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Youth Rides West
by Will Irwin

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WNU Service

(Continued.)

"Hello!" she said, slapping the hot cakes before the three miners, who all reached for them simultaneously with their forks. "Didn't I see you at the holdups?"

"Yes," I replied. "I wasn't held up, but I was there."

"Got us robbed," said Mrs. Barnaby, addressing the miners, "held up and robbed—that stage company!" Forthwith, addressing not me but them, Mrs. Barnaby launched forth into her narrative of that adventure, beginning with her mortal certainty, when she took the stage at Plated's, that something was going to happen. Meantime, I seated myself in a spare place at the other end of the table in the attitude of one who expects to be served. Mrs. Barnaby, whirling on a gesture as she described the killing of the horse, beheld me there, broke the narrative off short, and turned her guns from the stage company to me.

"Well, who asked you to sit down?" she asked.

"I—I wanted board," I replied, feeling somewhat de trop.

Mrs. Barnaby regarded me with small, brown, deep-set eyes, and her expression seemed to brand my simple business proposal as an insult.

"Regular, or transient?" she inquired.

"Regular," I faltered. Mrs. Barnaby was looking at me so sternly that I wondered uncomfortably if she had guessed why I chose her establishment.

"Got a job?"

"Oh, yes!"

"At what?"

"Reporter on the Courier."

"Editor, huh? Well, I know editors. You pay in advance!" said Mrs. Barnaby.

"How much?"

"Ten a week—for you!"

Meekly, I reached into my pocket, fumbled a produced a gold eagle, apologetically I gave it to Mrs. Barnaby. She rang it on the pine table before she lifted her skirt to no indiscreet height for those days, revealing a pair of men's cowhide boots. Into the leg of the

rest, she dropped her coin.

"And you'll get no ham with your eggs, neither," said Mrs. Barnaby, flourishing into the kitchen. "Last to be had in camp was eat by those hogs." Whereupon the nearest of the three miners turned upon the others and dropped a solemn wink. And I began to perceive that Mrs. Barnaby's bark was worse than her bite.

In fact, when she returned with my smoking hot eggs and my steaming coffee, she seemed to have accepted me as a regular boarder. Her manner became almost confidential. She spoke of the difficulty in getting decent provisions—"The last bar'l of flour I bought was great stuff for hanging paper, and that's the best you can say of it"—and the rivalry of Jim Huffaker—"that thievin' squatter!"

"Where's your tent?" I inquired.

"Out back," replied Mrs. Barnaby. Then she saved me the embarrassment of asking further questions by adding: "I live there with another lady—the one that was with me when they got us robbed."

"Mrs. Deane?" I asked, my eagerness betraying me into bold question.

"How'd you know her name?" responded Mrs. Barnaby sharply, and then: "Oh, yes, you was gallyvantin' round with her by the dead



In the Entrance Sat Mrs. Deane—Her Eyes Were Searching the Far Distances.

horse. Everybody gallyvants with her, or tries to."

"And Mr. Deane?"

"Ain't no Mr. Deane, 's far as is visible to the eye," replied Mrs. Barnaby. Then she seemed to pull back, as though already she had gone too far. She gathered up a pile of soiled dishes and sped back to the kitchen. When she returned, it was only to slam down another plate of hot cakes, remarking that if those didn't fill me up, I wasn't going to get filled. She did not reappear, even though I dawdled over my eating. Nor did any feminine figure part the flap of the front door. Evidently Mrs. Deane breakfasted early.

So at last I finished, wiped my fingers on my handkerchief, and strolled out of doors. Automatically, as though no longer governed by my conscious mind, I turned not toward camp but up the hill. Behind the walled tent of the boarding house stood a smaller tent, its door flaps hooked back to take advantage of the sun. And in the entrance sat Mrs. Deane. Her eyes were searching the far distances. Her hands lay in her lap. They held a newspaper.

