



He was huddled on a large flat rock by the roadside, morosely contemplating a spear of buffalo grass, and shedding an aura of dejection all around. From his seat, he could view the sprawling expanse of Dry Lake City.

He narrowed his eyes, protruded his jaw obstinately, leaned forward about an inch, as though even that concession was intolerable, and croaked defiantly:

"A shovel is made to shovel with!"

"It certainly sounds reasonable," I replied.

"Do you admit it?" he inquired eagerly.

"Yes, of course," I said heartily—I might say enthusiastically—first, because I was seeking no lunatic dispute, second, because what he stated seemed to be a fact.

The figure on the rock relaxed and I felt I had made a favorable impression.

"Stranger here," was his next shot.

"Yes."

"Ah—that accounts for it. Yes, undoubtedly, shovels were made to shovel with. And I claim that a man who came here to shovel, and wants to shovel, should be permitted to shovel."

I considered this remarkable declaration, but at the moment it did not occur to me that it had a bearing on my mission.

Dry Lake lies in the Nevada desert, distant eighty miles from the nearest railway station. From this point, a single track line was built to transport workmen to our camp and provision them. For all practical purposes, this one railway is the sole means of communication.

Because of difficulties and expense, and also to sustain progress, it was thought advisable to contract with the employees for the full term of the work. At the outset it appeared that this would be to everybody's advantage.

It was estimated that it would take 14,000 men fifteen years to complete the lake bed, and diversion of the Colorado River to the lake would require three years additional, with half this force employed.

Including the 14,000 workmen and their wives and families, and tradesmen, artisans and others who took up residence there to ply their vocations and transact the business of the camp, Dry Lake is populated by about 60,000 souls. It is something of a desert metropolis.

The full quota of 14,000 has been in the camp eight years but progress has been disappointing. Only about one-quarter of the project is finished. Hence my own presence, with a commission to ascertain what extraordinary engineering difficulties had been encountered, and how best to expedite matters.

Thus ruminating, I sized up the disconsolate figure on the flat rock,

and weighed his statement that a shovel is made to shovel with.

"Any argument about it?" I asked.

"Argument! It's all we do—argue about it."

"Just who argues?" I inquired.

"Everybody," replied the man on the flat rock. "Martin started it, and we've never gotten it settled. If it hadn't been for Martin, we'd have this lake half dug."

"That's why I am here," I explained, "to find out what's wrong. I'm here to investigate for the company."

"You are!" exclaimed the man on the flat rock jubilantly. "Then you're the man I want to see. I'm Tom Morgan—I'm the champion of the theory that a shovel is made to shovel with."

The odd champion of an odd cause rose and accompanied me, relating incidents of the camp—incidents that appeared fantastic, but which I had occasion to verify and embody in this report.

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Whether accident or design has* the greater share in molding the affairs of mankind will always be a fruitful theme for academicians. The

sensible way to view it undoubtedly is that some external power—providence or chance, whatever it be—controls the ebb and flow of fortune, and the judicious time the voyage to suit.

So in Dry Lake City, chance dealt the cards, and a man appeared to play the hand.

William Martin, a workman, originated Dry Lake City's economic system. He is an ingenious personage. He deserves credit for contriving one of the strangest theories ever observed in a construction camp.

Explorations of motive would be out of place. The public motive, so far as I could ascertain, was to develop, enrich, and civilize Dry Lake City.

There is no question of Martin's plausibility. In any other environment—in some city, for example, where he might have become a local boss—his statecraft might have been fittingly appreciated. As at first intimated, however, it was mainly due to accident—Martin merely took advantage of the accident.

Through some oversight in our Salt Lake City office, the first consignment of shovels for the workmen did not reach Dry Lake City on time. When it did arrive, it was found that there were but 10,000 shovels, while there were 14,000 men waiting for them. The odd 4,000 settled down to wait for additional implements. There was more delay.

Men began to calculate their earning power in terms of lost time. Enough of them saw the loss to go to the trenches and offer as high as \$5 for shovels for which the owners had paid \$1, figuring that with one day's wages they could make up the cost. So it was apparent that the value of a shovel was \$5, not \$1.

Martin digested this phenomenon.

"I wish I had bought 100 shovels five days ago," he said to a fellow shoveler in the trench where he worked. "It would be \$400 clear velvet."

The workman grunted.

"Do you know," pursued Martin, "that this camp is getting richer and richer every day—getting richer, without anyone doing any work?"

"I suppose so," replied the grunt-er, "but it looks like work has something to do with it. They pay \$50,000 a day to the 10,000 of us who are shoveling. That helps. But I don't see them paying anything to those who don't shovel."

"I don't mean that," Martin replied. "I mean the shovels. Four days ago, there were 10,000 shovels, worth \$10,000. Today, they are worth \$50,000."

"They are not worth one cent more," declared the dissenter, who was Tom Morgan. "They are the same shovels. You can't shovel any more dirt with one today than you could yesterday. A shovel is a shovel, and a shovel is made to shovel with. That's all there is to it."

