

# *Wetherell's Romance*

**Alan Sullivan**

Illustrated by

**Charles A. Maclellan**

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# Wetherell's Romance

By ALAN SULLIVAN

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES A. MACLELLAN

**I**t was in a certain restaurant not a hundred feet from the Strand, where one discovers, on three days of the week, a notable beefsteak pie and drinks one's beer from a pewter mug, that Wetherell observed across the table a thin and distinctly interesting face. It was very American. The stranger had a restless mouth, quick, observant eyes, rather cadaverous cheeks, and a manner in which a growing nervousness was but ineffectually subdued. From his many curious glances about the old-fashioned room, Wetherell assumed that he was lunching here because it was one of the recognised duties of every American to do so before he left London, but he was too obviously over-wrought to yield—however he might desire it to the association of the place. Presently Wetherell saw him draw out a few coins, regard them deliberately for an instant and beckon to a waiter.

“How much is your beer?”

“Pint of bitter? Sir—sixpence.”

The young man nodded. “I guess I'll have some,” he glanced at Wetherell with the most friendly smile possible, then, as though he had transgressed some unwritten code, colored slightly and looked away.

Wetherell had had no time to smile back but became, all in a moment, inescapably conscious of his neighbour's personality. He was like a strange bird that had found its way into some well classified aviary and had not yet been catalogued. In his face there was a perfectly honest wonder, as though the world had treated him well up to a point and then suddenly turned the cold shoulder. He seemed like a man who had been hurt—and was too puzzled to protest. He was too young a man, thought Wetherell, to look like that.

Moved by a sudden impulse, which afterwards he completely understood, Wetherell leaned forward and invited him to take coffee. At the sound of his voice the young man started, and sent him a whimsical and almost incredulous glance.



*Presently Wetherell saw him draw out a few coins, and regard them deliberately for an instant.*

“Sure! I’ll be pleased to. I was hoping you’d speak to me. I drifted in here to-day for the first time: this is where Ben Jonson used to hold forth, eh? I read about it out in the West.”

Wetherell nodded. “How far west?”

“Denver-Montana-California—anywhere the other side of the Mississippi. I’m known out there, but I’ve been a month in London and I

don't know a soul yet except my boarding-house keeper. That's why I'm mighty glad you spoke to me."

"Do you like London?" asked Wetherell and instantly regretted the question.

"I did for the first week, but now," the stranger's voice dropped a little, "now I'm afraid of it. It scares me. Can you understand that?"

"I can with some natures."

"Well, I've got one of them. I was thrilled at first, I suppose most Americans are, home of their ancestors—and that sort of thing; then I saw written right across the city 'mind your own business,' and the letters have been getting larger ever since. The thing is that I've been trying to mind my own business and nobody will listen to me."

"Oh," said Wetherell uncomfortably.

The young man sipped his coffee. "Now if you'd come from the West you'd have asked what my business was; but you're English alright so I'll have to tell you. It's mining."

"But that's very interesting."

"I thought so—till I got here. Now I reckon that if anyone has mining stock to sell, the first thing they do is buy a ticket to London. I wish I'd known about that before. I guess I've seen twenty people and they all said 'come back in a month' and though I'm not English, I know what that means."

Wetherell smiled. "Where is your mine?"

**T**he young man brightened at once. "State of Washington in the Cascade mountains about fifty miles from the coast. Like to see some samples?"

"Yes, if you'd like to show them."

"Show them! I've come six thousand miles to show them and I haven't had them out of the house yet. It's just a step from here—off the Edgware Road. My name is Woodruff—I ought to have told you." He hesitated a moment, glanced at Wetherell's card, then looked him straight in the face. "Sure you want to come?"

Wetherell, quite honestly, made it plain that he was in earnest, and they set off together. He did not contemplate doing business with a stranger, but was gradually becoming absorbed, not only in the young man's provocative

person but also, in a queer way, in his very helplessness. That the latter should in all good faith journey six thousand miles to sell mining shares to clients who were still unknown, gave one a new and rather intriguing picture of London. He visualized the inevitable awakening, and studied the American's face with increasing interest. Quite obviously the boy—for he was little more than a boy—was horribly lonely.

