Jim the Conqueror

By Peter B. Kyne

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Roberta Antrim, beautiful Eastern society girl, who lives with her uncle, William B. Latham, known as "Crooked Bill" because of his amusing slyness, receives a telegram from Jaime Miguel Higuenes, owner of the Rancho Valle Verde, in Texas, informing her that Uncle Tom Antrim has died, in violent death. At the advice of Glenn Hackett, who is in love with her, Roberta plans to go to Texas to protect her interests, since she is her uncle's sole heir to thousands of sheep which Antrim had impudently driven on grass on land controlled by Don Jaime.

CHAPTER II.—Don Jaime, unmarried and romantic, half Spanish and half Irish, is attracted to Roberta's picture in a magazine. Some time before the girl hears from Higuenes, Ken Hobart, a Texas Ranger, agrees to help Don Jaime protect his estate from the invasion of Tom Antrim's sheep. Antrim is warned to take the sheep off Don Jaime's ranch at once.

CHAPTER III.—Antrim ambushes Don Jaime. They shoot it out. The young ranch owner, is wounded four times and Tom Antrim killed. On the sheep owner's body are found instructions to notify Miss Roberta Antrim in the event of Tom's death. Another Higuenes' telegram tells Roberta her uncle was killed by Jim Higgins (Don Jaime's assumed name). Latham tells her his fortune is in danger, and she decides to go to Texas to get Antrim's estate for Crooked Bill.

CHAPTER IV.—Don Jaime invites Mrs. Ganby, his nurse, and her crippled son Robbie, to stay at his ranch with the idea of preserving the properties if Roberta, as he hopes, visits the ranch. "Crooked Bill" lets his niece believe he has lost his fortune, furthering a scheme he hopes will forward Hackett's courtship, which he greatly favors.

CHAPTER V.—Don Jaime, actuated chiefly by his romantic interest in the pictured Roberta, allows the Antrim sheep to continue to graze on his ranch. Hackett, despite misgivings, "plays up" to Uncle Bill's scheme for influencing Roberta in his favor.

CHAPTER VI.—On the platform of the little flag station of Valle Verde Robbie meets Dingle, Tom Antrim's foreman, who points out Don Jaime as her uncle's slayer, then flees. Roberta, watching "Jim Higgins," sees him shoot at Dingle's car. She hears the sounds of the slaying of her uncle, and Jimmy hurries off ostensibly to tell Don Jaime of her arrival. Then the girl finds Higgins and Higuenes to be one and the same. At Don Jaime's invitation she stays at his ranch.

CHAPTER VII.—Roberta, despite her natural antipathy toward the slayer of her uncle, is impressed with her host, comparing his strength and independence with Hackett's city culture, to the disfavor of her former lover.

CHAPTER VIII.—Roberta becomes fond of her host and wires this fact to Latham, who has received from the irrepressible Don Jaime a request for permission to pay court to his niece. This is not to "Crooked Bill's" liking. He decides he'd better leave for Texas, and goes. Hackett is to follow in a week.

CHAPTER IX.—Determined to put a spoke in the wheel of Don Jaime's courtship, Uncle Bill, who spent part of his early life in Texas, and knows Don Jaime's father well, arrives at Los Algodones "incognito." Under the name of Blodgett he arranges to buy Antrim's sheep, bargaining with Don Prudencio Alviso, Roberta's Texas attorney.

CHAPTER X.—Alviso, suspicious because of "Blodgett's" willingness to pay a high price for the sheep, tells Don Jaime of the latter's visit. The ranch owner, his curiosity aroused by various incidents, visits "Blodgett" at Los Algodones, recognizing him at once as "Crooked Bill." After some verbal fencing he discloses his knowledge, to Latham's confusion. Don Jaime tells him he intends to keep the sheep—and also win Roberta for his wife. Latham unwilling to have Roberta know of his interference, agrees to sell the sheep to Don Jaime for "all a head less than he paid for them.

CHAPTER XI.—Returning home, Don Jaime and Ken Hobart are astonished and fired on, but reach the ranch safely. Roberta had feared just such an occurrence, and reveals her apprehension, much to Don Jaime's great satisfaction. Next day there sets out to run the sheep into Mexico, Alviso and the attempted theft. Don Jaime gathers a force of men and determines to go after them, despite Roberta's pleading with him to let them go and avoid bloodshed.

