WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE:

It is 1868 and the Pacific Railroad has reached its newest "farthest west"—Benton, Wyoming, a town described as "roaring," as each new terminus, temporarily, was.

Frank Beeson, a young man from Albany, New York, comes here because he is in search of health and Benton is considered "high and dry."

Edna Montoyo, a fellow passenger on the train from Omaha, impresses Beeson with the beauty of her blue eyes and the style of her apparel. Equally she astonished him by taking a "smile" of brandy before breakfast. A brakeman tells Beeson she has "followed her man" to Benton.

Jim, a typical western ruffian whom she knows apparently well insults her and is floored by Frank whose prowess impresses the passengers.

Col. Lunderson and "Bill" Brady volunteer to entertain young Beeson.

Frank avoids being caught by any of the numerous gambling games, but is robbed of all his money.

At the "Big Tent" Beeson again meets the Lady with the Blue Eyes. At "Monte" someone turns up the corner of the winning Queen of Hearts and Beeson, his whole $22 bet on it, turns the card—which instead of being the Queen is the Eight of Clubs.

Awakening

My fingers left it as though it were a snake. The eight of clubs! Where I had seen, in fancy, the queen of hearts, there lay like a changeling the eight of clubs, with corners bent as only token of the transformation.

"We can't both win, gentlemen," the gambler said. "But I am willing to give you one more chance, from a new deck."

What the response was I did not know, nor care. My ears drummed and seeing nothing I pushed through into the open, painfully conscious that I was flat penniless and instead of having played the knave I had played the fool, for the—queen of hearts!

The loss of some twenty dollars might have been a trivial matter to me once—but here I had lost my all, whether large or small; and not only had been bilked out of it—I had bilked myself out of it by sinking, in pretended smartness, below the level of a mere artful dodger!

I heard My Lady speaking beside me.

"I'm so sorry." She laid hand upon my sleeve. You should have been content with small sums, or followed my lead. Next time—"

"There'll be no next time," I blurted out. "I am cleaned out."

"You don't mean—?"

"I was first robbed at the hotel. Now here."

"No, no! she opposed. Jim sidled us. "That was a bungle, Jim."

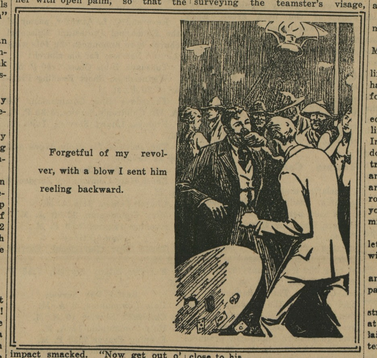
He ruefully scratched his head.

"A wrong steer for once, I reckon. By thunder, I want revenge on this joint and I mean to get it. So do you, don't you, partner?" he appealed to me.

As with mute, sickly denial I turned away it seemed to me that I sensed a shifting of forms at the monte table—caught the words "You watch here a moment;" and close following, a slim white hand fell heavily upon My Lady's shoulder.

It whirled her about, to face the gambler. His smooth olive countenance was dark with a vernom of rage incarnate that poisoned the air: his syllables crackled.

"You devil! I heard you, at the table. You meddle with my comeons, will you?" And he slapped her with open palm, so that the impact smacked. "Now get out o' here or I'll kill you."



Forgetful of my revolver, with a blow I sent him reeling backward.

She flamed red, all in a single rush ow blood.

"Oh," she breathed. Her hand darted for the pocket in her skirt, but I sprang between the two. Forgetful of my revolver, with a blow I sent him reeling backward.

He recovered. With lightning movement he thrust his right hand into his waistcoat pocket.

I heard a rush of feet, a clamor of voices; and all the while, I was tugging, awkward with deadly peril at my revolver.

His fingers had whipped free of the pocket, I glimpsed as with second sight (for my eyes were held strongly by his) the twin little black muzzles of a derringer concealed in his palm; a spasm of fear pinched me; they spurted, with ringing report, but just at the instant a flanneled arm knocked his arm up, the ball had sped ceilingly upward and the teamster of the gaming table stood against him, revolver barrel boring his very stomach.

