

Youth Rides West

CHAPTER XIV.

My decision to stay at Cottonwood and face it all down proved ridiculously more easy than I

thought when I matched nobilities with Constance. Disgrace is a coward; it retreats before a bold front. The indifferent world in the end always takes toward it the attitude that you take yourself. Nor, indeed, did Cottonwood probably think me disgraced. They gossiped, of course; I had for a

long time an uncomfortable sense that groups had pointed me out when I passed. But to my face men showed only cordiality—some times a trifle overdone, and more galling than public reproach.

Even that had passed. A mining camp runs with bewildering speed its course from birth to senile decay. Twenty years of Europe! In a month Cottonwood lived a cycle of Cathay. Before August blew the petals from the white columbines, decked the forests with their flaunting sisters in red and yellow, we had become a new entity. Events a few weeks before were as ancient history as though they had happened to my grandfather.

Constance wrote from Denver. On the surface this was merely a friendly letter such as any married woman might address to a young man who had rendered her service. Yet the intention shines through the written expression; and as by an arrangement of words too subtle for analysis I knew that Constance Deane had not changed toward me, never would change. She had found Martin Deane; had seen him once. "But he thinks it better, considering his position, that we should not be together for the present—either here or traveling," she wrote.

In all I had six letters from her that autumn—I have them yet. After that she did not refer again even to Martin Deane; only the fourth said:

"If there is any change in my situation I shall let you know at once."

Meantime I had resumed my regular correspondence with mother, much neglected of late. Into it I poured something of the soul and fervor with which I would have liked to infuse my letters to Constance. The shrewd eye of motherhood seemed dimly and uneasily to

perceive the meaning behind this change; her rumsonplaces about Cohasset were sprinkled with hints that I must have had enough of the West. By November, indeed, she advised me openly to come home, at least for the winter. "I want to look you over, Robert!" she wrote. Poor mother—I thought—if she only knew! And I speculated on happiness, as one will in the depths of misery, imagining her in the capacity of mother-in-law.

If I had met Constance in ordinary happy circumstances, wooed her serenely and according to the normal pattern of courting in mother's time and place, I had no doubt but they would have got on wonderfully. They were just like enough, just different enough. The souls of both were built on a solid structure of honor. Both to use a word much degenerate in meaning since the days of my youth—were ladies. Both had enormous capacities for friendship with women. And the good-humored candor of Constance would be a foil for mother's peppery wit. As it was—well, mother boasted that her set in Cohasset had never known divorce or scandal. If ever life opened again for me I must come to Constance across events beyond comprehension of mother's circle. And still I had faith that Constance would overcome all this—because she was Constance. At the end of these meditations I would pull myself up and realize that I had been dreaming, as a prisoner for life dreams of mountains and seas and green fields.

As the camp boomed, so did the Courier. We were publishing six pages on Wednesdays and Sundays now; and our job-printing department, in spite of the increase in power, ran two weeks behind its orders. Just before the big snow Marcus wrote a week's editorials in advance, packed his carpet bag, and took the stage to Denver, leaving me coked up on the dizzy eminence of the editorial chair.

There followed a period of hard work and trying but interesting responsibility. Marcus intended to be gone only a week; but the big snow came, blocking the passes. It was ten days, in fact, before he appeared at the office without the grace of warning by telegraph, walked in upon me, the icicles hanging from his mustache. With scarcely a word of greeting or of news, he plunged into the business of supervising the night's work. When the printers had an hour's copy ahead he said:

"Get on your coat and come over to Huffaker's—the private room. I've got a heap of things to spill about that Denver business; and I don't want to tell 'em here." We plodded over to Huffaker's, silent perforce in the face of an arctic wind. He took off his buffalo coat, warmed his hands at the red-hot stove, before he began abruptly:

"What I want to talk to you about isn't business. It's your girl."

"Is she—is she well?" I asked.

"Well, and reasonably happy, I guess," replied Marcus. "Now you sit down and keep your shirt on. I've got a lot to tell you." He came over from the stove, sat down at the table opposite me, turned on me a look more nearly tender than ever I had seen in his face. But his first words seemed remote from the subject.

"You remember Mike the detective?"

"Yes."

Marcus nodded. "Well, he's no common detective. Fancy operative, and all that. When Mr. Taylor hired him, he had to sign a year's contract. Everything was rounded up long before anybody expected. And there was Mike, eating his head off. So Mr. Taylor lent me Mike. Little testimonial of esteem for my work in stabilizing finance in this camp. I set him to looking up this Martin Deane. For satisfaction of my own curiosity. And your peace of mind, boy."