CHAPTER XII

CANTERING where the ground permitted, moving at a fast running walk where it did not, Roberta and Don Jaime reached the waiting truck and motorcar in thirty minutes. Throughout the journey no word had passed between the two. Don Jaime rode ahead, occasionally looking back to see that all was well with the girl; seemingly, in his eagerness for conflict, he would gladly have dispensed with her society if he could, at least Roberta thus read his thoughts, nor was she far wrong, as his first subsequent words proved.

"Bobby, this job of mine is man's work. Aurello is going back with the truck, so if you'll dismount we'll load your horse into it. Then, if you will be good enough to take the motorcar and drive it home for me I'll be your debtor."

"No," she answered sharply. "My horse and the motorcar should remain here. I might need the car to carry some wounded men to the doctor in Los Algodones or some dead men to the morgue. When this issue is settled I'll know what to do and I'll not have to be told."

"The objection you raise is a logical one. Have it your own way." He gave Aurello his orders in Spanish and when the latter had departed with the truck, Don Jaime sat down on the running board of the motorcar and motioned to Roberta to dismount and sit beside him. "Let's have a smoke. Soothing to the nerves."

"It probably would be—if you had any," she retorted, and climbed down beside him. "I cannot imagine any man enjoying a roughhouse more than you."

"You're a poor judge of human nature." His tones were dry. "Nobody likes a roughhouse where lethal weapons are used. I'm always very much afraid I'll get killed, and I don't want to die—now. In fact, I never did care very much about dying. Life's fairly sweet and, as you remarked recently, I have a lot of unfinished business to clean up. Yes, I could do with a whole lot of letting alone, Bobby."

"Well, I've suggested the sheriff. It's his business to apprehend horse thieves."

He did not answer this. He was thoughtful, blowing smoke rings. "I'll have to teach that below-the-border gang a lesson," he resumed casually. "They must learn to stay at home. I'm four men shy on a fifty-fifty break in my ructions with those animals—four good men. One of them was Julio's father—and Julio shall have his chance at reprisal this day. This matter is personal, Bobby, and I'm going to get every mother's son of those renegades if I have to follow them to Medico City."

"You have no right to risk the lives of your poor, ignorant men to save your property," she flared at him.

"I haven't? Why haven't I? They're my men, aren't they? Didn't I inherit them? Do I not employ them and house and feed them and make them happy? Didn't my father and grandfather and great-grandfather accept them and their troubles? I'm loyal to them, am I not? They know I'd fight to the death for them, and lose every dollar I have in the world before turning them off to face that world—the gringo world they do not understand! Why shouldn't they be loyal to me? 'Whose salt I eat, his song I sing.' A good slogan and a very ancient one in this country."

The girl was sensible of a vague uneasiness as he looked her over sternly. She had not pleased him and he did not disdain to make her aware of the fact.

"I'm not a lawyer," he shot at her suddenly. "What would your friend, Mr. Hackett, do if he were the owner of these sheep?"

"I imagine he'd have some sort of theft insurance on them, so he wouldn't worry if Dingle stole them. He'd leave the worry and the salvage and the prosecution to the insurance company."

"Everything for defense but not a crumb for the dog, Bobby. It's all in the point of view. Well, I suppose, now you're out of the sheep business, Bobby, you'll be going back to Dobbs Ferry in a day or two."

"Well, of course. I would stay over for your funeral, Jimmy." She tried to appear jocular, but her quavering voice betrayed her real feelings.

His brown hand caressed her shoulder. "That's the girl. Aft spunky, even if you're not. Nine times out of ten one can fool the enemy with a good bluff."

"You are going to wait here until Aurello returns with more men and horses? How many men have you sent for?"

"Twenty. Caraveo, the riding boss, will pick the best. Don't talk to me now, Roberta. I have to formulate a battle plan."

He took out a notebook and pencil and commenced writing. "Here," he said abruptly, when he had finished, "please hand this to Ken Hobart when he reports here. If nobody returns by twilight, drive the car back to the ranch. You know the way." He stood up, hitched his belt and held out his hand.

"Where are you going, Jimmy?"

"I'm going to circle ahead of those sheep and get to the only water-hole they can reach tonight. There's an old branding corral in the valley by that water-hole—one I built myself. I'm going to dig in there and hold that gang off."

"Surely you're not going alone?"