"Stand pat, Mister, I call you."

In a trice all entry of any unpleasant emotion vanished from my antagonist's handsome face, leaving it olive tinted, cameo, inert. He steadied a little, and smiled, surveying the teamster's visage, close to his.

"You have me covered, sir. My hand is in the discard." He composedly tucked the derringer into his waistcoat pocket again. "That gentleman struck me; he was about to draw on me, and by rights I might have killed him. My apologies for this little disturbance."

He bestowed a challenging look upon me, a hard unforgiving look upon the lady; with a bow he turned for his hat, and stepping swiftly went back to his table.

Now in the reaction I fought desperately against a trembling of the knees; there were congratulations, a hubdub of voices assailing me—and the arm of the teamster through mine and his bluff invitation:

"Come and have a drink."

"But you'll return. You must! I want to speak with you!"

It was my Lady, pleading earnestly. I still could scarcely utter a word; my brain was in a smother. My new friend moved me away fro mher. He answered for me.

"Not until we've had a little confab, lady. We've got matters of importance jest at present."

I saw her bite her lips, as she helplessly flushed; her blue eyes implored me, but I had no will of measure of courtesy to this man who had saved my life.

We found a small table in a corner The affair upon the floor was apparently past history—if it merited evvn that distinction. The place had resumed its program of dancing, playing and drinking as though after all a pistol shot was of no great moment in The Big Tent.

"You had a narrow shave," my friend remarked as we seated ourselves.

He then proceeded to tell me that the whole thing was crooked.

"And the woman is the main steerer." he concluded. "That purty piece who damn nigh lost you your life as well as losin' you your money!"

"You mean the lady with the blue eyes?"

"Don't you savvy that your lay's Moncoyo's wife—his woman, anyhow!"

"Montoyo? Who's Montoyo?"

"The monte thrower! That same spieler who trimmed us," he rapped impatiently.

"She's bound to Montoyo. He's a breed, some Spanish, some white, like as not some Injun. A devil and as slick as they make 'em. She's a power too white for him, herself, but he uses her and some day he'll kill her. You're not the first gudgeon she's hooked, to feed to him."

Now I saw all, or enough. I had received no more than I deserved.

"Jest why Montoyo struck his woman I don't know," the teamster went on. "Do you?"

"Yes! She had cautioned me and he must have heard her. And she showed which was the right card. I don't understand that."

"To save her face, and egg you on, Shore! Your twenty dollars was nothing. She didn't know you were busted. Next time she'd have steered you to the tune of a hundred or two and cleaned you proper. You hadn't been worked along, yet, to the right pitch o' smartness. Montoyo must ha' mistook her! Well now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I must find and earn enough to get home with." To write for funds was now impossible through very shame. "Home's the only place for a person of my greenness."

"Let me make you a proposition" he said. "I'm on my way to Salt Lake with a bull outfit and I'm in need of another man. I'll give you a dollar and a half a day and found."

"You are teaming west, you mean?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Freightin' across. Mule-whacklin."

"But I never drove spans in my life; and I'm not in shape to stand hardships." I faltered. "I'm here for my health. I have—"

"Stow all that, son" he interrupted. "Forget your lungs, lights and liver and stand up a full size man. In my opinion you've had too much doctorin'. A month with a bull train, a diet of beans and sow-belly, and you can look anybody in the eye and tell him to go to hell! This roarin' town life—it's no life for you. It's a bobtail wide open in the middle."

"Sir," I said gratefully, "may I let you know in the morning? Where will I find you?"

We arranged to meet next day and I returned to the hotel, having paid in advance.

Gazing neither right nor left, I strode resolutely for the exit, but at the door I was halted by a hand laid upon my arm, and a quick utterance.

"Not going? At least say good-night!"

I barely paused. replying to her, "Good night."

Still she would have detained me. "Oh, no, no! Not this way. It was a mistake. I swear to you I am not to blame. Please let me help you. I don't know what you've heard—I don't know what has been said about me—you are angry—"

I twitched free. With such as she, a vampire and yet a woman a man's safety lay not in words but in unequivocal action.

