

Desert Dust

By Edwin L. Sabin

Author of "How Are You Feeling?" etc.

"Someers about that time. But didn't last long—not more'n two minutes," Bill responded.

"As foh fluids demanded by the human system, we are abundantly blessed, suh. There is scarcely any popular brand that you can't get in Benton, and I hold that we have the most skillful mixtologists in history. There are some who are artists; artists, suh. But mainly we prefer our likker straight."

"We're high, too," Bill put in. "Well over seven thousand feet, 'cordin' to them railroad engineers."

"Yes, suh, you are a mile and more nearer Heaven here in Benton than you were when beside the noble Hudson," supplemented the Colonel. "and the prices of living are reasonable; foh money, suh, is cheap and ready to hand. No drink is less than two bits, and a man won't tote a match across the street foh less than a drink. Money grows, suh, foh the picking. Our merchants are clearing thirty thousand dollars a month, and the professional gentleman who tries to limit his game is considered a low-down tin-horn. Yes, suh. This is the greatest terminal of the greatest railroad in the known world. It has Omaha, No'th Platte, Cheyenne before to a frazzle. You cannot fail to prosper." They had been critically watching me wash and rearrange my clothing. "You are not heeled, suh, I see?"

"Heeled?" I repeated.

"Equipped with a shooting iron, suh. Or do you intend to remedy that deficiency also?"

"I have not been in the habit of carrying arms."

"Most everybody packs a gun or a bowie," Bill remarked. "Gents and ladies both. But there's no law ag'in not."

I had finished my meager toilet, and was glad, for the espionage had been annoying.

"Now I am at your service during a short period, gentlemen," I announced. "Later I have an engagement, and shall ask to be excused."

The Colonel rose with alacrity. Bill stood, and seized his hat hanging at the head of the bed.

"A little liquid refreshment is in order fust, I reckon," quoth the Colonel. "I claim the privilege, of course. And after that—you have sporting blood, suh? You will desire to take a turn or two foh the honor of the Empire State?"

The inference was not quite clear. To develop it I replied guardedly, albeit unwilling to pose as a milkop.

"I assuredly am not averse to any legitimate amusement."

"That's it," Bill commented. "Nobody is, who has red in him; and a fellow can see you've cut your eye-teeth. What might you prefer, in the line of a pass—the time, on spec?"

"What is there, if you please?" I encouraged.

He and the Colonel gravely contemplated each other. Bill scratched his head, and slowly closed one eye.

"There's a good open game of stud at the North Star," he professed. "I kin get the gentleman a seat. No limit."

"Maybe our friend's luck don't run to stud," hazarded the Colonel. "Stud exacts the powers of concentration, like faro." And he also closed one eye.

"It's rather early in the evening foh close quarters. Are you particularly partial to the tiger or the cases, suh?" he queried of me. "Or would you be able to secure transient happiness in short games, foh a starter, while we move along, like a bee from flower to flower, gathering his honey?"

"If you are referring to card gambling, sir," I answered, "you have chose a poor companion. But I do not intend to be a spoil sport, and I shall be glad to have you show me whatever you think worth while in the city, so far as I have the leisure."

"That's it, that's it, suh." The Colonel appeared delighted. "Let us libate to the gods of chance, gentlemen; and then take a stroll."

"My bag will be safe here?" I prompted, as we were about to file out.

"Absolutely, suh. Personal property is respected in Benton. We'd hang the man who moved that bag of yours the fraction of one inch."

This at least was comforting.

As much could not be said of New York City. The Colonel led down the echoing hall and the shaking stairs, into the lobby, peopled as before by men in all modes of attire and clustered mainly at the bar. He led directly to the bar itself.

"Three, Ed. Name your likker, gentlemen. A little double X foh me, Ed."

"Old rye," Bill briefly ordered. The bartender set out bottle and whiskey glasses, and looked upon me. I felt that the bystanders were waiting. My garb proclaimed the "pilgrim" but I was resolved to be my own master, and for liquor I had no taste.

"Lemonade, if you have it," I faltered.

"Yes, sir." The bartender cracked not a smile, but a universal sigh, broken by a few sniggers. He voiced the appraisal of the audience. Some of the loafers eyed me amusedly, some turned away.

"Surely, suh, you will temper that with a dash of fortifiah," the Colonel protested. "A pony of brandy, Ed—or just a dash to cut the water in it. To me, suh, the water in this country is vile—inimical to the human stomach."

"Thank you," said I, "but I prefer plain lemonade."

"The gent wants his pizen straight, same as the rest of you," calmly remarked the bartender. My lemonade being prepared, the Colonel and Bill tossed off full glasses of whiskey, acknowledged with throaty "A-ah!" and smack of lips; and I hastily quaffed my lemonade. From the dollar which the Colonel grandly flung upon the bar he received no change—by which I might figure that whereas whiskey was twenty-five cents the glass, lemonade was fifty cents.