"Julio will follow at four o'clock. He's dependable. Good-by, Bobby—in case I do not see you again. It's been wonderful to have known you. When you get back to Dobbs Ferry think kindly of Jim Higgins, if he's in the cemetery, and send him an occasional picture post-card if he's not. Your sheep money is in the local bank. Trust old Prudy. He looks like a dusky idol, but he's cuter than any fox—and honest. Good-by, my dear."

He took her hand. It trembled in his. "Jimmy," she said in a very small voice, "the other night you told me you loved me. Was that a statement of fact or just—ah—bunk?"

"It was a statement of fact. I'll love you as long as I live. Some day, if I live, I suppose I'll marry somebody else, but in the cool of the evening, darling, when the day's work is done and the Higuenes boy and his thoughts are alone together—well, I'll do some thinking. And if Mrs. Higuenes should say, 'James, what are you thinking of?' I shall tell her a harmless lie."

"I shall go home tomorrow, Jimmy—provided you come back to Valle Verde. If not—"

"They'll plant me in a hurry and you can go the day after, Bobby." He took her fresh, lovely face in his palms. "Bobby," he said very seriously, "remember me as the man who never loved you for fun." And he kissed her on the lips and let her go. Dully, she watched him swing into his saddle and ride away; when he had topped the ridge he pulled up, looked back and waved his hand. Then he went over the sky-line.

About three-thirty Ken Hobart and Julio returned and found Roberta face downward in the grass sobbing as if her heart must break.

"Where is the Big Boss?" he demanded in the matter-of-fact tone of one who beholds nothing unusual.

Roberta held out a couple of leaves of paper—Don Jaime's battle plan. Hobart read it. "The boy has some sense after all," he decided. "Who says this is a dull country?" He spoke to Julio.

"Si señor," murmured Julio, and rode away on Don Jaime's trail.

Ken Hobart, left alone with Roberta, lit a cigarette, smoked it through in silence, lit another, and waited. Then:

"Crying over the old man?"

Roberta nodded, and added, defensively: "I'm sure anybody would. Don Jaime's so young and so fine, and if he should get killed—"

"Quite so," murmured Mr. Hobart. "However, we have one consolation. He'll have a lot of company on the way up! Well, I imagine he'll get killed—somehow."

"In heaven's name, why?"

"Well," said Mr. Hobart with exasperating deliberation, "he's madly in love with you, Miss Antrim, but he realizes that's all the good it's going to do him. He realizes you'd never dream of marrying the man who killed your uncle—"

"Ah, but he's a scoundrel. He employed scoundrels."

"Still he was your uncle. You know, of course, that with Don Jaime's breed of cat an uncle is a kinsman, no matter what he does. I've felt like telling the boss he was all wrong about you, but then I'm only a hired man, and the hired hand who speaks out of his turn to Don Jaime gets fired pretty sudden."

"If you'd only told him!" Roberta wailed. "Oh, if you only had!"

"Why didn't you tell him yourself?" he retorted. "You're one of the parties at interest, aren't you?"

"There are things no girl can say—when a man acts as queerly as Don Jaime does, Mr. Hobart. He's so sensitive, so retiring—"

Mr. Hobart choked and to cover his strange cachinnation coughed violently into his cupped hands. "About as sensitive and retiring as a steer on the peck," he retorted, "but he is proud. If he thought there was the least chance of your refusing him he'd never ask you to marry him in a thousand years."

"Indeed! Is that possible, Mr. Hobart?" Then, it suddenly dawning on her that her conversation with Ken Hobart hitherto could have been covered in five hundred words, she was appalled, not only at his garrulity but at her own. "Isn't this conversation getting a trifle—personal and delicate, Mr. Hobart?" she suggested. "Really, I haven't the slightest idea why I am discussing with an intimate subject with you."

"Well, I have. I want to discuss it," he replied calmly. "When I discover that Don Jaime has ridden away to get killed because life won't mean a thing to him after you're gone—and when I find you crying over this greaser—"

"How dare you? He's not a greaser!"

"Nobody but a greaser would act the way he does. Well, as I was saying, having discovered the lay of the land, I felt it my Christian duty to interfere and offer some sound advice. Would you marry this Higuenes hombre if he asked you?"

Roberta blushed furiously and hung her head.