He guided Wetherell to a dingy lodging house, and, at the top of three pair of stairs, turned into a small back room, where, without any apology for his surroundings, he arranged on the frowsy bed a row of quartz fragments. He was breathing a little hard, and two spots of colour had bloomed in his hollow cheeks. Through the samples ran fine threads and filaments of a dull yellow. Wetherell picked up the nearest, fingered it curiously and waited.

“Thing about mining,” said Woodruff slowly, and staring at his trophies, “is that you need a good deal of money before you can make any. Jim—that’s my brother—and I thought we had enough, but we guessed wrong. That’s what fetched me over here. You see the folks out on the coast have troubles of their own—and aren’t buying any mining stock—at least not today. That stuff you’re looking at is worth three hundred dollars a ton, but it’s not all like that. I guess the lode will run about fifty—right through.”

Wetherell cupped a fragment in his palm. “How much more money do you need?”

The young man glanced up. He had turned a little pale and was scrutinising his visitor's face with a sudden and intense eagerness.

“We’ve capitalised at four hundred thousand dollars. I’ve got to sell a hundred and fifty thousand at ten cents that’s fifteen thousand dollars. The rest of it is held by Jim and myself and the fellows from whom we bought the property. We’ve got two hundred feet to drive to hit the lode, but when we do hit her, we’ll have three hundred feet of that ore, on top of us.”

**W**etherell nodded. He was chiefly conscious of the extreme fragility of this boy who had set himself to batter through two hundred feet of living rock toward a hidden fortune. But this determination animated, without question, his entire existence. It was the far distant clink of drill steel and the thud of dynamite that kept him alive. But he was too sensitive to withstand much longer the indifference of a great city, and too insecure of life to face defeat. It was the transitoriness of him that captured

the imagination. No one could be less armed against the world—and at the same time more loyal to his mission.

“When you come to London on a job like this, you should have letters—to the right people. The mining circle here is not as large as you might think,—and is pretty well informed. Your best chance is to find some individual who is willing to take a flyer.”

Woodruff looked at him like a puzzled child. “There’s seven million people in London. Which do you mean?”

It was on the tip of the other men’s tongue to give the obvious answer, when he became slowly and secretly aware that he himself was the person he meant. It could not be determined how or why he should feel this, and his first and overwhelming impulse was to conceal it—at all costs. He was ordinarily of a deliberate mental process, and had never made a snap decision in his life. But now he seemed to have reached an abrupt turn in the road, that gave him, strangely enough, no particular surprise, and for which he was unaccountably prepared.

“Will you tell me more about the property?” he said thoughtfully. “It’s just possible I might be able to help.”

The blood climbed swiftly to the boy’s temples. He blinked wistfully at the samples, did not seem able to meet Wetherell’s eyes, then turned and peered out of the window at the murk of London.

“Were you looking for something like this?” he asked over his shoulder.

Wetherell drew a long breath and lied—magnificently. “Yes, but I didn’t realise it till I met you. I’ve never taken a flyer in my life. Don’t you think it’s about time? I can afford it.”

“My God!” whispered Woodruff unsteadily. He sat down, put his face between his hands, and Wetherell caught the heave of narrow shoulders. Then the fog got into the boy’s lungs, and he began to cough.

“About that property,” he said presently, pulling himself together, “you’d have just under a third interest. When we reach the lode the shares ought to be worth a dollar apiece.” He jerked open a suitcase, spread a rough drawing on the bed, and went on with rising inflection. “Can’t you come out and see it for yourself now? It’s four feet wide and all quartz from wall to wall, and traced on the surface for a thousand feet. Don’t think it’s all good, for it isn’t, none of them are, and the man is a liar who says so, but I’ve given you a fair average.”

“When do you want the money?” asked Wetherell quietly.