Morgan spoke without realizing that there might be much more to it—and he was not aware that he was stating the basis of one of the two economic theories that were to rend the camp.

Martin said:

"These shovels are selling today for \$5 apiece. Therefore, they are worth \$50,000."

And therein, Martin stated the opposing theory.

So impressed was he with this idea that he glanced in the direction of the straw boss, and, not seeing him, sat down to think his discovery over. Morgan also thought, and repeated:

"A shovel is made to shovel with!"

To one intent on shoveling, it might appear that way, but not to Martin. Something was burning in his brain. It was the Big Idea.

"I don't feel well," said Martin. "Tell the boss when he gets around that I'm ailing and had to go home."

"All right," said Morgan.

* * *

Martin had \$400 of his own. He did not go home. Instead, he went from one work gang to another, summoning men he knew. They all met in the back room of one of the new saloons. There they talked over the Big Idea. Then they went to see Murphy, the company agent.

Two days later, the second consignment of shovels arrived, and some 4,000 workmen assembled, each dollar in hand, to procure a shovel.

"Nothing doing," said Murphy. "Martin bought the shovels. See him."

"What the hell does Martin want with 4,000 shovels?" demanded one. "Thinks he's a steam dredge, does he?"

Martin himself appeared.

"Boys," he said, "I've got your shovels. As you know, shovels are worth \$5 each. I don't care to sell all the shovels I have, but I'll sell 1,000 of them today for \$7 each to first up."

"That don't go!" shouted the crowd. "Come through with those shovels!"

"Now, don't get excited," cautioned Martin. "This is not a hold-up. It's a benefaction. Dry Lake City is about to enter upon a most remarkable era of prosperity—the greatest period of business expansion any camp has ever experienced. Now, I want to put this question—how much is the wealth of Dry Lake City today—just counting the 10,000 shovels?"

"Ten thousand dollars!" shouted a voice.

"Wrong you are!" replied Martin,

smiling benignly. "Its wealth in shovels is \$50,000—\$5 per shovel! You never saw wealth increase so rapidly. Boys, if I hadn't worked out a plan to support the market, all this wealth would have been destroyed—shovels would have dropped to \$1, and our community would have lost \$40,000!"

"Not only have I safeguarded the honestly earned wealth of every man in this camp who owns a shovel—I am adding to it! I am about to increase the wealth of Dry Lake City \$20,000 more by bringing the price of shovels up to \$7. That is why I say Dry Lake City is embarking on the greatest era of wealth and prosperity ever known to any construction camp in the United States.

"You who buy shovels at \$7 today, the 1,000 I am going to sell, will pay just what shovels are worth, for the market fixes the value. I state that as a well-known economic fact that cannot be denied. And you will be secure, for shovels will never be worth less—they will be worth more!"

"I say that because we've got a business administration here and the city council has voted that no shovel can henceforth be transported into

Dry Lake City. While you recognize the needs of your community, while you see to it that the right kind of men are elected, you need never fear that your well-earned rights in these shovels will be molested.

"By prompt action, my friends and myself have shielded Dry Lake City

from disaster—and in four days we have increased the financial resources of this community from \$14,000 to \$98,000! Can you beat that?"

"What about us?" yelled four thousand voices, whose owners had no shovels. "Where do we get off?"

"See me later," said Martin. "We will now begin the sale of 1,000 shovels at \$7 each."

The crowd broke into groups, excitedly speculating on Martin's scheme.

The purchasers of the 1,000 shovels quickly spread news of the era of wealth and prosperity Martin had inaugurated. For the most part, the idea was eagerly welcomed. Each workman grasped his \$7 shovel with renewed enthusiasm, as he realized that it represented more than he could earn in a day, and that his profit had not cost him a single effort. Martin was popular, and his popularity helped him in his negotiations with the 3,000 shovel-less workmen.

"No," he said. "I won't sell any more shovels, just at present. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll release 2,000 more shovels on terms. You use the shovels, and pay me one-fifth of your wages."

"Like hell!" replied the shovelers. "We're entitled to a shovel and full wages the same as you."

"Very well," Martin said. "They are my shovels!"

The upshot was that the shovels were finally accepted with much grumbling by workmen who felt it was better work for four-fifths pay than get none at all. But this arrangement still left 1,000 shovel-less men.

"What about us?" the 1,000 demanded.

"I do not care to do any more business today," Martin responded. "I feel that I should go home and rest. Only those to whom the welfare of the community has been entrusted by Divine Providence can appreciate the exhausting character of responsibilities so vast. I shall

go home and lie down. I must have quiet, so I can think."

"But what will we do?" persisted the shovel-less shovelers.

"It's a competitive age," Martin replied. "Every fellow for himself."

"How are we going to compete without a shovel to compete with?"

"That's up to you," Martin replied. "Every man must settle his own personal problems."