"Come," Mr. Hobart urged, "this is serious business. Would you marry the idiot and chuck all your sheep money into the pot with him and help extend his irrigation system and buy about a thousand pure-bred Hereford breeding cows?"

"I would, gladly. If I married him I'd be his partner as well as his wife. I could be a good partner."

"None better," agreed Mr. Hobart. "Well, if you want him, go get him. He's yours for the asking."

"Mr. Hobart! How dare you? No girl asks a man to marry her!"

"That's why we have so many old maids, Miss Antrim. Now, listen to me. If you two aboard that horse of yours and ride after Julio he'll lead you to that old branding corral where he and Don Jaime are going to dig in and do some fancy shooting. You'll have time to get to the scene of the festivities before they get going, have your little pow-wow with Don Jaime, and then beat it back here before dark."

"Oh, Mr. Hobart, I couldn't! I'd feel so brazen. I'd die of shame."

"Very well, then, die. Don Jimmy is sure to die, because he doesn't want to live. Of course he'd never let you know that, but right here in this note he left me he says: 'Adios, amigo. See that Miss Antrim gets to the station all right, and whatever you do, don't plant me in the same cemetery with her uncle.' You can save a human life if you care to. If you do not care to—well, that's your own business."

Roberta got up, walked to her horse and mounted him. "Thank you a lot, Mr. Hobart," she gulped. "You're a true friend."

"I'm glad I measure up. Hello, here come Caraveo and the trucks. I must head him off and send him down the road a few miles farther, to save time." He made a dying leap to his horse and galloped away to meet the riding boss.

Just as Roberta disappeared over the sky-line he gave Enrico Caraveo his orders, then without waiting for his five men to follow he galloped swiftly after the girl.

"D—it," he muttered, "I got so interested fixing things for Don Jimmy I clean forgot that girl wears pants, and a two-gallon hat. Some one of those roughnecks may mistake her for a man."

CHAPTER XIII

KEN Hobart was an excellent poker player, which is equivalent to saying that he was a very shrewd guesser. It is to be regretted, however, if we are to regard his peccadillos literally, that he was also a very good liar, but that he was a keen observer no one who knew him would have had the hardihood to deny. Heretofore he had been much too preoccupied with the responsibilities of his job as Don Jaime's general manager to waste any time speculating on his employer's affair de coeur. When Don Jaime first presented him to Roberta, Hobart had instantly decided that she was merely one of what he had learned, through reading the Sunday supplements, to term society girls; and society girls, according to Ken Hobart's primitive code, were the sort of female no man with a ranch on could afford to take to wife, being much too skittish for the obligations of the married state in districts where the phrase "until death us do part" still is taken seriously. He knew Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, so it never occurred to him that the latter would permit himself to fall in love with his guest; and in the brief contacts with Roberta it had seemed to him that Don Jaime would be the last man in the world she might be expected to fall in love with.

Robbie's visit to him and the confidential information revealed by that young eavesdropper had first amused and then interested Hobart. Robbie was furious at Roberta for her apparent failure to appreciate his beloved Jimmy and was for going in her and chiding her about it. Hastily Ken Hobart vetoed that procedure, but promised Robbie to look into the matter and see if something couldn't be done about it.

Well, he had done something, nor had he been too particular as to the means employed for its accomplishment. To Mr. Hobart's direct way of thinking, this charming guest at Valle Verde had demonstrated that she was not, after all, a heartless society girl. He had found her weeping in terror and grief because, forsooth, she had an idea that Don Jaime might presently be killed. Many years as a Texas ranger had convinced Ken Hobart that the prospects of Don Jaime's being killed were nebulous; consequently he had to take those fears seriously. There was going to be a fight. No doubt about that. And somebody usually got hurt in such fights.

So Ken Hobart had thought quickly. There was but the slightest necessity for Don Jaime mixing in this row; wherefore, if he could be persuaded to abandon the field, Ken felt that the defection would not remotely prejudice the victorious outcome of the sharp bit of Donnybrook that impended. How, then, to induce him to forego the sweets of reprisal? Why, by sending the girl to the scene of battle just before it started. Her arguments, consisting of tears, two kissable lips, two soft arms, and a declaration of love everlasting, would be potent indeed. Mr. Hobart would have bet his saddle on that. Wherefore, he had skillfully woven his web, with the result that Don Jaime and Roberta were now enmeshed in it.