The boy swayed a little, stretched out a thin hand as though for support, and slid limply to the floor. Wetherell, thoroughly frightened, knelt over him, then, as though he were a child, laid him on the bed beside the samples. In that moment he knew that he belonged irrecoverably to this consumptive stranger. Then Woodruff opened his eyes and smiled.

“Hope I didn’t alarm you, but I’ve been feeling rotten ever since I got here. It isn’t like the coast. Now about that property, I—”

“Don’t mind about that now, there’s no hurry.”

The boy raised himself on an elbow. “Say—if you’d been trying to pull off something for a solid month and been frozen out every day of the week except Sunday, would you let a bit of a cough prevent you from closing up a deal?”

Wetherell laughed. “I suppose not, if I could, but we don’t do business like that over here.”

“Then perhaps you want me to come back, say in a fortnight, they generally get off something like that.”

“No, but if you can dine with me in my rooms to-morrow evening, we can probably arrange everything.”

Woodruff was suddenly amused. “Sure I will, but”—here he broke off, pushed out his lips, and stared at the samples. “I’d like to feel that you’re going into this thing just—well, just on the showing we’ve got. Does it sound saucy to say that to a Britisher?”

“No.” Wetherell laughed in spite of the wistful look on the boy’s face. “I believe in the property. You’ve made me believe in it. May I take this plan and a few of the samples and I’ll see you to-morrow night?”

Woodruff sat up. “Sure, you can. I’ll come downstairs with you.”

“No, stay where you are; I’ll find my way out. What are you taking for that cough?”

“The best thing I’ve had is what you’ve brought to-day, and I feel better already. See you at seven-thirty to-morrow.”

**B**ut Wetherell did not see him. Seven-thirty came and passed with no Woodruff. Nor was there any message. At nine o’clock he climbed



three pair of stairs and knocked. A voice that sounded strangely distant asked him to come in.

Woodruff was in bed, his cheeks flaming. He propped himself up, then sank back with a pathetic little attempt at a welcome.

“Nice way to treat an invitation, isn’t it, but the starch has been all out of me since yesterday.” He closed his eyes for an instant, and gave a queer unnatural laugh. “I suppose you’re wondering why I didn’t communicate.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Wetherell hastily, “I’m sorry you’re knocked out.”

“I’ll be all right to-morrow. I’ve been lying here trying to guess what you had for dinner. I didn’t wire because, well—” He paused with a sudden and extraordinary look of age on his young face. “You see I’m strapped. The queen of this boarding-house blew in last night after you’d gone, and took all I had left. It wasn’t any use trying to explain anything—I’d done that several times already—and she wouldn’t even send you a wire.” He searched Wetherell’s face with undisguised anxiety. “Does this make you feel any different about things?”

“I’ve brought the money, if that’s what you mean.”

The boy stared at the ceiling. He did not speak. After a long, long silence he turned on his pillow with eyes like stars.

“Well, I’ll be darned,” he whispered.

Wetherell’s heart went out to him in a sudden flood. “Now look here, you’re coming to stay with me for a few days till you feel better. You can cable that money to-morrow, if you like, and then take things easy for a week.”

“Gee!” said Woodruff, “I thought I was in London. Do you mean it?”

That was the way of it. In something less than an hour, he was in Wetherell’s spare room on Half Moon Street, examining his new surroundings with quick interest. Wetherell, regarding the white features, knew instinctively that it would be for much longer than a week. But did that matter? It did not seem to be a burden, and he felt, in an odd way, that he was somehow redeeming London. He did not speculate on the boy’s reactions, or what it would mean to be in such case himself, but was quite definitely assured that the whole affair had been intended from the first. He was three thousand pounds the poorer, but, strangely enough, his balance did not seem one whit the less.

The money went off next morning; the whole of it. Woodruff, stimulated by his success, counted on selling enough additional shares to pay his expenses back, but as day after day he grew weaker, Wetherell was convinced that he had made the one great deal of his life. If something of this moved in the boy's own mind, he gave no sign of it.

Came a cable from his brother. The money had arrived in the nick of time, the property was saved, work was progressing. There was no need for his return if he was forming a good connection in London which would be useful in the future. Reading this last, Woodruff smiled whimsically at his saviour.