"How Mike went at it, I haven't asked. But he has a special wire running down to every circle of crooks in the West. Since Deane, alias Maxwell, left here, he's been hanging round various camps in range of Denver. He's been telling Mrs. Deane, just as I told you, that he shouldn't go East with her for the present, because it isn't safe for them to be seen together. Hasn't occurred to you, has it, that they might travel separately and just meet somewhere? It has occurred to Mrs. Deane—I guess—but I suspect she's been fooling herself. Anyhow, I was stringing you because I wanted him right here in the West. And he was stringing her because he wasn't alone in his wanderings. He had company. This man West makes the good better and the bad worse, in my opinion. And does it sudden. Crooks always have queer spots of virtue in them, too. The marrying crook's common. Like any other specimen of that species, he wants what he wants so hard that he doesn't care how he gets it. But he has a whim for sanctifying his intentions on womenfolk with holy matrimony. And, like most men, he's capable of fancying two women at one and the same time. This Martin Deane, for example, Mike found 'em last month. He's been working since to identify the signatures. And they're authentic." He spread out two docu-

ments on the table.

An order of divorce. Martin Deane of Wyoming from Constance Deane of Rhode Island. Cause, desertion. Dated last February. A marriage certificate. Martin Deane of Wyoming to Lucy Baldwin of Wyoming. Dated two days later—"Don't let your emotions get away with you until I have told you the rest," said Marcus. I gripped myself, and listened.

"The divorce is right and it isn't right. There's other camps in this West that need a clean-up. That"—he pointed at the date line on the papers—"is one of them. No lawyer is needed to see that this divorce won't hold water if the other party wants to fight. He hadn't lived long enough in Wyoming to establish a legal residence. The court—on the Judge Cowan pattern, only worse, I guess—has delicately refrained from inquiring into that. Other party wasn't

notified either. If I was a young man with any intention of marrying a lady in that fix, I'd wait until she got divorced proper and legal on her own account. Mrs. Deane says—"You've seen her?"

"Yes. Found an afternoon off to call. Me and Mike, and afterward me alone. She's plumb sick and tired of this Martin Deane at last. Wouldn't have the spirit of a squashed tar baby if she wasn't."

I rose. "I'm going to Denver!" I said. "All right, give you a vocation if you want it," responded Marcus with a beaming smile. "Only if I were you, on the way to Denver I'd glance for a moment into the ladies' parlor of this hotel. It's fixed with Jim Huffaker that you aren't to be disturbed if you want to loaf and linger there a little while."

I flew down the corridor. Constance rose from the sofa; faced me. But as I sprang toward her, my arms outstretched, she stopped me with an uplifted hand.

"Robert," she said—and her syllables dropped like honey—"I haven't waited for you. I wanted to come to you—because you've been brave and because it happened here—and because you've suffered so much for me—and because I couldn't wait—and now, Robert, my lover—if you want me—come the rest of the way—"

(THE END.)

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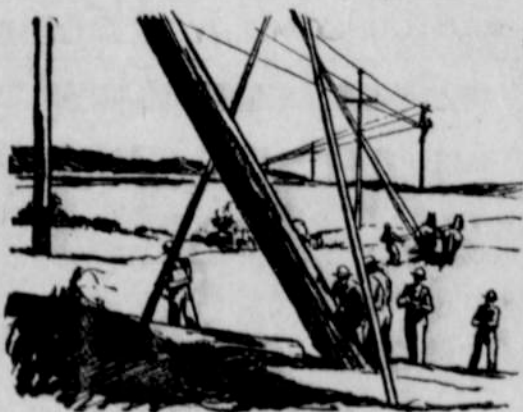
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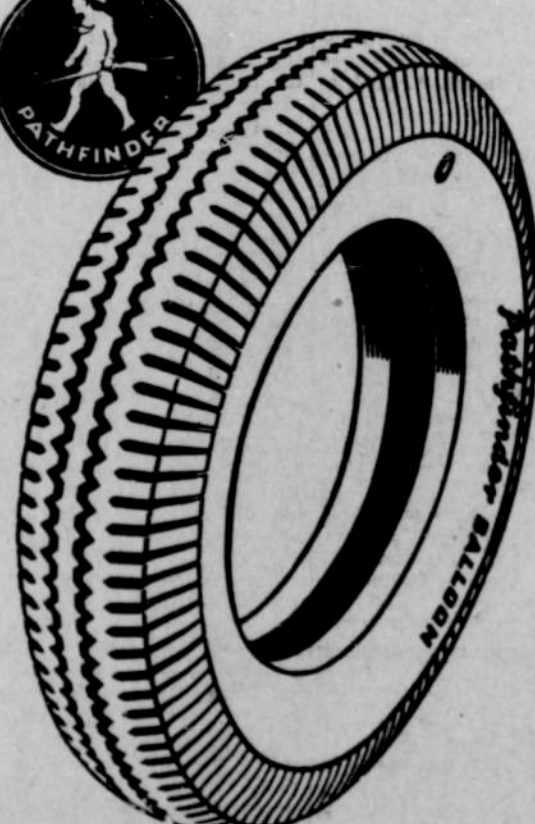
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