The huge satisfaction felt by Ken Hobart at his interference in other people's business was shattered now. Riding along the skyline Roberta could very readily be mistaken for a man—and such mistakes, in the impending circumstances, might reasonably be fatal! She was incumbent upon him, therefore, to catch up with her, to guard her approach to that old branding corral in the valley, to make her take every advantage of the ground, to scout the territory for her.

Also, a new and disturbing thought had occurred to him. What if Dingle had decided to make sure of the water for the sheep by taking possession of the water-hole before Don Jaime could get there? Verily, Ken Hobart could take no chances.

There was Don Jaime, to begin with, hurrying to get to the water-hole and consolidate his position. He knew the country well and was a hard, fast rider. After him came, on hot hoof, his reinforcements—the devoted Julio. Duty was duty to Julio—and, as Don Jaime had stated, that youthful retainer had a personal interest in the forthcoming activities. Hurrying to catch Julio, that he might lead her to the water-hole, Roberta was pounding along on her fleet hunter; and after Roberta came Ken Hobart.

Hobart sighted the girl three-quarters of a mile ahead of him as he topped the ridge, but though he spurred his horse to its utmost speed he could not gain on her. Presently, two miles ahead of the girl, he caught a flash of white—a recurring flash, as something moved among the brush and pinon trees. That, he knew, was Julio's pinto mount.

"If anything happens to that girl," he told himself, "I'll just keep right on in the general southerly direction and never come back."

The low range swung to the east—and suddenly, in a cup-shaped valley far below, Ken Hobart saw the sheep—saw that they were being driven, not grazed. They were within a mile of the water-hole, and Julio was not in sight. At the foot of the range Roberta, stationary, sat her horse and took stock of the situation.

She had lost Julio!

Hobart looked back. In the distance he could see his five men following him. He waved his hat and one of them waved in return; so without further ado he rode down to join Roberta.

The girl held up her hand, enjoining silence, as Hobart reined in beside her. "Listen!" she commanded.

He bent his head. Faintly to him came the report of rifles.

"There were twenty herders with the band an hour ago," the girl reported. "Don Jaime counted them. There doesn't appear to be that many now."

Hobart swept the scene with his binoculars. "Ten! Half the gang went ahead to preempt the water, and Don Jaime has walked into them. He's alive and kicking, though. If he were not, there wouldn't be any shooting. And Julio hasn't got there yet. Well, he'll be careful. I wish I knew whether Jaime is in the old corral or at the water-hole. Smokeless powder, you see. One cannot tell. But the sheep move forward! That indicates confidence. Yes, Dingle has the water—"

"Then Don Jaime's fighting ten of them."

"Looks that way. He must be in the old corral, because he wouldn't last a minute in the open. The corral is boarded close and the light is failing. If he keeps moving he will not be too easy to hit."

Julio rode out into the open a quarter of a mile south of them. Instantly Hobart pulled his rifle, sighted carefully and threw up the dirt in front of the boy to attract his attention. When Julio pulled up and looked around to see where the attack came from, Hobart waved his hat at him and moved out from the sheltering fringe of bushes onto the grassy floor of the valley, Roberta by his side. Instantly Julio recognized them.

"You stay where you are, girl," Ken Hobart commanded. "My other five men will be riding down the hill pretty soon. You tell them my orders are to charge the men with the sheep. Immediately!"

"What are you going to do, Mr. Hobart?"

"I'm going to join Julio, and the two of us will advance along the south side of this valley toward the water-hole. The range will be too long for the herders with the sheep to stop us, I think. Jimmy is in a jackpot and needs help mighty bad, so Julio and I will furnish what we can. Adios!"

He galloped away diagonally across the valley, motioning for Julio to join him. The boy did not hesitate. Roberta watched them in an agony of apprehension.

The herders with the sheep were firing at Hobart and Julio, galloping across their front. The girl saw Julio's pinto go down, saw the boy shoot out over the animal's neck. He was up instantly and back beside the horse.

"Getting his rifle," Roberta thought. Ken Hobart had pulled up and was riding back to Julio, who, in turn, was running to meet him. There was not an instant's pause in the stride of the horse as Julio mounted double behind Hobart, the horse whirled, and the daring pair were on their way again.

