



A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

In the estimate of the affable brakeman we were making a fair average of twenty miles an hour across the greatest country on earth. It was a flat country of far horizons, and for vast stretches peopled mainly, as one might judge from the car windows, by antelope and prairie dogs.

Yet despite the novelty of such a ride behold me, surfeited with already five days' steady travel, engrossed chiefly in observing a clear, dainty profile and waiting for the glimpses, time to time, of a pair of exquisite blue eyes.

Merely to indulge myself in feminine beauty, however, I need not have undertaken the expense and fatigue of journeying from Albany on the Hudson out to Omaha on the plains side of the Missouri River; thence by the Union Pacific Railroad of the new transcontinental line into the Indian country.

There were handsome women aplenty in the East; and of access, also, to a youth of family and parts!

But here I was, advised by the physicians to "go West," meaning by this not simply the one-time West of Ohio, or Illinois, or even Iowa, but the remote and genuine West lying beyond the Missouri.

The Union Pacific announcements acclaimed that this summer of 1868 the rails should cross the Black Hills Mountains of Wyoming to another range of the Rocky Mountains, in Utah; and that by the end of the year one might ride comfortably clear to Salt Lake City! And somewhere in the expanse of brand new Western country, the plains and mountains, I would find at least the breath of life.

When I arrived in Omaha the ticket agent was enabled to sell me transportation away to the present western terminus, Benton, Wyoming Territory itself, six hundred and ninety miles west of the Missouri!

Of Benton I had never heard. But in round figures, seven hundred miles! Practically the distance from Albany to Cincinnati, and itself distant from Albany over two thousand miles! All by rail.

The lady of the blue eyes was bound for the same point. Ye gods, but she was a little beauty; a perfect blonde, of the petite and fully formed type, with regular features inclined to the clean-cut Grecian, a piquant mouth deliciously bowed, two eyes of the deepest blue veiled by long lashes, and a mass of glinting golden hair upon which perched a ravishing little bonnet.

The natural ensemble was enhanced by her costume, all of black, from the closely fitting bodice to the rustling crinoline beneath which there peeped out tiny shoes. I had the opportunity also to note the jet pendant in the shelly ear toward me, and the flashing rings upon the fingers of her hands.

Could she by any chance live in Benton—a woman dressed as she was, as much a la mode as if she walked Broadway in New York? Omaha itself had astonished me with the display upon its streets; and now if Benton, far out in the wilderness, should prove another surprise—!

Indeed, the Western world was not so raw, after all.

Half of my seat at the start had been effectually filled by a large, stout, red-faced woman who formed the base of a pyramid of boxes and parcels.

She was going to North Platte, three hundred miles westward. I told her I was going to Benton.

She stared, round-eyed. "I reckon you're a gambler!" she accused.

"I am seeking health in the West," I said, "where the climate is high and dry."

"My Gawd!" she blurted, "High and dry! You're goin' to the right place. For all I hear tell, Benton is high enough and dry enough. But laws sakes, you don't need to go that fur. You can as well stop off at North

Platte, or Sidney or Cheyenne. They'll sculp you sure at Benton—unless you watch out mighty sharp."

"How so, may I ask?"

"You're certainly green," she apprised. "Benton's roarin'—and I know what that means. Didn't North Platte roar? I seen it at its beginnin's. My old man and me, we were there from the fust, when it started in as the railroad terminal. My sakes, but them were times! Gamblin', shootin', drinkin' and high-cockalorum night and day! 'Twasn't no place for innocence! Easy coe, easy go, that was the word. I don't say but what times were good, though. My old man contracted government freight, and I run an eatin' house for the railroaders, so we made money. Then when the railroad moved terminus, the rest of the crowd moved, too. You stop off at Platte, Nebraska. It's healthy and it's moral."

But since I had crossed the Missouri something had entered into my blood which rendered me obstinate against such allurements. For her North Platte, "strictly moral," I had no ardent feeling. I was set upon Benton.

And in after days—soon to arrive—I bitterly regretted that I had not yielded to her counsel.



"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."

Nevertheless this was true, at present: That was the old emigrant road.

"But I have already purchased my ticket to Benton," I objected. "If I don't like it I can move elsewhere. Possibly to Salt Lake City, or Denver."

She snorted.

"In among them Mormons? My Gawd, young man! Where they live in konkibinage—several women to one man, like a buffer herd or other beasts of the field? Denver—well, Denver mightn't be bad, but ain't on no railroad, either. If you want health, and to grow up with a strictly moral community, you throw in with North Platte."

"I thank you," I replied. "But since I've started for Benton, I think I'll go on. And if I don't like it you may see me in North Platte after all."

She grunted. "You can find me at the Bon Ton restaurant. If you get in broke, I'll take care of you."

In remarkably short order she was asleep.

The brakeman came in later, lighting the coal-oil lamps. Outside, the twilight had deepened into dusk.

Numerous passengers were making ready for bed; the men by removing their boots and shoes and coats and gaiters and stretching out; the women by loosening their stays, with significant clicks and sighs, and laying their heads upon adjacent shoulders or drooping against seat ends. Babies cried, and were hushed.

Final "night-caps" were taken from the prevalent bottles.

The brakeman leaned to me. "You for North Platte?"

"No, sir, Benton, Wyoming Ter-

ritory." "Then you'd better move up to the car ahead. This car stops at North Platte."

Fortune had favored me—across the aisle from my new seat only a couple of seats beyond, I glimpsed the top of a golden head, securely low and barricaded in by luggage.

I slept until midnight. The train was rumbling as before. The lamps had been extinguished—the coach atmosphere was heavy with oil smell and the exhalations of human beings in all stages of deshabille.

But the golden head was there, about as when last sighted.

Now it stirred, and erected a little. I felt the unseemliness of sitting and waiting for her to make her toilet, so achieve my own by aid of the water tank, tin basin, roller towel and small looking-glass at the rear.

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

A levy of antelope flashed white tails at us as they scudded away. Two motionless figures, horseback, whom I took to be wild Indians, survey us from a distant sandhill.

Across the river there appeared a tangle of low buildings, almost indistinguishable, with a glimmer of

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 not decline to taste with a lady? Let us drink to better acquaintance in Benton!"

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

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

With a darting glance at him and a parting smile for me she passed inside. The brakeman lingered.

"Friend of yours, is she?"

"I met her at Omaha, is all," I stiffly informed. "You are acquainted with the lady, yourself?"

"Her? Sure. I know about everybody along the line between Platte and Cheyenne."

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

"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.

(Continued Next Week.)

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