Desert Dust

By Edwin L. Sabin

Author of "How Are You Feeling?" etc.

Now it stirred, and erected a little. I felt the unseemliness of sitting and waiting for her to make her toilet, so hastily staggered to achieve my own by aid of the water tank, tin basin, roller towel and small looking-glass at the rear, substituting my personal comb and brush for the pair hanging there by cords.

The coach was the last in the train. I stepped out upon the platform, for fresh air.

We were traversing the real plains of the Great American Desert, I judged. The prairie grasses had shortened to brown stubble interspersed with bare sandy soil rising here and there into low hills. It was a country without north, south, east, west, save as denoted by the sun, broadly launching his first beams of the day. Behind us the single track of double rails clear to the Missouri. The dull blare of the car wheels was the only token of life, excepting the long-eared rabbits scampering with erratic high jumps, and the prairie dogs sitting bolt upright in the sunshine among their hill-ocked burrows. Of any town there was no sign. We had cut loose from company.

Then we thundered by a freight train, loaded with still more ties and iron, standing upon a siding guarded by the idling trainmen and by an operator's shack. Smoke was welling from the chimney of the shack—and that domestic touch gave me a sense of homesickness. Yet I would have not have been home, even for breakfast. This wide realm of nowhere fascinated with the unknown.

The train and shack flattened into the landscape. A bevy of antelope flashed white tails at us as they scudded away. Two motionless figures, horeback, whom I took to be wild Indians, surveyed us from a distant sand-hill. Across the river there appeared a fungus of low buildings almost indistinguishable, with a glimmer of canvas-topped wagons fringing it. That was the old emigrant road.

While I was thus orienting myself in lonesome but not entirely hopeless fashion the car door opened and closed. I turned my head. The Lady of the Blue Eyes had joined me. As fresh as the morning she was.

"Oh! You? I beg your pardon, sir." She apologized, but I felt the diffidence was more politic than sincere.

"You are heartily welcome, madam," I assured.

"There is air enough for us both."

"The car is suffocating," she said. "However, the worst is over. We shall not have to spend another such a night. You are still for Benton?"

"By all means." And I bowed to her. "We are fellow-travelers to the end, I believe."

"Yes?" She scanned me. "But I do not like that word: the end. It is not a popular word, in the West. Certainly not at Benton. For instance—"

We tore by another freight waiting upon a siding located amidst a wide debris of tin cans, scattered sheet-iron, stark mud-and-stone chimneys, and barren spots, resembling the ruins from fire and quake.

"There is Julesburg."

"A town?" I gasped.

"The end." She smiled. "The only inhabitants are now in the station-house and the graveyard?"

"And the others? Where are they?"

"Farther west. Many of them in Benton."

"Indeed? Or in North Platte!" I bantered.

"North Platte!" She laughed merrily. "Dear me, don't mention North Platte—not in the same breath with Benton, or even Cheyenne. A town of hayseeds and dollar-a-day clerks whose height of sport is to go fishing in the Platte! A young man like you would die of ennui in North Platte. Julesburg was a good town while it lasted. People lived, there; and moved on because they wished to keep alive. What is life, anyway, but a constant shuffle of the cards? Oh, I should have laughed to see you in North Platte." And laugh she did. "You might as well be dead underground as buried in one of those smug seven-Sabbaeth-a-week places."

Her free speech accorded ill with what I had been accustomed to in woman kind; and yet became her sparkling eyes and general dash.

"To be dead is past the joking, madam," I reminded.

"Certainly. To be dead is the end. In Benton we live while we live, and don't mention the end. So I took exception to your gallantry." She glanced behind her, through the door window into the car.

"Will you," she asked hastily, "join me in a little appetizer, as they say? You will find it a superior cognac—and we breakfast shortly, at Sidney."

From the pocket of her shirt she had extracted a small silver flask, stoppered with a tiny screw cup. Her face swam before me in my astonishment.

"I rarely drink liquor, madam," I stammered.

"Nor I. But when traveling—you know. And in high and—dry Benton liquor is quite a necessity. You will discover that, I am sure. You will not decline to taste with a lady? Let us drink to better acquaintance, in Benton."