There, alone at the foot of the hill watching this drama, Roberta prayed for those men as she had never prayed before; she cried out in agony when Ken Hobart's horse went to its knees, rose again—and stood still. Even one so unversed in warfare as Roberta could realize that the poor brute had been hit and crippled. She saw Hobart and Julio dismount and, kneeling some twenty feet apart, open fire on the distant herders as calmly as if shooting at a mark!

And then, over the crest behind her, came the five men detailed to follow Ken Hobart. They slackened speed as they sighted the girl, holding up her hand in a signal to halt.

She trembled so she could, with difficulty, speak coherently. "Don Jaime—engaged at the water-hole with ten men. Ken Hobart and Julio over south—shooting at the herders—Ken says—rear attack."

The three American riders gazed at her, not quite comprehending, desirous, perhaps, of receiving more explicit instructions in such an emergency.

"What are you standing there for?" Roberta cried hysterically. "Follow me. I'll show you." With a savage little dig of her dull dress spurs she was off, the five men streaming behind her. Across the northern flank of the valley they raced, the patter of rifle fire from the herders growing and drowning the sound of their thudding approach, for they were within a hundred yards of the nearest men before the latter saw them. One of them fired at Roberta. . . . She thrilled with a cold fear and a wild exultation as the bullet whistled past her head . . . afterward she had a faint recollection of a dark, frightened, but defiant face that loomed for an instant in front of her before she rode the man down. Pistol shots . . . then a backward look. Behind her the fire rode with upraised pistols, flourishing them at her, yelling a fièvre approbation of her leadership.

The sheep, in panic, fled wildly, leaping over each other, bleating, leaving a cloud of grayish white dust behind them. Roberta rode into the cloud—rode through the fringe of stragglers, knocking them down, leaping over and among them. Pistols popped behind her. . . . She was clear of the sheep. . . . Her dull little riding accessory spurs prodded her mount's flanks; the quirt rose and fell.

She caught the gleam of sunshine as the last level rays of the dying day were reflected on a pool. Among some rocks beyond the pool three figures moved, the crackle of fire grew louder; she could discern the white spindrift reflected from of it now. Where was the corral? Don Jaime was there, wounded, dying perhaps. . . .

She saw it—a circle of weather-beaten boards, nailed so close together that the fence appeared like a wall. Straight at it she drove her mount, realizing vaguely as she did so that it was a hurdle at least a foot higher than she had ever faced in sport.

She saw her horse's ears flicker, felt his stride slacken a little; then his head shot forward and his ears came up straight. Good horse! He was not going to refuse the jump! She felt him gather himself for the leap, and took a firm grip on the reins.

"Alley oop!" she cried.

While in midair she saw Don Jaime off on the right flank, standing in the bed of a wagon, firing over the fence; then she was over and inside the corral with him.

"Jimmy!" she shouted.

He turned staring at her amazed. Then he yelled:

"Down! Get—"

She rode up to the wagon, slipped off, pulled the rifle from the scabbard and untied the cartridge belt from her pommel. Then, with a leap on her horse's rump, she sent him trotting across the corral.

And then Don Jaime acted. He leaped down at her, his powerful arm swept her backward and off balance; she slid down his body gently to the ground and he threw himself beside her.

"Oh, my G—d, sweetheart, why did you come?" he almost moaned.

"Because I love you, Jaime Miguel Higuenes. You are in danger and I couldn't stay away. I'll help you, Jimmy. If you have to die I—want you to know before that happens—that life without you—will be desolate—"

He raised to her in Spanish, his hot eyes devouring her, his grimy perspiring hands caressing her cheek. "I always knew you were a thoroughbred," he gulped finally. "Lie here and do not move. This is a private fight and you'll get hurt. I'm excited. I'm going to keep moving. If I stay still they'll locate me and I can't afford that—now."

He rolled away like a tumbleweed. A bullet crashed through the fence and struck where he had been lying a moment before. And then Roberta proved herself a woman. She fainted.

(Concluded Next Week)

Everybody Knows

"I believe I shall have to give up amateur theatricals. They always make me feel I am making a fool of myself."

"I know; everybody feels the same way."

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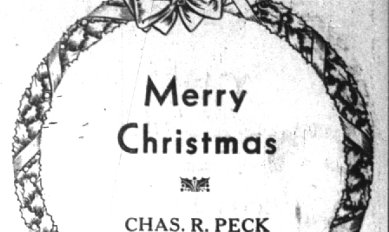

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