will ye?" he burst out, the long-repressed rage flaming up--"walk! when you've jumped the best man in Garotte--walk! No, by God, you'll crawl, d'ye hear? crawl--right out of this camp, right now!" and he dropped his revolver on Hitchcock's breast.

Then came a wild chorus of shouts.

"That's right! That's the talk! Crawl, will ye! Down on yer hands and knees. Crawl, damn ye! Crawl!" and a score of revolvers covered the stranger.

For a moment he stood defiant, looking his assailants in the eyes. His face seemed to have grown thinner, and his moustache twitched with the snarling movement of a brute at bay. Then he was tripped up and thrown forwards amid a storm of, "Crawl, damn ye--naw." And so Hitchcock crawled, on hands and knees out of Doonan's.

Lawyer Rablay, too, was never afterwards seen in Garotte. Men said his nerves had "give out."