

THE TARDY CANNON BALL.

CONCERNING AN ENOCH ARDEN—OF THE SHEEP RANGE.
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RIBALD FRIEND of mine used to yowl a song, which went:
The telegraph man in his office sat—

*Out west, out west—
When in came a man without a hat,
Or coat, or vest.*

He never could sing, and it is a poor effort, any way, tending to levity on serious subjects; but it happens to sum up the situation in Dodd City on the night of September 22, A. D. 1911.

At ten of the clock the station agent was hunched in a chair in a semi-comatose condition, waiting for the click of the instrument which should notify him of the approach of the Cannon Ball. The Cannon Ball lurches through Dodd City once a day, and, when it does not run off the track, frequently attains a speed of twenty miles an hour on the ballasted stretches. A hatless man, in his shirt-sleeves, came in and leaned on the counter with the languid ease of practice. The agent roused, glanced once, and felt surreptitiously of his waistband to make certain that his gun was within reach, for the stranger's appearance would never have begotten confidence in timid souls, and the station was a mile from anywhere. Thus did a plutocratic railroad slight Dodd City.

"Howdy," said the stranger. "Gimme a ticket to Childress."

He was slab-sided and very tall, and the agent could not quite determine to his own satisfaction whether he was a lightning-rod peddler or a sewing machine man. But it was none of his concern how the gentleman had arrived, provided he had the necessary money to depart, so he stamped the ticket in the listless fashion peculiar to his species and counted out change from a twenty-dollar bill.

"Got your credentials?"

"Uh-hh—I ain't a regular drummer," was the answer. "What made you go to think I was?"

"Oh, the cut of your mug!" said the agent, in a sleepy voice.

The other pocketed the ticket and took possession of the chair that held the door open. Not feeling inclined to conversation, the agent trimmed the lamp and fell to sorting a pile of flimsy.

FOR a long time there was silence. The night was growing cold, on the heels of a day of blighting heat. Outside was the flat, dead stillness of lone regions after dark. A mosquito piped his thin song. Once an owl hoated from the track, and a bull-bat, wheeling in erratic flight, invaded the office for an instant, swept close to the lamp and darted out again. Evidently the quiet grew irksome to the traveler.

"Say," he said abruptly, "if you hear anything of a doggone team running loose around these parts, notify Jake Beasley at the City, will you?"

The agent turned reluctantly to look at him.

"I done hired a team from Jake and they run away with me. You know them sorry grays of his? Well, where the road makes a sharp

turn up here about half a mile I could n't turn as sharp as the road did. That's where I lost my hat and coat. But wait—I did n't lose my luggage."

Very gravely he produced a flask from his hip pocket and tendered it to the agent. That functionary hesitated for a moment; then, in response to an urgent "Take a sip, anyhow," said "How" and swallowed a goodly gulp. His eyes began to bulge, and he shuddered and groped blindly about for a glass of water.

"That's sure stout," he remarked.

"You can't get any other kind in these towns no more. No, sir; since this plains country went dry, there's been thousands of healthy stomachs ruined."

Saying which, the lank individual took a long pull without blinking an eyelash and returned the flask to his pocket.

THE AGENT turned again to a scrutiny of the flimsy, but it was apparent that a more sociable footing had been established. Try as he would, he could not look so sternly preoccupied as before. Meanwhile the stranger rocked one leg over the other and hummed a tune. Presently the telegraph instrument began to tick.



"Dink hoisted her on top of a burro and off they went down the mountain side"

"Gee! She won't be here for another two hours," said the agent, in intense disgust. "I never will catch up with my sleep. What do you know about that? Fours nights now, hand-running, I've sat here until midnight, waiting for that doggone Cannon Ball. I swan, a man with a wife and family ain't got any right to stay in railroading."

Nodding comprehension and sympathy, the traveler put in: "Speaking of railroading, did you ever hear the one about the engineers?"

"I've heard a right smart of 'em," was the cautious reply. "Which one do you mean?"

The traveler told the story, and the agent fairly bowled. Leaning back in his chair, he allowed himself to relax and accepted a cigar.

"Say, do you play euchre?" he asked.

"No-oo, I can't say I do. But I'm a wolf at casino."

Without more ado the agent took a deck of cards from a pigeonhole and made room for him at the table.

"Come on 'round. I'm some casino player myself," he added with a grin. And there ain't anything you can steal here."

A cordial relation being thus established, they began the game.

"It's right queer," remarked the traveler, "but I ain't played casino in years. Isn't it funny how time will change a feller's habits, though? I mind when I used to play most every night. And there were no flies on me in them days, neither."

"Yes?" said the agent, raking in big casino.

BOTH knew all the finer points of the game. They played for half an hour, with scarcely a word exchanged. The agent observed that his opponent was not having much luck.

"No, but it'll come." He shuffled the pack and handed it to the other. "I always say that time will do most anything if a feller only gives it a chance. What's your idea?"

"Sure," the agent replied. "It's a long lane that has no ash barrel."

The telegraph instrument started its monotonous *tack, tick-a-tack*, and the official hurriedly shoved back his chair. After listening a moment: "That's just my luck every time. Consarn it! Got to relay some stuff. Hey? No; wash-out on the Canadian. I reckon we'd best not start another game. Don't move. Take it easy."

The other settled back, lighted the stub of his cigar and cocked his feet on the desk. For a space he listened to the agent receive. Then, in a break, he said musingly:

"Yes, sir, time will cure most anything. A feller's a fool to let himself get worked up over things. If he'll only wait, everything'll come out right. And if it don't, what does it matter?"

To which the agent, bending over the key, retorted: "What's the answer?"

"There ain't no answer. But I was just thinking—fire ahead. Don't let me cut in on you there, I just happened to remember about a case that proves what I said."