“Jim thinks I've tapped the Bank of England. Well, I've done better than —” He paused, then broke out abruptly. “My God, old man, where would I have been without you?”

**W**etherell knew where he would have been, and where, indeed, he must soon inevitably be. Each day, during which the boy's grip of life slackened imperceptibly, had drawn them closer together. It was like sprinkling a flower that found no relief in moisture. The inward flame was too fierce. And ever, as it wilted, it valiantly thrust out tiny, pathetic tendrils to grasp at the comfortless soil. Wetherell saw them, and they hurt him exceedingly. Doctors, many of them, came, then shook their heads in the dining-room and went away. Finally there arrived the day when Wetherell knew that the boy knew.

“I suppose that each of us has his one big job, and mine was to come to London and find you. Tell me honest, old man, aren't you just the least bit sorry I did?”

“No,” said Wetherell steadily, “I'm glad you did.”

“That last bone-sawyer was the gloomiest of the lot, wasn't he? It was written all over his face before he went out to have a chin-chin with you. I would have liked to hang on till we broke through the lode, but they can't make her inside of a month yet. And I wanted to look after your interest, too. Say, what am I going to cost you—all told? I want to send the bill out to Jim.”

“Nothing, old chap. Don't talk about that.”

The boy sent him a quick glance, then nodded understandingly and smiled. “Out on the coast we sometimes heard fellows calling each other ‘old chap,’ and it used to make us grin. But it don't seem so darn funny right

here. Fact is I'm getting to like it." He rambled on, now of London, now of the far distant Cascade Range, till, of a sudden, he turned and lay, face on hand, his eyes cloudy with thought.

"It doesn't make any difference what I say now, does it?"

Wetherell put aside his paper, and shook his head. He could not speak.

"Then it's only right I should tell you about Jim. I said I wanted to send those bills out to him, but I don't know if he'd pay them or not. He was never overly fond of me, and, anyway, he doesn't pay what he can dodge. What I'm trying to get at is this. Jim's holding all my shares except thirty thousand—that I want you to take, against those expenses. Now say you'll take them."

The other man made a little gesture, then had a blinding glimpse of the boy's penultimate faith.

"I'll take them."

Woodruff smiled. He had discharged a debt that lay heavy on his soul. He did not voice any further gratitude for what he had received, being in a queer but unmistakable way satisfied that acknowledgements would only make Wetherell uncomfortable, the man who, for him, represented the whole British nation. He yearned to live a little longer, to see the success of the mine, and glory in this—his one great friendship; but something persistently whispered that had he been less weak and helpless this friendship would never have reached its present and comforting stage. So he took the bitter with the sweet and complained not at all.

It was a few days before the boy died that Wetherell got what seemed to him a great reward. He had led a humdrum life in which he rather guarded himself against any extreme of feeling. But, down underneath, he had a certain congenital pride of race. He was glad that he was British and secretly proud that he was English. The only way in which he revealed this was a very slight accentuation of manner, when he happened to be with a foreigner. And Americans had been, up to date, naturally foreigners. But Woodruff had, apparently, not noticed anything out of the way, and for this he was thankful. The reward came at the end of an evening that seemed interminable.



*“When I got over here first I didn’t understand you people—not a little bit,” said the boy faintly. . . . Woodruff ‘slipped West’, his hand pressed tightly in a British palm.*

“When I got over here first,” said the boy faintly. “I didn’t understand you people—not a little bit. Now I guess you’re mostly the same after one gets through the skin. Out our way what one feels is spread right over us, so you can see it, while on this side of the water it seems to me you think that’s hardly, well—decent. Perhaps if you lived where I come from, you’d get the way we are—after a while. Anyway I just wanted to say that I misjudged the Britisher pretty hard—till I met you. Then I quit.”

Wetherell replied for the nation. “Thanks,” he said huskily.

**T**here wasn’t much more after that. Woodruff slipped West, his hand pressed tightly in a British palm, that extended friendship to the very last. He did not complain at his brother’s attitude for the latter had cabled that he could not come, owing to pressing work at the mine. What use could Jim be—in any case? His last look was one of unutterable affection.

