



Frank Beeson, from Albany, N.Y., reaches Benton, Wyoming, then—1868—western terminus of the Pacific railroad. He had been ordered by physicians to seek a climate "high and dry." He is robbed of most of his money in his hotel and loses his last twenty dollars at monte in "The Big Tent," a dance hall and gambling resort, in the "roaring" town of Benton.

Edna Montoyo, a companion of a gambler, is believed by Frank to have cajoled him purposely into the game. Broke, disconsolate over his discovery that "the lady of the blue eyes" as he calls her, is what she is, and finally humiliated over his glaring "greenness," Frank repulses Edna when she begs him to go away with her, sobbingly telling him that she had made a big mistake in letting him lose his money. He goes to take a job with

George Jenks, a teamster in a wagon train about to leave for Salt Lake City.

Captain Adams, a Mormon, is in charge of the wagon train.

Rachael Adams, an attractive young woman, one of his wives, is in the train, as is

Daniel Adams, his loutish son. When Edna, who has shot, but not killed the gambler, Montoyo, comes a fugitive in "britches" to join the train, Daniel tells his father that she is seeking Jenks and Beeson. Captain Adams shouts, "No hussy in men's garments shall go with the train."

Daniel, by a spectacular gun play, foils Montoyo's attempt to take Edna back with him.

Under Jenks' and Edna's instruction Frank practices shooting—is told to "aim for his feet to hit his heart." This follows a clever exhibition of shooting by young Daniel, who is angered by Edna's interest in Beeson.

Daniel tries to bully Beeson. He is shot by the Easterner, and Beeson with Edna, flees into the night.

CHAPTER XI

A BARGAIN FOR A WOMAN

At last Edna spoke in low, even tones.

"What do you expect to do with me, please?"

"We shall have to do whatever is best for yourself," I managed to answer. "That will be determined when we reach the stage line, I suppose."

"Thank you! Once at the stage line and I shall contrive. You must have no thought of me. I understand very well that we should not travel far in company—and you may not wish to go in my direction. You have plans of your own?"

"None of any great moment. Everything has failed me, to date. There is only the one place left: New York State, where I came from."

"You have one more place than I," she replied.

Her voice had a quality of definite estimation which nettled, humbled, and isolated me, as if I lacked in some essential to a standard set.

"Well at home you will live comfortably. You will need to wear no belt weapon. The police will protect you. You can marry the girl next door—or even take the chance of the one across the street, her parentage being *comme il faut*. Your children will love to hear of the rough mule-whacker trail—yes, you will have great tales but you will not—mention that you killed a man who tried to kill you and then rode for a night with a strange woman alone at your stirrup! Your course is the safe course. By all means take it, Mr. Beeson."

"That I shall do, madam," I retorted. "The West and I have not agreed. I wish to God I had never seen it—I did not conceive that I should have to take a human life—become like an outlaw in the night, riding for refuge—" And I choked passionately.

"You deserve much sympathy," she remarked.

I lapsed into a turbulence of voiceless rage at myself.

For a time our mules plodded with sundry snorts and stares as if they were seeing portents in the moonshine. Eventually their imaginings dulled, so that they now moved careless of where or why.

I could not but be aware of my companion. Her hair glistened palely, for she rode bareheaded; her Mormon gown, tightened under her as she sat astride, revealed the lines of her boyish limbs.

She was a woman in any guise; and I being a man, protect her I should, as far as necessary! I found myself wishing that we could upturn something pleasant to talk about.

The drooping round of my thoughts revolved over and over, and I dozed, and kept dozing, until she spoke.

"Hadn't we better stop?"

That was a curious sensation. When I stared about, uncomprehending, my view was shut off by a whiteness veiling the moon above and the

earth below except immediately underneath my mule's hoofs.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The fog. I don't know where we are."

"Oh! I hadn't noticed."

"I don't think there's any use in riding on," she said. "We've lost our bearings."

"Yes, we'd better stop where we are," I agreed. "Then in the morning we can take stock."

She swung off before I had awkwardly dismounted to help her. Her limbs failed—my own were clamped by stiffness—and she staggered and collapsed with a little laugh.

"I'm tired," she confessed. "Wait just a moment."

"You stay where you are," I ordered, staggering also as I hastily landed. "I'll make camp."

But she would have none of that; pleaded my one-handedness and insisted upon co-operating at the mules. The animals were staked out, fell to nibbling.

I sought a spot for our beds; laid down a buffalo robe for her and placed her saddle as her pillow. She sank with a sigh, tucking her skirt under her, and I folded the robe over.

Her face gazed up at me; she extended her hand.

"You are very kind, sir," she said, in a smile that pathetically curved her lips. There, at my knees, she looked so worn, so slight, so childish, so in need of encouragement that all was well and that she had a friend to serve her, that with a rush of sudden sympathy I would—indeed I could have kissed her, upon the forehead, if not upon the lips themselves.