"I know!" shouted one. "We'll have a new city ordinance! We'll get more shovels into camp!"

"Do you think so?" queried Martin. "This is a democracy. The majority rules. The majority elects the city council. Now in this case, the majority is satisfied because I increased the value of their shovels from \$1 to \$7. Do you think they will vote for cheaper shovels?"

With that, Martin went home, well pleased with his day's work. He had made \$2,400 on the sale of the 1,000 shovels, since his \$400 represented one-tenth the amount it took to swing the deal. Besides, he had one-tenth in the 2,000 shovels let out on shares, and his income from that source meant one-fifth the wages of 200 men. The camp wage was \$5 per day; so Martin knew that at the end of each day, he would receive \$200.

When he awoke, however, he was richer even than these figures indicated. A force on which he had not calculated had been at work. The shovel-less 1,000 solved their personal problems by rushing to the trenches. There they sought to purchase shovels from those at work.

The more eagerly they tried to buy, the more the owners asked, for owners now feared to sell, since it was known that no more shovels could reach the camp. However,

some of the shovel-less had savings, and when enough money is offered, some will always sell what they possess. So shovels changed hands for \$15 and \$20, and then for \$50 and \$100.

A fever of shovel speculation raged. Men clambered from trenches. The shouts of rival bidders, the exultation and increasing excitement as the price of shovels rose, caused all to lose interest in the job, and join the scramble to easy wealth by acquirement of shovels.

Some, who possessed foresight and means, hastily purchased shovels to hold for future advance. In this way, other shovels were withdrawn from use, and added to those hoard-

ed by Martin. With fewer shovels to bid on, the bids went higher.

An additional stimulus was the knowledge that Martin had shrewdly leased 2,000 shovels at one-fifth the wage. When Martin woke up, he found shovels quoted at \$1,000 each.

That night citizens thronged the public square, drunk with the desire for more wealth just as easily acquired. Martin was lionized. He made a speech.

"Fellow citizens," he said, "Dry Lake City is about to attain the zenith of modern civilization.

"There are 14,000 shovels here, worth \$1,000 per shovel. That is a total of \$14,000,000 all created within four days. I dare say no construction camp has ever witnessed so rapid a development of its material resources. Every loyal and patriotic citizen should uphold our city council, whose action so amply demonstrates the wisdom and profound statecraft of its members."

Even the share-shovelers were delighted at the prospect of working with a valuable shovel, worth \$1,000. Because of the swift advance in shovels, they thought their contracts were bargains. They credited their good luck to Martin.

"A great head he has!" said one shovel-tenant.

"Rot!" exclaimed Morgan. "A shovel is worth \$1. That's all. What's a shovel for? To shovel with. You get paid for the shoveling. That's where the wealth comes from."

Wherein Morgan uttered dictum number two, in the economic strife that was to rend the camp. But the tenant was not convinced.

"It's worth \$1,000," weighing his shovel carefully, and gaping at it, "and if it hadn't been for Martin, it would be worth only \$1. A great head!"

"Keep your hat on yours," Morgan replied. "I wish I hadn't signed up on this job."

Thus was the Shovelcratic regime launched. The camp was delighted when it found how swiftly and how easily it had grown rich.

Martin guessed aright the course the people would take. The 1,000 workmen with no implement larger than a spoon were resentful, but the lure of quickly created wealth closed all ears to their complaints.

The majority was satisfied with itself, and impatient with the shovel-less. It thought it absurd that its prosperity should be interrupted

to give a few, beseeching here and there, a chance to shovel.

The luckless 1,000 were informed that they had only themselves to blame. They should have been earlier in line, to take up Martin's offer of a shovel at \$7, or they should have seized the opportunity to give one-fifth their wages for a shovel.

Changes in fortune faithfully reflect the fickleness and vanity of

mankind. Among the workmen were many who had bought shovels for \$1, with never a thought that shovels would be worth more, who now prided themselves on superior foresight, and the possession of unusual financial ability. These believed they had been rightfully rewarded, while the whining 1,000 were merely paying the penalty of incapacity. When we are lucky, we take the credit, and think we deserve wealth; when fortune frowns, we shift responsibility to the fates.

Few heeded Morgan, who said that neither personal merit nor luck had much to do with it, arguing that under the Martin scheme, 1,000 were doomed to have no shovels, and if it had not been this 1,000, it would have been another.

The shovel-less 1,000 roved here and there, bargaining for shovels. With cash, some tempted an owner to part with a shovel. Others became tenants. In the great era of speculation that followed the rise in shovels, many became the owner of more than one shovel. These sought others with whom to make tenantry or purchase contracts. Sometimes a workman, the owner of say five shovels, did no work but collecting the rental of one-fifth the wages from each of five workmen, to whom he leased shovels. It can readily be seen that this beat shoveling in a trench. This bargaining did not change the picture as a whole. Everyone who obtained a shovel displaced someone else, who set up a new howl for a shovel.

"The Shovelcrats" will be continued next month.