"With all my heart, madam," I blurted.

She poured, while swaying to the motion of the train; passed the cup to me with a brightly challanging smile.

"Ladies first. That is the custom, is it not?" I queried.

"But I am hostess, sir. I do the honors. Pray do you your duty."

"To our better acquaintance, then, madam," I accepted. "In Benton."

The cognac swept down my throat like a stab of hot oil. She poured for herself.

"A votre sante, monsieur—and continued beginnings, no ends." She daintily tossed it off.

We had consummated our pledges just in time. The brakeman issued, stumping noisily and bringing discord into my heaven of blue and gold and comfortable warmth.

"Howdy, lady and gent? Breakfast is twenty minutes." He grinned affably at her; yes, with a trace of familiarity. "Sleep well, madam?"

"Passably, thank you." Her voice held a certain element of calm interrogation as if to ask how far he intended to push acquaintance. "We're nearing Sidney, you say? Then I bid you gentlemen goodmorning."

With a darting glance at him and a parting smile for me she passed inside. The brakeman leaned for an instant's look ahead, up the track, and lingered.

"Friend of yours, is she?"

"I met her in Omaha, is all." I stiffly informed.

"Considerable of a dame, eh?" He eyed me. "You're booked for Benton, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never been there, myself. She's another hellroarer, they say."

"Sir!" I remonstrated.

"Oh, the town, the town," he enlightened. "I'm not saying nothing against it, for that matter—nor against her, either. They're both O. K."

"You are acquainted with the lady, yourself?"

"Her? Sure. I know about everybody along the line between Platte and Cheyene. Been running on this division ever since it opened."

"She lives in Benton, though, I understand," I proffered.

"Why, yes; sure she does. Moved there from Cheyenne." He looked at me queerly. "Naturally. Ain't that so?"

"Probably it is," I admitted. "I see no reason to doubt your word."

"Yep. Followed her man. A heap of people moved from Cheyenne to Benton, by way of Laramie."

"She is married, then?"

"Far as I know. Anyway, she's not single, by a long shot." And he laughed. "But, Lord, that cuts no great figger. People here don't stand on ceremony in those matters. Everything's aboveboard. Hands on the table until time to draw—then draw quick."

His language was a little too bluff for me.

"Her husband is in business, no doubt?"

"Business?" He stared unblinking. "I see." He laid a finger alongside his nose, and winked wisely. "You bet yuh! And good business. Yes, siree. Are you on?"

"Am I on?" I repeated. "On what? The train?"

"Oh, on your way."

"To Benton; certainly."

"Do you see any green in my eye, friends?" he demanded.

"I do not."

"Or in the moon, maybe?"

"No, nor in the moon," I retorted. "But what is all this about?"

"I'll be damned!" he roundly vouchsafed. And—"You've been having quite a little smile with her, eh?" He sniffed suspiciously. "A few swigs of that'll make a pioneer of you quicker'n alkali. She's favoring you—eh? Now if she tells you of a system, take my advice and quit while your hair's long."

"My hair is my own fashion, sir," I rebuked.

"And the lady is not for discussion between gentlemen, particularly as my acquaintance with her is only casual. I don't understand your remarks, but if they are insinuations I shall have to ask you to drop the subject."

"Tut,tut!" he grinned. "No offense intended, Mister Pilgrim. Well, you're all right. We can't be young more than once, and if the lady takes you in tow in Benton you'll have the world by the tail as long as it holds. She moves with the top-notchers; she's a knowing little piece—no offense. Her and me are good enough friends. There's no brace game in that deal. I only aim to give you a steer. Savvy?" And he winked. "You're out to see the elephant, yourself."

"I am seeking health, is all," I explained. "My physician had advised a place in the Far West, high and dry; and Benton is recommended."

His response was identical with others preceding.

"High and dry? By golly, then Benton's the ticket. It's sure high, and sure dry. You bet yuh! High and dry and roaring."

"Why 'roaring'?" I demanded at last. The word has been puzzling me.