It was an impulse well-nigh overwhelming; an impulse that must have dazed me so that she saw or felt, for a tinge of pink swept into her skin; she withdrew her hand and settled composedly.

"Good-night. Please sleep. In the morning we'll reach the stage road and your troubles will be near the end."

Under my own robe I lay for a long time debating over what she might have done had I actually kissed her to comfort her.

Daniel had been disposed of, Montoyo did not deserve her; I had won her, she could inspire and guide me if I stayed; and I saw myself staying, and I saw myself going home, and I already regretted a host of things, as a man will when at the forking of the trails.

When I awakened we were still enshrouded by the fleece of fog. As I gazed sleepily about I could see Edna's eyes were open. She looked at me.

"Sh!" she warned, with quick shake of head. The same warning bade me listen. In a moment I heard voices.

They were indistinguishable except as vocal sounds.

"I've been hearing them some little while," she whispered.

"Adam's men trailing us?"

"I hope not," she gasped, in sheer agony. "If we might only know in time!"

Suddenly the fog was shot with gold, as the sun flashed in. Gradually the earth appeared in glimpses.

"There!" she whispered, pointing. "Look! They are Indians. We must get away before they see us."

We worked rapidly, bridling and measured steadiness.

"Harry!" she bade.

The whole desert was a golden haze when having packed we climbed aboard.

The fog lingered in patches. From patch to patch we threaded, with many a glance over shoulder.

At last we came to a rough outcrop of red sandstone, looming rudely on our right. Edna quickly swerved for it.

"The best chance. I see nothing else," she muttered. "We can tie the mules under cover, and wait. We'll surely be spied if we keep on."

In a moment we had gained the refuge. The sculptured rock masses, detached one from another, several jutting ten feet up, received us. We tied the mules short, in a nook at the rear; and we ourselves crawled in until we lay snug amidst the shadowing buttresses, with the desert vista opening before us.

We had been just in time. Rounding a knoll there appeared a file of mounted figures, Indians unmistakably.

"A war party! Sioux, I think," she said. "Don't they carry scalps on that first lance? They've been raiding the stage line. Do you see any squaws?"

"No," I hazarded. "All warriors, I should guess."

"All warriors. But squaws would be worse."

On they cantered; indeed, seemed to be diverging from our ambush and making more to the west. And I had hopes that, after all, we were safe.

Then her hand clutched mine firmly. A wolf had leaped from cover in the path of the file; leaped eastward across the desert, and instantly, with

a whoop that echoed upon us like the crack of doom, a young fellow darted from the line in gay pursuit.

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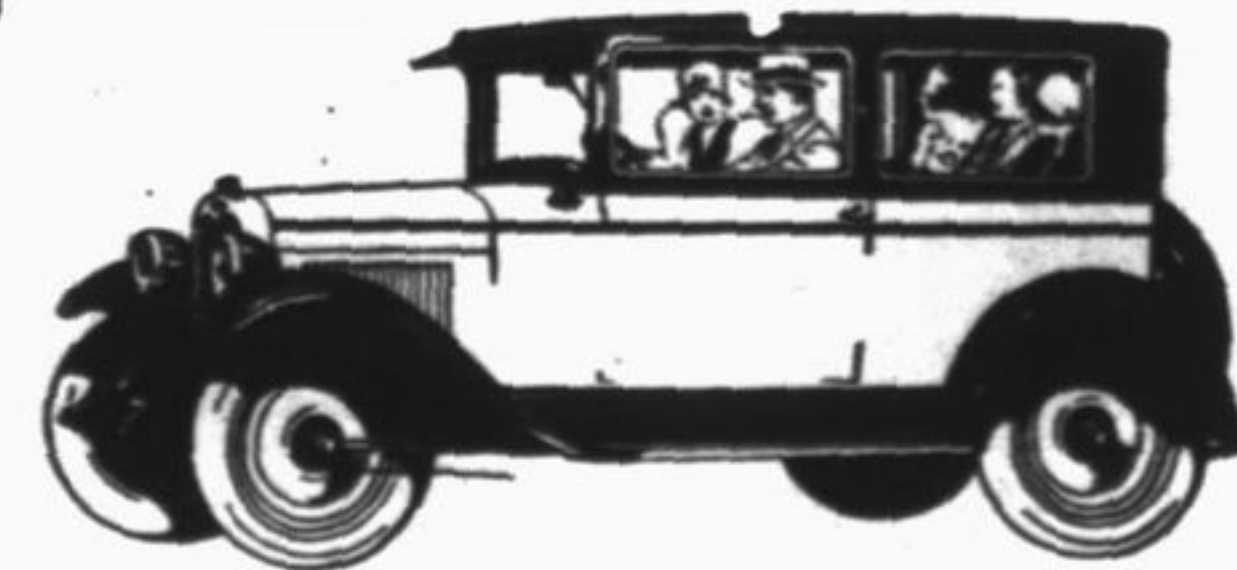
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