

Desert Dust

By Edwin L. Sabin

Author of "How Are You Feeling?" etc.

CHAPTER VII I go to rendezvous

The hotel lamps were being lighted by the gnome porter. When I stepped outside twilight had deepened into dusk, the air was almost frosty, and this main street had been made garnish by its nightly illumination.

It was a strange sight, as I paused for a moment upon the plank veranda. The near vicinity resembled a fair. As if inspired by the freshness and coolness of the new air the people were trooping to and fro more restlessly than ever, and in greater numbers. All up and down the street coal-oil torches or flambeaux, ruddily embossing the heads of the players and onlookers, flared like votive braziers above the open-air gambling games; there were even smoked-chimney lamps, and candles, set on pedestals, signaling other centers. The walls of the tent store-buildings glowed spectral from the lights to be glimpsed through doorways and windows, and grotesque gigantic figures flitted in silhouette. While through the interstices between the buildings I might see other structures, ranging from those of tolerable size to simple wall tents and makeshift shacks, eerily shadowed.

The noise had, if anything, redoubled. To the exclamations, the riotous shouts and whoops, the general gay vociferations and the footsteps of a busy people, the harangues of the barkers, the more distant puffing and shrieking of the locomotives at the railroad yards, the hammering where men and boys worked by torchlight, and now and then a revolver shot, there had been added the inimitable music of stringed instruments, cymbals, and such—some in dance measures, some solo, while immediately at hand sounded the shuffling of waltz, hoe-down and cotillion.

Night at Benton plainly had begun with a gusto. It stirred one's blood. It called—it summoned with such a promise of variety, of adventure, of flotsam and jetsam and shuttlecock of chances, that I, a youth with twenty-five dollars and a half at disposal, all his clothes on his back, a man's weapon at his belt, and an appointment with a lady as his future, forgetful of past and courageous in present, strode confidently, even recklessly down as eager as one to the manners of the country born.

The mysterious allusions to the Big Tent now plucked me. It was a rendezvous, popular, I deem, and respectable, as assured. An amusement place, judging by the talk; superior, undoubtedly, to other resorts that I may have noted. I was well equipped to test it out, for I had little to lose, even time was of no moment, and I possessed a friend at court, there whom I had interested and who very agreeably interested me. This single factor would have glorified with a halo any tent, big or little, in Benton.

There was no need for me to inquire my way to the Big Tent. Upon pushing along down the street, beset upon my course by many sights and proffered allurements, and keenly alive to the romance of that hurly-burly of pleasure and business combined here two thousand miles west of New York, always expectant of my goal I was attracted by music again, just ahead, from an orchestra. I saw a large canvas sign—The Big Tent—suspended in the full shine of a locomotive reflector. Beneath it the people were streaming into the wide entrance to a great canvas hall.

Quickening my pace in accord with the increased pace of the throng, presently I likewise entered, unchallenged, for my admission fee. Once across the threshold, I halted, taken all a-back by the hubbub and the kaleidoscopic spectacle that beat upon my ears and eyes.

The interior, high ceilinged to the ridge roof, was unbroken by supports. It was lighted by two score of lamps and reflectors in brackets along the walls and hanging as chandeliers from the rafters. The floor of planked boards, already teemed with men and women and children—along one side there was an ornate bar glittering with cut glass and silver and backed by a large plate mirror that repeated the lights,

the people, the glasses, decanters and pitchers, and the figures of the white-coated, busy bartenders.

At the farther end of the room a stringed orchestra was stationed upon a platform, while to the bidding of the music women, and men with hats upon their heads and cigars in mouths, and men together, whirled in couples, so that the floor trembled to the boot heels. Scattered thickly over the intervening space there were games of chance, every description, surrounded by groups looking on or playing. Through the atmosphere blue with smoke women, many of them lavishly costumed as if for a ball, strolled riskily or responding to gallantries. The garb of the men themselves ran the scale: from the comme il faut of slender shoes, fashionably cut coats and pantaloons, and modish cravats, through the campaign uniforms of army officers and enlisted men, to the frontier corduroy and buckskin of survivors and adventurers, the flannel shirts, red, blue and gray, the jeans and cowhide boots of trainmen, teamsters, graders, miners, and all.