"Up and coming. Pop goes the weasel, at Benton. Benton? Lord love you! They say it's got Cheyenne and Laramie backed up a tree, and the best days they ever seen. When you step off at Benton step lively and keep an eye on the back of your head. There's money to be made at Benton, by the wise ones. Watch out for ropers and if you get onto a system, play it. There ain't any limit to money or suckers."

"I may not qualify as to money," I informed.

"But I trust that I am no sucker."

"No green in the eye, eh?" he approved. "Anyhow, you have a good lead if your friend in black cottons to you." Again he winked. "You're not a bad-looking young feller." He leaned over the side steps, and gazed ahead. "Sidney is in sight. Be there directly. We're hitting twenty miles and better through the greatest country on earth. The engineer smells breakfast."

CHAPTER III

I Rise In Favor

With that he went forward. So did I; but the barricade at the end of My Lady's seat was intact, and I sat down in my own seat, to keep expectant eye upon her profile—a decided relief amidst that crude melange of people in various stages of hasty dressing after a night of cramped postures.

The brakeman's words, although mysterious in part, had concluded reaasuringly. My Lady, he said, would prove a valuable friend in Benton. A friend at hand means a great deal to any young man, stranger in a strange land.

The conductor came back—a new conductor; stooped familiarly over the barricade and evidently exchanged pleasantries with her.

"Sidney! Sidney! Twenty minutes for breakfast!" the brakeman bawled, from the door.

There was the general stir. My Lady shot a glance at me, with inviting eyes, but arose in response to the proffered arm of the conductor, and I was late. The aisle filled between us as he ushered her on and the train slowed to grinding of brakes and the tremendous clanging of a gong.

Of Sidney there was little to see: merely a stationhouse and the small Railroad Hotel, with a handful of other buildings forming a single street—all squatting here near a rock quarry that broke the expanse of uninhabited brown plains. The air, however, was wonderfully invigorating: the meal excellent, as usual; and when I emerged from the dining room, following closelyly a black figure crowned with gold, I found her strolling alone upon the platform.

(Continued next week.)

Beating 'Em to It.

From the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

Before the annual Christmas letters to Santa Claus begin to crowd the old gentleman's mail, we wish to call his attention to our following needs:

1. About $7,432.86 in cash or certified check. That'll break us even and give us a chance to start over again.

2. A new motor car. The one we've got is getting tired, and anyhow, we're old enough now to enjoy a sedan.

3. Two months of rest just the way we want to take it. We've never had a vacation after our own idea.

4. A forgiving disposition. We're plumb tired of hating our enemies and despising our detractors. It just naturally kills joy.

5. Finally, a little attention to these requests. Every time we write Santa Claus he sticks his tongue in his cheek and winks the other eye. We're in deadly earnest this time, Dr. Kris. Come across!

Avoidable Deaths.

From the Washington Post.

More than 75,000 deaths by accident in 1922, and the great majority of them avoidable. So runs a record that should give every man, woman and child in the United States pause in carelessness. It is a forbidden price that the nation pays for failure to exercise proper care.

The above figures represent a terrific economic loss. Not only has the nation in the past year been weakened by the loss of man power, but the dependents of those killed, who have suffered as a result, run into the hundreds of thousands.

Analysis of the record shows that carelessness in highway traffic is an increasing menace to life, for while accidents in industry have decreased, those of the street have increased. Figures for recent years show that this increase is not to be wholly charged to the increase in the number of automobiles.

Realization of the price that is being paid for carelessness in street traffic by motors and pedestrians should drive home to all the necessity for exercise of proper care.

Why Farmer's Boys Make Good.

"There is often a question in the minds of the public as to why so many boys from the farm make good in business." As I look at it, it is first of all because they have the foundation of rugged health without which the average man cannot meet the terrific strain which comes with heavy responsibilities.

"The farmer's boy has been brought up in the open, he has lived on simple, nutritious food, has been obliged to depend on himself, and has no false notions of life, because he has studied it from its primitive side. He is simple in his tastes, direct in his action, honest in his intent, and a hard worker. All these traits are essential to the man who is building up a business.

