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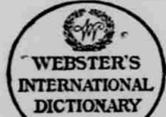
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THE ROAD AGENT.

The pull is up hill for almost three miles along here, and the horses plod along slowly. The dust is just as deep, but now, instead of blowing off to leeward, as it did awhile ago, it hangs close around the stage in a thick, dense, reddish yellow cloud, almost shutting off the view from the passengers inside, if they cared to look out. But the beauties of nature hold their interest only slightly just at present. The dust occupies their attention to a large extent. It fills their mouths and eyes and nostrils, and clings to their hair and ears in much profusion. It is disagreeable—very; and the man who has enough spirits left to try and keep up the conversation is voted an ass by his fellow passengers. They were all very friendly only a short time ago, but they hate each other with a bitter hatred just now—all on account of the dust. Dust is a great destroyer of good humor.

Back there a mile or so the sun shines brightly on the canyon road, making it look like a long yellow ribbon, but just ahead the shadow of the mountain on the west, which seems to close the upper end of the pass, cuts the light off in an odd, abrupt way, and presently we shall be in comparative darkness, for the edge of the heavy timber is only a little distance before us.

Somehow the dust doesn't rise very high, or else the driver and the passenger on the box don't mind it, for we can hear them talking. Old Ben, through some unseen but easily imagined influence, has relaxed from his usual taciturnity and is quite communicative to the beardless, boyish looking young chap who got on back at Alpina and is sharing the box with him.

As the stage reaches the level, and rolls into the shadows of the mountain and the tall pines, Ben points with the whip to the mouth of the narrow pass leading out of the canyon a quarter of a mile away and remarks:

"See them two big rocks?—road runs b'tween 'em. Uh-huh. Wal, right that—mebbe a couple rods 'r so fu'ther on—was what I was helt up one day in th' summer of '76."

"Yes?" said the passenger's pleasant voice interrogatively. "Would you mind telling me about it?"

Ben chirped to his horses, spat impressively and liberally, and began:

"Wal, 'twuz this a-way. That mornin' in th' 'press box was loaded plumb full o' hard stuff, th' hed t' go through that day. Now, jes' l'ck'd hev' it, one o' the yards—we hed yards them days—turned up missin' 'bout th' time we was ready t' start fr'm Eldorado in th' mornin'. Berry McNeill, th' other yard, goes arter 'im, an' fin' Mr. Man laid up with a gash in th' head fr'm a beer bottle—'n' scarpin' night b'fore.

"Th' agent an' me was thinkin' pow'ful 'bout who we c'd git t' take Hauser's place if he was sick, w'en hyar comes Mac, whistlin'.

"Say, fellers," says he, "Hauser got plunked with a bottle las' night, an' is layin' on his downy couch with a headache. Reckon I c'n go in b' my lone-some; I got Hauser's sawed off gun."

"We both kicked a whole lot, but Mac, he'd made up his min an' was bou't t' hev his own way; b'sides, we didn't hev no one right handy t' go 'long, so we hed t' give in, an' Mac, whistlin' one o' his everlastin' toons, piles up on th' box an' we pull out. They wa'n't no passengers.

"Wal, we kep our peepers skun right sharp, but ev'rythin went lovely till jes' 'long 'bout hyar. Then Mac says, 'Ben, I b'lieve they'some cusses layin' fer us up b' them rocks—I think I seen a feller's head, jes' now.' Says I: 'Mac, y're full o' hop. I see it, too, an' 'twan't nothin' but a hawk crossin' the road.'"

"I stirred up the critters a bit, how-somever, but jes' we turned th' rocks somebody jumps out fr'm both sides an' nails th' leaders, an' they was so many guns starin' intuh my face th't it made me ashamed o' myself. Mac cut loose wi' th' sawed off shotgun an' then begun wi' th' Winchester, gittin' two fellers an' skinnin' up some more—but they was too dern many o' 'em, an' they c'd shoot, too, so Mac he never got no chance t' pump that gun dry. He oughtn't t' hev shot, nohow, but he allus was a nery cuss—nore nery 'n sense. I usotuh say, 'Mac!'"

Half a dozen dusky forms leap from the roadside—the big cowboy who got aboard early in the afternoon, and has been dozing and swearing in a sleepy way about the dust, is suddenly wide awake, and we, on the inside, get a good look at the muzzles of his two big revolvers—we hear Ben ejaculate, "Wal, this do beat hell!" and then we are invited to get down into the road, where the pleasant faced, boyish looking young man, who got on back at Alpina, proceeds to business, and politely, courteously, but firmly without, relieves us of our spare change—and more too.

That is my part of the story. Of course there were quite a number of other people present, including the youthful highwayman and his capable assistants, and they, also, have a claim on the above narrative. I did not mean that I owned it; what I tried to say was that this is the only one of the events from which come this veracious tale that I took part in, and I think it has been shown that my part was entirely a passive one. Perhaps we had better call that portion of the story the gentlemanly road agent's, because he got about everything else there was to get. The rest is Hallegan's.