From nearly every waist dangled a revolver. I remarked that not a few of the women displayed little weapons as in bravado.

What with the music, the stamp of the dancers, the clink of glasses and the ice in pitchers, the rattle of dice, the slap of cards and currency, the announcements of the dealers, the clap-trap of barkers and monte spielers, the general chatter of voices, one such as I, a newcomer, scarcely knew which way to turn.

Altogether this was an amusement place which, though of exterior, eclipsed the best of the Bowery and might be found elsewhere, I imagined, not short of San Francisco.

From the jostle of the doorway to pick out upon the floor any single figure and follow it was wellnigh impossible. Not seeing my lady in black, at first sight—not being certain of her, that is, for there were a number of black dresses—I moved on. It might be that she was among the dancers, where, as I could determine by the vista, beauty appeared to be whirling around in the embrace of the whiskered beast.

Then as I advanced resolutely among the gaming tables, I felt a cuff upon the shoulder and heard a bluff voice in my ear.

"Hello, old hoss. How are tricks with this time?"

Facing about quickly with apprehension of having been stopped by another capper, if not Bill Brady himself (for the voice was not Colonel Sunderson's unctuous tones) I saw Jim of the Sidney station platform and the railway coach fraecas.

He was grinning affably, apparently none the worse for wear save a slightly swollen lower lip; he seemed in good humor.

"Shake," he proffered, extending his hand. "No hard feelings here. I'm no Injun. You knocked the red-eye out of me."

I shook hands with him, and again he slapped me upon the shoulder. "Hardly knowed you in that new rig. Now you're talkin'. That's sense. Well, how you comin' on?"

"First rate," I assured, not a little nonplussed by this greeting from a man whom I had knocked down, tipsy drunk, only a few hours before. But evidently he was a seasoned customer.

"Bucked the tige a little, I reckon!" And he leered cunningly.

"No, I rarely gamble."

"Aw, tell that to the marines." Once more he jovially clapped me. "A young gent like you has to take a fling now and then. Hell, this is Benton, where everything goes and nobody the worse for it. You bet yuh! Trail along with me. Let's likker. Then I'll show you the ropes. I like your style. Yes, sir; I know a man when I see him." And he swore freely.

"Another time, sir," I begged off. "I have an engagement this evening."

"O' course you have. Don't I know that, too, by Gawd! The when, where and who? Didn't skinned for you, and to cotton to she tell me to keep my eyes you when you came id! We'll find her, after we likker up."

"She did!"

"Why not? Ain't I a friend o' hers? You bet! Finest little woman in Benton. Trail to the trough along with me, pardner, and name your favorite. I've got a thirst like a Sioux buck with a robe to trade."

"I'd rather not drink, thank you," I essayed; but he would have none of it. He seized me by the arm and hustled me on.

"O' course you'll drink. Any gent I ax to drink has gotta drink. Name your pizen—make it champagne, if that's your brand. But the drinks are on me."

So willy-nilly I was brought to the bar, where the line of men already loafing there made space. "Straight goods and the best you've got," my self-appointed pilot blared. "None o' your agency whiskey, either. What's yours?" he asked of me.

"The same as yours, sir," I bravely replied.

With never a word the bartender shoved bottle and glasses to us. Jim rather unsteadily filled; I emulated, but to scantier measure.

"Here's how," he volunteered. "May you never see the back of your neck."

"Your health," I responded.

We drank. The stuff may have been pure; at least it was stout and cut fiery way down my unwonted throat; the one draught infused me with a swagger and a sudden rosy view of life through a temporary mist of watering eyes.

"A-ah! That puts guts into a man," quoth Jim. "Shall we have another? One more?"

"Not now. The next shall be on me. Let's look around," I gasped.