"Good night," I bade thickly. Bearing with me a satisfying but somehow annoying persistent imprint of moist blue eyes under shimmering hair, I roughly stalked on and out, free of her, free of the Big Tent, her lair!

In the morning as I left the hotel the clerk handed me a note.

It could have been sent by only one person—the superscription, dainty and feminine, bestrayed it. That woman was still pursuing me!

Couldn't she understand that I was no longer a fool—that I had wrenched absolutely loose from her and that she could do nothing with me? I was minded to tear the note to fragments, unread, and contemptuously scatter them. Had she been present I should have done so, to show her.

But around a corner, I tore the envelope open. The folded paper within contained a five-dollar bank note.

That was enough to pump the blood to my face with a rush. It was an insult—a shame. With cheeks twitching I managed to read the lines accompanying the dole:

Sir:

You would not permit me to explain to you to-night, therefore I must write. The recent affair was a mistake. I had no intention that you should lose, and I supposed you were in more funds. I insist upon speaking with you. You shall not go away in this fashion. You will find me at the Elite Cafe, at a table at ten o'clock in the morning. And in case you are a little short I beg of you to make use of the enclosed, with my best wishes and apologies. You may take it as a loan. I am utterly miserable. E.

Half unconsciously wadding both money and paper in my hand as if to squeeze the last drop of rancor from them I swung on.

"Mr. Beeson! Wait! Please wait."

I had to turn about to avoid the further degradation of acting the churl to her, an inferior.

"I've been waiting since daylight,' she panted, "and watching the hotel. I was afraid you wouldn't answer my note, so I slipped around and cut in on you."

"I know where you're going. George Jenks has engaged you. You don't have to turn bull-whacker or mule-skinner! It's a hard life; you're not fitted for it—never, never. Leave Benton if you will. Let us go together."

"Your husband, madam," I prompted.

"Montoyo? He is no husband to me. I could kill him—I will do it yet, to be free from him."

"My good name, then," I taunted. "I might fear my good name more than I'd fear a man."

"But I'm not asking you to marry me," she said. "I'm not asking you to love me as a paramour, sir. Please understand! Treat me as you will; as a sister, a friend, but anything human. Oh, I'm so tired of myself; I can't run true, I'm under false colors. And there is Montoyo—bullying me, cajoling me, watching me. But you were different! I foolishly wished to help you, but last night the play went wrong. And Montoyo struck me—, me, in public. Oh, why couldn't I have killed him. You'll say I'm in love with you. Perhaps I am—quien sabe? I only ask a kind of partnership—the encouragement of some decent man near me. I have money; plenty till we both get a footing. But you wouldn't live on me; no! I would be glad merely to tide you over, if you'd let me. And I—I'd be willing to wash floors in a restaurant if I might be free of insult. You, I'm sure would at least protect me. Wouldn't you? You would. wouldn't you? Say something, sir." She paused, aquiver. "Shall we go? Will you help me?"

For an instant her appeal, of swimming blue eyes, upturned face, tensed grasp, breaking voice, swayed me. But I resolved not to be snarled again.

"Impossible, madam," I uttered. This is final. Good morning."

She staggered and with magnificent but futile last flourish clapped both hands to her face. Gazing back, as I hastened, I saw her still there, leaning against a wall.

(Continued Next Week)

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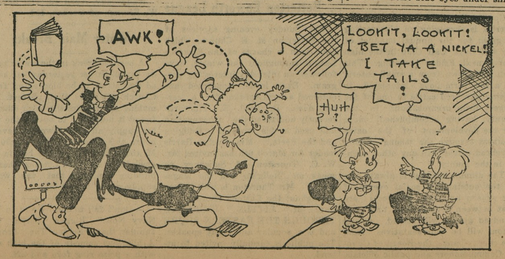

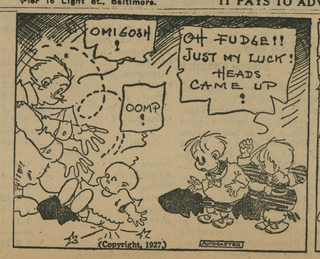

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