We issued into the street and were at once engulfed by a ferment of sighs and sounds extraordinary.

CHAPTER V. ON GRAND TOUR

The sun had set and all the golden twilight was hazy with the dust suspended in swirl and strata over the ugly roofs. In the canvas-faced main street the throng and noise had increased rather than diminished at the approach of dusk. Although clatter of dishes mingled with the cadence, the people acted as if they had no thought of eating; and while aware of certain pangs myself, I felt a diffidence in proposing supper as yet.

My two companions hesitated a moment, spying up and down, which gave me opportunity to view the scene anew. Surely such a hotch-potch never before populated an American town; Men flannel shirted, high booted, shaggy haired and bearded, stumping along weighted with excess of belts and formidable revolvers balanced, not infrequently, by sheathed butcher-knives—men whom I took to be teamsters, miners, railroad graders, and the like; other men white skinned, clean shaven except perhaps for moustaches and goatees, in in white silk shirts or ruffled bosoms, broadcloth trousers and trim footwear, unarmed, and all appearance, but evidently respected; men of Eastern garb like myself—tourists, maybe, or merchants; a squad of surveyors in picturesque neckerchiefs, and revolver girted; trainmen, grimy engineers and firemen; clerks, as I opined, dapper and bustling, clad in the latest fashion, with diamonds in flashy ties and heavy gold watch chains across their fancy waistcoats; soldiers; men whom I took to be Mexicans, by their velvet jackets, slashed pantaloons, and filagree hats; darkly weathered, leathery faced, long-haired personages, no doubt scouts and trappers, in fringed buckskins and beaded mooseskins; blanket wrapped Indians; and women.

Of the women a number were unmistakable as to vocation, being lavishly painted, strident, and bold, and significantly dressed. I saw several in amazing costumes of tightly fitting black like ballet girls, low necked, short skirted, around the smooth waists snake-skin belts supporting handsome little pistols and dainty poignards. Contrasted there were women of other class and, I did not doubt, of better repute; some in gowns and bonnets that would do them credit anywhere in New York, and some, of

course, more commonly attired in calico and gingham as proper to the humbler station of laundresses, cooks, and so forth.

The uproar was a jargon of shouts, hails, music, hammering, barking, scuff of feet, trample of horses and oxen, rumble of creaking wagons and Concord stages.

"Well, suh," spoke the Colonel, pulling his hat over his eyes, "shall we stroll a piece?"

"Might better," assented Bill. "The gentleman may find something of interest right in the open. How are you on the goose, sir?" he demanded of me.

"The goose?" I uttered. "Yes. Keno."

"I'm a stranger to the goose," said I.

He grunted. "It gives a quick turn for a small stake. So do the three-card and rondo."

Of passageway there was not much choice between the middle of the street and the border. Seemed to me as we weaved along through groups of idlers and among busily stepping people that every other shop was a saloon, with door widely open and bar and gambling tables well attended. The odor of liquor saturated the acrid dust. Yet the genuine shops, even of the rudest construction, were piled from the front to the rear with commodities of all kinds, and goods were yet heaped upon the ground in front and behind as if the merchant had no time for unpacking. The incessant hammering, I ascertained, came from amateur carpenters, including mere boys, here and there engaged as if life depended upon their efforts, in erecting more buildings from knocked-down sections like cardboard puzzles and from lumber already cut and numbered.

My guides nodded right and left with "Hello, Frank," "Eow are you, Dan?" "Evening, Charley," and so on. Occasionally the Colonel swept off his hat, with elaborate deference, to a woman, but I looked in vain for my lady in black. I did not see her—nor did I see her peer, despite the fact that now and then I observed a face and a figure of apparent attractiveness.

Above the staccato of conversation and exclamation there arose the appeals of the barkers for th gambling resorts.

"This way. Shall we see what he's got?" the Colonel invited. Forthwith veering aside he crossed the street in obedience to a summons of whoops and shouts that set the very dust to vibrating.

A crowd had gathered before a youth—a perspiring, red-faced youth with a billy-cock hat should back upon his bulle head—a youth in gulluses and soiled shirt and belled pantaloons, who, standing upon a box for elevation, was exhorting at the top of his lungs.

"Whoo-oo! This way, this way! Everybody this way! Comeon, you rondo-coolo sports! Give us a bet! A bet! Rondo coolo-oh! Rondo coolo-oh! Here's your easy money! Down with your soap! Let her roll! Rondo coolo-oh!"

"It's a great game, suh," the Colonel flung back over his shoulder.