The same automatic impulse which had turned me in the direction of the cabin carried my feet toward her. Her eyes fixed themselves absently on me for a moment before she gave a little start, leaned back in her chair. My sharpened intuitions told me that she had suddenly drawn some imperceptible curtain of feminine reserve. Then she smiled; a slow smile which began with her deep blue eyes and seemed to run, like the morning sunlight down a peak, until it warmed her firm, shapely mouth.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Gilson," she said, conventionally but cordially.

I approached, stood at her side. I was six feet one in those days. I must have towered above her; and for an instant I read in her eyes something akin to panic. Did she tremble? It was no more than a flutter, but it suggested fear. Then she rose suddenly and—

"Let me get you a chair!" she said. She had dropped the newspaper. As I picked it up and restored it to her, I saw that it was this morning's Cottonwood Courier. My eye followed her swift, easy movement into the cabin, caught dimly a background of feminine neatness and decorative instinct—a pine bunk covered with a clean sheet in lieu of a spread, a worn but well-swept strip of rag carpet, a mirror in a plush frame, a picture superfluously decorated at the corner of its frame with bows of blue ribbon. And there floated out to me a subtle suggestion of perfume, which went to my head like wine. She returned with a rough pine chair, set it beside her own.

"I'm a fellow boarder of yours," I said as we seated ourselves. "I've just given my digestion into the care of Mrs. Barnaby."

"It's safe, I think," commented Mrs. Deane. "She's an inspired cook—though she has little enough to work with here." Her trouble was that she's too generous. She has to be a little gruff to guard herself against herself."

"I can readily understand that," I replied. Then Mrs. Deane looked up—very serious now—and, catching a past phrase in my narrative, asked:

"Did you say—that you were an editor?"

It had been long since I had opportunity to confide in a woman; and I fairly revelled in the luxury, telling the story of my struggles with mining, my lucky call on Marcus Handy, and my first night on a newspaper. She seemed amused at first; then a shade crossed her expression and—

"You didn't come to interview me?" she asked suddenly and rather breathlessly. This question chilled like a dash of cold water my glowing mood. But I hastened to clear myself.

"No—why should I? We haven't a society column as yet," I added with an awkward attempt at subtle gallantry. "Besides, Sunday is my day off. There's no paper on Monday morning."

She did not answer this. A moment of silence followed until she turned the subject with:

"This must be wonderful—for a man—this life up here!"

"It is," said I. "And why not for a woman?"

"Is anything so wonderful for a woman as for a man, I wonder?" she asked. "You must remember, too, that we can't go to the Black Jack and the Comstock Lode. She smiled at that mid-Victorian conceit; and I smiled back. To Mrs. Deane's generation and mine, the picture of a lady in any establishment where hard liquor was sold publicly, seemed so impossible as to be humorous, grotesque."

"Then you don't really like our camp?" said I, almost resentfully. My one night on the Cottonwood Courier had begun to develop my spirit of local pride.

"In flashes, I do," she replied. "Sort of," as the native Yankee says. But I'm afraid I'm too much a woman to like it wholly. It's terribly brutal in places. I can't as yet take all this talk about gold with the proper seriousness. When they talk to me about 'clean-ups'—isn't that the word?—my mind only pictures the stupendous quantity of chased bracelets and earrings and settings for brooches that it will make! I like to sing at the piano and to embroider little designs and to paint little water-color landscapes, and to go to church and pretend that I'm really sorry for my little sins, and to make little calls, and to gossip discreetly as a lady should about why John broke his engagement to Mary. I love gossip. That on the surface. And deeper down—security!" She had proceeded that word "security" by one of her delicious little rests in the rhythm of her speech; and when she came out with it, her voice seemed to have fallen a whole octave.

"Yes," she continued, beginning almost under her breath, "I love security! I didn't once. I wonder if I haven't a little piece of man in me. But I've learned better. A woman has to follow her nature. Security now above everything. Something you can count on."

(To be continued.)

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