"His greatest handicaps are his lack of knowledge of finance and of the world at large. The early difficulties of many men who started from a farm might be traced to the fact that they minimized the need for sufficient capital and depended too much on their own efforts to pull them through. Without doubt, self-confidence and individual ability were the foundations of their success, but they often passed through serious financial difficulties before it was attained."

Stinging Tree of Queensland.

From London Tit Bits.

Among the curious plants of Queensland is the "stinging tree," a luxurious shrub, pleasing to the eye but dangerous to the touch. It grows from two or three inches to 10 or 15 feet in height and emits a disagreeable odor.

Speaking of its effects, a naturalist says: "One often forgets the danger of the tree until warned by its smell. Its effects are curious. It leaves no mark, but the pain is maddening and for months afterward the effected part is tender, and when touched in rainy weather or when it gets wet in washing.

"I have seen men who treated ordinary pain lightly roll on the ground in agony after being stung, and I have known a horse so completely mad after getting into a grove of the trees that he rushed open-mouthed at every one who approached him and had to be shot."

Opposite Twist in Tree Grains.

From The Chicago News.

There are two common trees in the eastern United States which admirably illustrate in their winding grain the opposite tendencies in direction. These are the red maple and the sourwood, or sorrel tree. Both trees are distinctly inclined to form a twisting growth, and in practically all cases of pronounced twisting the maple turns to the left and the sourwood to the right. Not more than one or two trees in a hundred of either species will be found departing from this rule.

No very satisfactory attempt has been made by scientists to explain why so many plants of twining habits have adopted definite and constant directions of curvature, says the Detroit News. It has been suggested that in some species of vines the tip of the growing plant is attracted by and drawn toward the sun, resulting in a left, or "anticlockwise," curvature; while in other species the tip is repelled by the sun, causing it to bend to the right in a "clockwise" fashion.

The climbing garden bean is a good example of the vines which always rise by twining to the right. Wherever the cultivated or wild runner beans grow, whether feeble or strong, in sunshine or shade, every part of the main stem will be found bending constantly to the right in climbing its support. The common hop vine is just as constant in its inclination to the left.

A tariff on tobacco and canned salmon produced outside the empire was recommended recently by the imperial conference now in session at London. It is also planned to extend imperial preferences to all wines of a certain alcoholic standard from the dominions.

The Argentine government has suspended for a month the decree applying the minimum price law to the purchase of cattle for export. The law has been strenuously opposed by American and other foreign packing interests.

'RAIN TREE' SUPPLIES WATER

Beautiful and Common Tree in Tropical America Holds Liquid in Leaves.

The name "rain tree" has been given to a beautiful and very common tree of tropical America. The name is probably due to the fact that the tree has the habit of closing its leaflets before and during rains, and not to any tendency to shed water from the leaves.

The original rain tree story, as found in the narratives of early voyagers back as far as the Fifteenth century, located the tree in the island of Ferro, one of the Canaries. This island has no springs and a scanty rainfall, but, according to the story, derived an ample supply of fresh water from a single tree.

The natives say that the famous rain tree that once supplied the whole island was blown down in a storm.—Detroit News.

Why He Was Amused.

Bald-Headed Guest—"Well, sonny, what is 't that amuses you?" Sonny—"Nothing; only mother has put a brush and comb in your bedroom."

Knew Where It Was.

Pat had got a job as steward on board a liner and on his first trip he was anxious to have everything as nice as possible so as to please the captain. Accordingly, the first thing he did was to have a good cleanout of the captain's quarters, and among other things he polished up the tea service, of which the captain was very proud.

Unfortunately, he let the teapot slip overboard and it sank like a stone to the bottom of the sea.

He did not know what to do, but at last an idea struck him and, approaching the captain, he said:

"Captain, can anything be lost if you know where it is?"

"No; certainly not," replied the captain, rather sharply.

"Well, sir," retorted the Irishman, "your silver teapot is at the bottom of the Atlantic.

That Kind of Feet.

Customer—I would like to see a pair of shoes that would fit my feet.

Salesman—So would I.

The whole world loves to get the laugh on a lover.