"We'll find her," he promised. "Take a stroll, I'll steer you right. Have a seegar, anyway."

As smoking vied with drinking here in the Big Tent where even the dancers cavorted with lighted cigars in their mouths, I saw fit to humor him.

"Cigars it shall be, then. But I'll pay." And to my nod the bartender set out a box, from which we selected at twenty-five cents each. With my own "seegar" cocked up between my lips, and my revolver adequately heavy at my belt, I suffered the guidance of the importunate Jim.

We wended leisurely among games of infinite variety: keno, rondo, coelo, poker, faro, roulette, monte, chuck-a-luck, wheels of fortune—advertised, some, by their barkers, but the better class (if there is such a distinction) presided over by remarkably quiet, white-faced, nimble-fingered, steady-eyed gentry in irreproachable garb running much to white shirts, black pantaloons, velvet waistcoats, and polished boots, and diamonds and gold chains worn unaffectedly; low-voiced gentry, these, protected, it would appear, mainly by their lookouts perched at their sides with eyes alert to read faces and to watch the play.

We had by no means completed the tour, interrupted by many jests and nods exchanged between Jim and sundry of the patrons, when we indeed met My Lady. She detached herself, as if cognizant of our approach, from a little group of four or five, standing upon the floor; and turned for me with hand outstretched, a gratifying flush upon her spirited face.

"You are here, then?" she greeted.

I made a leg, with best bow, not omitting to remove hat and cigar, while agreeably conscious of her approving gaze.

"I am here, madam, in the Big Tent."

Her small warm hand acted as if unreservedly mine, for the moment. About her there was a tingling element of the friendly, even of the intimate. She was a haven in a strange coast.

"Told you I'd find him, didn't I?" Jim asserted—the bystanders listening curiously. "There he was, lookin' as lonesome as a two-bit piece on a poker table in a sky-limit game. So we had a drink and a seegar, and been makin' the grand tower."

"You got your outfit, I see," she smiled.

"Yes. Am I correct?"

"You have saved yourself annoyance. You'll do," she added. "Have you played yet? Win, or lose?"

"I did not come to play, madam," said I. "Not at table, that is." Whereupon I must have returned her gaze so glowingly as to embarrass her. Yet she was not displeased; and in that costume and with that liquor still coursing through my veins I felt equal to any retort. "But you should play. You

are heeled?"

"The best I could procure." I let my hand rest casually upon my revolver butt.

She laughed merrily. There were smiles aside.

"Oh, no; I didn't mean that. You are heeled for all to see. I meant, you have funds? You didn't come here too light, did you?"

"I am prepared for all emergencies, madam, certainly," I averred with proper dignity. Not for the world would I have confessed otherwise. Sooth to say, I had the sensation of boundless wealth. The affair at the hotel did not bother me, now. Here in the Big Tent prosperity reigned. Money, money, money was passing back and forth, carelessly shoved out and carelessly pocketed or piled up, while the band played and the people laughed and drank and danced and bragged and staked, and laughed again.

"That is good. Shall we walk a little? And when you play—come here." We stepped apart from the listeners. "When you play, follow the lead of Jim. He'll not lose, and I intend that you shant, either. But you must play, for the sport of it. Everybody games, in Benton."

"So I judge, madam," I assented. "Under your chaperonage I am ready to take any risks, the gaming table being among the least."

"Prettily said, sir," she complimented. "And you won't lose. No," she repeated suggestively, "you won't lose, with me looking out for you. Jim bears you no ill will. He recognizes a man when he meets him, even when the proof is uncomfortable."

"For that little episode on the train I ask no reward, madam," said I.

"Of course not." Her tone waxed impatient. "However, you're a stranger in Benton and strangers do not always fare well." In this she spoke the truth. "As a resident I claim the honors. Let us be old acquaintances. Shall we walk? Or would you rather dance?"

"I'd cut a sorry figure dancing in boots," said I.

"Therefore I'd really prefer to walk, if all the same to you."