We pushed forward, to the front. The center for the crowd was a table not unlike a small billiard table or, saving the absence of pins, a tivoli table such as enjoyed by children. But across one end there were several holes, into which balls, ten or a dozen, resembling miniature billiard balls, might roll.

The balls had been banked, in customary pyramid shape for a break as in pool, at the opposite end; and just as we arrived they had been propelled all forward, scattering, by a short cue rapidly swept across their base.

"Rondo coolo, suh," the Colonel was explaining, "as you see, is an improvement on the old rondo, foh red-blooded people. You may place your bets in various ways, on the general run, or the odd or even; and as the bank relies, suh, only one percentage, the popular game is strictly square. There is no chance foh a brace in rondo coolo. Shall we take a turn foh luck?"

The crowd was craning and eyeing the gyrating balls expectantly. A part of the balls entered the pockets; the remainder came to rest.

"Rondo," announced the man with the short cue, amidst excited ejaculations from winners and losers. And according to a system which I failed to grasp, except that it comprised the number of ball pocketed, he deftly distributed from one collection of checks and coins to another, quickly absorbed by greedy hands.

"She rolls again. Make your bets, ladies and gents," he intoned. "It's rondo coolo—simple rondo coolo." And he reassembled the balls.

"I prefer not to play, sir," I responded to the heavily breathing Colonel. I am new here and I cannot afford to lose until I am better established."

"Never yet seen a man who couldn't afford to win, though," Bill growled. "Easy pickin', too. But come on, then. We'll give you a straight steer some'rs else."

So we left the crowd—containing indeed women as well as men—to their insensate fervor over a childish game under the stimulation of the raucous, sweating barker. Of gambling devices, in the open of the street, there was no end. My conductors appeared to have the passion, for our course led from one method of hazard to another—roulette, chuck-a-luck where the patrons cast dice for prizes of money and valuables arrayed upon numbered squares of an oil-cloth covered board, keno where numbered balls were decanted one at a time from a bottle-shaped leather receptacle called, I learned, the "goose," and the players kept tab by filling in little cards as in domestic lotto; and finally we stopped at the simplest apparatus of all.

"The spiel game for me, gentlemen," said the Colonel. "Here it is. Yes, suh, there's nothing like monte, where any man is privileged to match his eyes against fingers. Nobody but a blind man can lose at monte, by George!"

"And this spieler's on the level," Bill pronounced, sotto voice. "I vote we hook him for a gudgeon, and get the price for a meal. Our friend will join us in the turn. He can see for himself that he can't lose. He's got sharp eyes."

The bystanders here were stationed before a man sitting at a low tripod table; and all that he had was the small table—a plain cheap table with folding legs—and three playing cards. Business was a trifle slack. I thought that his voice crisped aggressively as we elbowed through, while he sat idly skimming the three cards over the table, with a flick of his hand.

"Two jacks, and the ace, gentlemen. There they are. I have faced them up. Now I gather them slowly—you can't miss them. Observe closely. The jack on top, between thumb and forefinger. The ace next—ace in the middle. The other jack bottom-most." He turned his hand, with the three cards in a tier, so that all might see. "The ace is the winning card. You are to locate the ace. Observe closely again. It's my hand against your eyes. I am going to throw. Who will spot the ace? Watch, everybody. Ready! Go!"

The backs of the cards were up. With a swift movement he released the three, spreading them in a neat row, face down, upon the table. He carelessly shifted them hither and thither—and his fingers were marvelously nimble, lightly touching. "Twenty dollars against your twenty that you can't pick out the ace, first try. I'll let the cards lie. I shan't disturb them. There they are. If you've watched the ace fall, you win. If you haven't, you lose unless you guess right."

"Just do that trick again, will you, for the benefit of my friend here?" bade the Colonel.

The "Spieler"—a thin-lipped, cadaverous individual, his soft hat cavalierly aslant, his black hair combed flatly in a curve down upon his damp forehead, a pair of sloe eyes, and a flannel shirt open upon his bony chest—glanced alert. He smiled.

"Hello, sir. I'm agreeable. Yes, sir. But as they lie, will you make a guess? No! Or you, sir!" And he addressed Bill. "No! Then you, sir!" He appealed to me. "No! But I'm a mind-reader. I can tell by your eyes. They're upon the right-end card. Aha! Correct." He had turned up the card and shown the ace. "You should have bet. You would have beaten me, sir. You've got the eyes. I think you've seen this game before. No! Ah, but you have, or else you're born lucky. Now I'll try again. For the benefit of these three gentlemen I will try again. Kindly reserve your bets, friends all, and you shall have your chance. This game never stops. I am always after revenge. Watch the ace. I pick up the cards. Ace first—blessed ace; and the jacks. Watch close. There you are." He briefly exposed the faces of the cards. "Keep your eyes upon the ace. Ready—go!"

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