Hallegan and I were traveling together, and it was his foresight—or rather an odd notion of his—that enabled us to resume our journey to Denver after the road agent incident. This odd notion was in the form of a thin chamois insole which he wore in his left boot, and which, in addition to a card giving directions for the disposition of his body in case he should suddenly be called hence while among strangers, contained a fifty dollar bill. It was an ordinary fifty dollar bill, but when Terence flashed it before my dazzled eyes in the hotel at Merrill that night I was

quite sure that it was larger and more valuable than the opinions of a New England hired man. It took us to Leadville, anyway, and that was all we could reasonably desire:

But for the rest of the story: It was about two years after the road agent affair, in which we lost almost everything but our good names and the clothing we wore, when one day I was thunderstruck to receive Hallegan's wedding cards. It was the first time I had heard from him for a year, and had any one else told me Terence Hallegan was a marrying man I should have derided him, but when Terence himself, in his own peculiar chirography, directed to me an envelope containing such startling news, all set forth in the highest style of the engraver's art—well, it was too much, and I went down into the camp, where surcease of sorrow was obtainable in quantities to suit the purchaser, and where there was a full score of Terence's friends and acquaintances to toast his memory and console with each other. And grief was our lot until the day Jewett "struck it" in that hole he had been pegging away at over on the other side of the gulch, and excitement reigned supreme.

In the midst of the confusion, telegrams came and went, flying—brought and sent by special courier to and from the office at Sunrise, nine miles away; and one day came one for him who sits here burning the nocturnal kerosene. It was from Hallegan, who was now living in Chicago, and summoned me to hasten to that city, where I was needed to assist in a transaction involving the sale of some mining property in which Terence and I were interested.

Terence met me at the station. He looked remarkably well, even for a person whose health and spirits had always been of the very best, and I told him so, adding that in deponent's opinion he must have drawn a capital prize in the matrimonial lottery.

He smiled happily, and took my arm to walk outside the train enclosure as he said:

"That I did—that I did, me boy; just wait till you see her, and you'll be sure of it."

He called a cab, gave the driver some brief instructions, and leaped in after me. We rode several minutes in silence, then Hallegan turned to me in a rather embarrassed way, and said, in a strained tone:

"Billy, me boy—it's very near dinner time at our house—and there's no time for—explanations. Only—if you think you've seen—my wife—if her face is familiar—please don't mention it, or act as though you noticed it. I'll explain after dinner."

I acquiesced wonderingly, and wondered yet more after I had met Mrs. Hallegan, for I was quite positive that I had never seen her before, and there was ample opportunity during the course of the excellent dinner we presently sat down to, to study her. She was slightly above the medium height, and of a perfect, though rather slight figure. Her hair and eyes were dark, setting off excellently her clear olive complexion, and her features were all that an artist could desire. She was hardly what one would call a beautiful woman, however. "Handsome" would be the better word—or, perhaps, "striking." There was something about the firm set of her mouth when not speaking, and the strong, rather masculine chin—in which, oddly enough, there was a charmingly feminine dimple—that caused this effect, I think. One would never have taken Mrs. Hallegan for the daughter of the little, white haired, sweet faced old lady who sat opposite me, and whom she addressed as "mother."

No, I had never seen her up to half an hour ago, so I gave up studying her and fell to wondering what Hallegan was going to "explain."

Dinner over, the ladies rose to leave us, smiling over the broad hint Terence had just thrown out concerning a desire to smoke. As they reached the door Mrs. Hallegan turned and bowed mockingly to her husband, whose hand was just reaching for the bell. "I hope, Sir Terence, that the cigars may prove dry company." Then, with a bright smile, she vanished.

I flopped into my chair breathlessly. Where had I seen that mocking bow? Then suddenly there came before me that little scene in the mountains two years since—the dust, the heat, the sleepy cowboy inside the coach, the dapper little chap who so politely took our money and watches. He bowed just that way when he finished his work and departed. "Her brother," I thought—"black sheep, blot on family escutcheon. How much they resemble!"

"Well, me boy?" Hallegan was looking at me quizzically through the smoke, we having lighted our cigars meanwhile. I suppose I looked embarrassed. Of course it was all rot. The idea of there being any connection, however remote, between the stately creature who had just left us and the little rascal who engineered that holdup!

Hallegan spoke: "Billy, me boy, I won't make a short story any longer than is necessary. You remember the little fellow who held us up two years ago?"

"Of course I do."

"Yes, very likely. Well, I fancy I'd better begin at the beginning.

"Three years ago a young fellow named Wilson, who had been employed as cashier by the L. and A. Stage and Express company, got into trouble over his accounts. The manager, Robinson, charged him with a shortage amounting to several thousand dollars. There was an investigation, and on the strength of certain circumstantial evidence which need not be stated, as it is immaterial, backed by the testimony of Robinson, the manager; Tweedy, the superintendent, and Frank Robinson, son of the manager—who, by the way, had always been Wilson's bosom friend—the cashier, was convicted on trial and sentenced to a long term at Canyon City. Strange to say, he offered no testimony and made no defense except his plea of 'not guilty.'"