"Thank you for having mercy on my poor feet. Walk we will."

"May I get you some refreshment?" I hazarded. "A lemonade—or something stronger?"

"Not for you sir; not again," she laughed. "You are, as Jim would say, fortified." And I shall need all my wits to keep you from being tolled away by greater attractions."

Company Union Plan.

From the Minneapolis Journal. Federal District Judge Dickinson in Pennsylvania now formally declares, what was perfectly well-known before, that the Railroad Labor Board has no power to enforce its decrees, save that derived from the power of public opinion.

When Congress established the board it refused to clothe the new agency with power of enforcement, though perhaps it could have done so, in the light of its own interference with rail wages through the Adamson Law.

But even if congress had created enforce its findings, long litigation would doubtless have ensued to determine the constitutionality of such a delegation of power.

The refusal of Judge Dickinson to assume jurisdiction was occasioned by the efforts of the Brotherhood of Clerks, Freight Handlers and Station Employees to force the Pennsylvania railroad to recognize its delegates as representatives of the employees in wage conferences.

The Pennsylvania has broken away from brotherhood control and has organized "company unions." During the shopmen's strike this plan proved satisfactory to both the company and the men, and because of continuity of service, to the public. It is since approved itself by the maintenance of friendly relations and amicable settlement of all controversies.

The national brotherhoods are naturally much concerned. If the Pennsylvania plan should spread, it would mean their own approaching death. But the Pennsylvania's own employees seem well content with the plan. They have complete freedom to choose their own representatives, and are not obliged to confide their interests to outside labor leaders who may be more concerned about labor politics than about a favorable settlement.

It is found that controversies are much more easily settled, when the conferees are all Pennsylvania men, representing management and employees in fair fashion, and all interested for the prosperity of the enterprise in which they are engaged.

"Ome."

From the Chicago News.

At the English golf club, after several indifferent rounds, they were discussing the new member.

"I suppose he is very wealthy?" remarked one member.

"Yes," replied the other, "but he hasn't a place he calls home."

"What, with all his money?"

"Yes, it's only too true. He calls it 'ome'."

Dr. L. E. Dickson, professor of mathematics in the University of Chicago, was awarded the prize of \$1,000 offered by the American Association for the Advancement of Science for the most valuable contribution to science, presented during the recent meeting at Cincinnati.

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Disappointed

"Aunt Hannah hailed from the Middle West, and had never seen the sea. Her nephew, who was doing well in the East, invited her to spend a month at his Asbury Park cottage. She accepted the invitation, of course. "Well, as soon as she arrived, her nephew took her down to the boardwalk and showed her the boundless ocean, with its white foam and crashing breakers and fresh, salt-laden winds.

"There," he said. "There, Aunt Hannah, is the Atlantic. What do you think of it?"

"Humph," said Aunt Hannah, "I thought it was larger."

Novice Gets Names Mixed

An experienced golfer, in a fit of condescension, invited a novice to a game. The novice, to the golfer's dismay and disgust, plowed up the ground all around the ball at every stroke.

The golfer stood it for a while, but

after one particularly vicious dig into the tee, he remarked:

"You've revoked."

"We're playing golf, not whist," said the novice.

"Yes," replied the golfer, "but you have just played a spade where you should have played a card."

Not in His Line

"An elderly Scot was standing at a railway station when a traveler trotted heavily on his foot.

"Hoot mon!" groaned the Scot. "Canna ye take care? Ye've nearly killed me. Hoot, mon! Hoot, hoot!"

"The traveler looked the sufferin' Scot up and down.

"Hoot yourself," he said. "I'm a drummer, not an auto."

The less said about a fuss the better.

A man is generous to a fault when he fails to correct it.

What We Forget Between 15 and 50

Schools teach, and nearly every home applies the rule against coffee and tea for children.

When middle age comes, a great many people remember the facts about the caffeine drug of coffee and tea, and how its regular use may disturb health. Often they have cause to remember what it has done to them.

How much better it would be not to forget—and avoid the penalties!

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