It took Wetherell some weeks to pull himself together. During the past month he had lived more intensely than ever before, and it was of his nature

that he did not want to repeat the experiment. This thing had been inevitable. He had gone through with it whole-heartedly, and had felt it so much that he was a little frightened. The boy had been so vivid in spite of the frailty of his body, so whimsical and superbly honest, that he pulled at the strings of existence, and Wetherell had no desire for anything to replace him. Then he wrote to James Woodruff and enclosed a statement of his expenses. Something warned him to keep the originals.

The answer, which arrived in six weeks, justified the boy's premonitions. James Woodruff expressed a modified regret at his brother's death, declined responsibility for any expense, and requested the immediate return of all private property. The tone of the letter made Wetherell furious, but his reply merely asked for news of the mine, and stated that he held certain shares against certain proper disbursements on the boy's behalf. Then followed silence.

The way in which he next heard of the property was from a friend who had arrived from Yokohama by way of Seattle, and dropped a casual remark about a mine, the name of which, to Wetherell's startled ear, was very familiar, and which lay some fifty miles from the latter city. This mine, it appeared, had developed bonanza ore—and every effort was being made to keep the discovery quiet. The shares were, he understood, practically unpurchasable. He showed Wetherell a fragment of ore which was half gold and had been given to him by a good-natured miner on the train.

Wetherell did not say much, but that night in his rooms, unpacked the boy's samples, and examined them thoughtfully. He did not feel at all surprised. Money was always welcome, but it meant much, very much—more to him that the boy should have been right. As a matter of fact he had given up thinking of the mine altogether, and regarded his investment as lost, but the boy who had left so quick and tender a legacy, was never connected with this. In Wetherell's memory he was a plus and not a minus sign. But what did puzzle the latter was that he should have had no report from the property. He was still fingering the samples when the telephone rang, and a voice came in asking to know where and when he would meet Mr. James Woodruff.

It seemed at first perfectly natural that Woodruff should be in London. He had no doubt come over with the reports himself. But a moment later Wetherell caught a note in the voice that antagonized him strangely, and when he named a time and place, and in answer to a casually-worded enquiry about the property was told that the news was not particularly good, he hung up the receiver and turned away with a grim look of comprehension

on his usually good-natured face. What angered him was not only the thing he suspected, but also that from now on he should have to remember two Woodruffs instead of one with whom he was well content. And James Woodruff was living up to his reputation.

**I**n his office next morning, Wetherell gave instructions that his door be left slightly ajar. This gave him command of the long entrance passage, and he was presently rewarded by a glimpse of a tall figure, a sunburned face and eyes that seemed at first glance a little furtive. Then Woodruff was ushered in, and took the hand that was automatically extended before Wetherell realised what he was doing.

Their eyes met, and the two men measured each other. It was Woodruff who spoke first.

“I’d like to say thank you for what you did for my brother.”

Wetherell nodded. “That’s all right. The boy was in bad shape and I was glad to do what I could. He wasn’t fit for the job he attempted.”

Woodruff’s lips tightened a little. “I guess that was your English climate. I don’t think much of it myself.”

Wetherell grew hot with anger. He thought that never in his life had he disliked a man so much on short notice. He knew that if he went on to talk about the boy, his temper would get the better of him, and, because there was a tense moment not far ahead, he did not propose to lose it at all.

“How’s the mine doing?” He hazarded.

Woodruff looked suddenly gloomy. “That’s something I’ve got to tell you, but it isn’t cheerful news.”

“No?”

The other man leaned back, put an elbow on the desk and stared at a picture in the furthest corner. “Mining’s always a gamble. That’s never so true as when a lode is looking its best, and,” he paused, then went on regretfully, “I’m darned if it wasn’t the case with us. We had a fine showing—a thousand feet long on the surface—we worked like sin to strike it three hundred feet underground—and when we finally got there we found no values at all. What I want you to get hold of is that we were justified in doing all we did. You’re a big stockholder—and I wanted to tell you the thing myself.”