"Well, it killed him. Inside of a year the worry and disgrace, along with the

hard work and close confinement—he had never been very strong—had wasted him to a shadow, and when at last he knew he couldn't live very long he sent for his mother and sisters to come to him.

"His mother was too ill herself to travel, and one of the sisters—a cripple—was obliged to remain with her, but the elder sister went.

"She found him dying—dying in prison. It was the first she had known of his trouble and, naturally, she was terribly shocked.

"He told her the true history of the affair—that young Robinson, between whom and himself had existed a sort of Damon and Pythias friendship, was the guilty one; and how, when some of the stockholders got wind of the shortage, the two Robinsons and Tweedy, who was a brother-in-law of old Robinson, had conspired to shield the guilty man by sacrificing an innocent one, who would not defend himself. The confession made by the dying man was not altogether a voluntary one. His sister, who had known nothing except that he was innocent, caught a hint of the truth from him when he was raving in delirium—the rest she made him tell her.

"After young Wilson's death, his sister went quietly to work to see what could be done to prove her brother's innocence and to place the guilt where it belonged, but soon found that nothing could be proved. The Robinsons were too strong for her.

"About this time Mrs. Wilson and her younger daughter were obliged to go south on account of ill health, leaving the elder daughter, who was studying medicine, here in Chicago. Not long after this the holdups on the different lines of the L. and A. began. For the first few times there was only one road agent—a little chap, but a nery one, who got talked about by the papers a good deal; but pretty soon there were others, until a band of about eight or nine had organized under the little fellow's leadership, and they made life a burden to the L. and A. people.

"It made no difference what precautions the company took or how many guards it employed; the road agents were too smart, and the boldest kind of holdups were successfully made—and, by Jove! it 'busted' the company's business. The L. and A. wasn't a heavy concern, of course, but had always made a good deal of money. The frequent holdups on its lines, though, proved a settler. It wasn't long before nobody would ship or travel over any of the L. and A. company's lines unless actually obliged to, and the company was kept pretty busy settling the losses of its customers. Then came the crash, and somehow people began to suspect that the Robinsons had not run things as they should have been handled, and the stockholders investigated. Old Robinson died in disgrace shortly afterward. The young man took all he could lay his hands on and skipped, but was caught at Canyon City. He's where he should be—at Canyon City. Tweedy got off on a technicality.

"About seven or eight months after we were held up a stageful of fellows, including myself, were stopped and relieved one afternoon about ten miles from Milliken, on the old Muleshoe trail. The young fellow was one of the robbers—I knew him in spite of his mask. There were only four of the road agents on this occasion.

"They pulled out, leaving us orders not to touch our arms (which they had stacked on the ground) for twenty minutes, under penalty of getting shot. But one of our party was a devil-may-care chap, and no sooner were the bandits gone than he walked right over to the pile of guns and picked his out, remarking that he 'didn't believe there were any road agents around just then.' And there weren't.

"Well, the result of this fellow's foolhardiness was that we concluded it would be money in our pockets to get on the trail of those four road agents, so we started after them, separating a little distance from each other. We followed them all the afternoon, but couldn't find a trace.

"You know how the old Muleshoe trail is? Well, the driver had gone on, agreeing to meet us on the other side of the shoe—it is only three or four miles across.

"I was just about making up my mind to join the other fellows, and had stopped to think of the best way to cross the creek, when I heard a queer sound, like a woman sobbing. I looked cautiously around, and there, within two rods of me, was the young road agent, crying as if his heart would break. There was nobody else there, it was plain to be seen, so I quietly sneaked up and requested him to throw up his hands.

"Did you ever hear a woman scream at the sight of a mouse? That's just the way this young fellow screamed when he saw the muzzle of my gun—and I, as soon as I saw the scared, tearful face turned to mine, knew as well as I know now that the famous bandit known as Foxey was only a woman.

"She seemed to trust me, somehow, and pretty soon I had the whole story from her. Then I sat down and talked to her like a brother; and the result was that next day the road agents missed their leader, and inside of a fortnight Miss Jean Wilson was back here in Chicago at her studies again.

"I need not say that this gentle bandit, who ruined the business of the L. and A. company, took not one cent of the proceeds, and never permitted any of the band to interfere with Uncle Sam's mail. The latter fact accounts in a measure for their success, for Uncle Sam is a bad man to interfere with. The former fact, I think, had to do to some extent with the strong hold which Foxey had over his subordinates, although they must have had a good deal of faith in his demonstrated ability as an executive. The band was broken up not long after Foxey's disappearance and three of the men were caught, but they didn't know any more concerning their mysterious ex-chief than did the public at large.

"And—Miss Wilson is?" Hallegan's eyes twinkled. "Is waiting for us. Let us join her," he said.—E. L. Ketchum in Argonaut.

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