Wetherell drew a neat little cross on the blotter. “What would you say my shares are worth—if anything?”

“On the face of it practically nothing, but there’s just a chance of getting a little back.”

“Oh how’s that?” Wetherell tried to look surprised.

“Some fellows out on the coast,” said Woodruff evenly, “are willing to take the chance of trying it again. I told them straight it was a dead dog—but they’re game.” He glanced up significantly. “I reckon you don’t want to put any difficulties in the way.”

“Have they made an offer?” There was no feeling in the voice, and to the other man it sounded indifferent: but he didn’t know the English.

“They offer two cents a share.”

Wetherell’s pencil began to form little concentric circles. “And you think that’s reasonable under the circumstances?”

“It’s something for nothing, isn’t it?”

There was silence for a moment. Wetherell felt a spasm of contempt, but was coldly bent on carrying out his programme. It pleased him to be one thing to Woodruff—just as it had been a joy to be something very different to Woodruff’s brother. And this was comforting because it assured him that he had not degenerated into a sentimentalist whose emotions were nourished by that which was past and done with. So he surveyed this man with a certain deadly welcome and secretly rejoiced in his presence.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “I suppose it’s something for nothing. I hold thirty thousand shares your brother gave me against his expenses—that would be about a hundred and twenty pounds—at two cents a share.”

Woodruff nodded. “Just about.”

**W**etherell touched a bell, and, a moment later spoke to his chief clerk who stood impassively on the threshold. “With regard to those mining shares handed me by the late Mr. Guy Woodruff, this gentleman, who is his brother, and”—he dwelt on the next words a little—“knows the property thoroughly, states that their market value is one hundred and twenty pounds.” He regarded his visitor with cold blue eyes. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes—that’s right.”

“Would you also be willing to pay at the same rate for the larger number I bought?”

“Sure! That’s what I reckoned on doing. My friends won’t take the gamble unless they get the lot. I thought you understood that.”

“Perhaps I’m a little slow sometimes,” said Wetherell patiently. “I was thinking how odd that the shares your brother gave me should realize exactly the amount of the accounts I sent you.”

Woodruff colored under his tan. “I would have paid that right away if I hadn’t been up against it. I needed all my cash to put into the property.”

“And now you’ve lost it. Too bad,” murmured Wetherell, “too bad.”

The other man nodded resignedly. “It’s all in the game.”

“Then possibly you’ll be glad of a little ready money. Millen,” here Wetherell addressed the clerk, “make out a cheque to the order of Mr. James Woodruff for a hundred and twenty pounds, also—”

“But look—”

Wetherell raised a protesting hand. “Just a moment. You’ve probably heard that we’re not a very sentimental lot over here, but now and again we do feel something. This is a case of it. I put a sentimental value on those shares—because I had them from—well—from a boy, and naturally,” he added with a curious smile, “if I feel that about thirty thousand, I feel it all the more—being a Britisher—about a hundred and fifty thousand. I’m not selling to-day, Mr. Woodruff,” here his voice lifted a little, “I’m buying. Millen, make out that cheque, will you.”

He threw down his pencil and leaned back. “I’m not obliged to give you that money, but I want to wipe you off the slate if I can. No,—no, you needn’t get vexed—I happen to have the latest news from the mine, and I’ve an idea that your brother has got it too. At any rate I hope he has; and it’s about him that I want to speak while that cheque is being drawn. You see—or perhaps you don’t see—he left behind him something rare and—well—rather beautiful. I was a little afraid you were going to spoil that for me, but I see that you can’t—it’s beyond you. Now I understand why. It’s because you were ready to follow him and foul has trail—which was very straight. You’ve lost the boy now, and,” here the voice faltered slightly, “I’ve got him.”

The door opened. A cheque was laid on the blotter. The door closed again. Woodruff did not stir, but sat huddled in his chair, his chin on his



chest. Wetherell scribbled his name.

“Here,” he said roughly, “take it. And now get out!”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Wetherell's Romance* by Alan Sullivan]