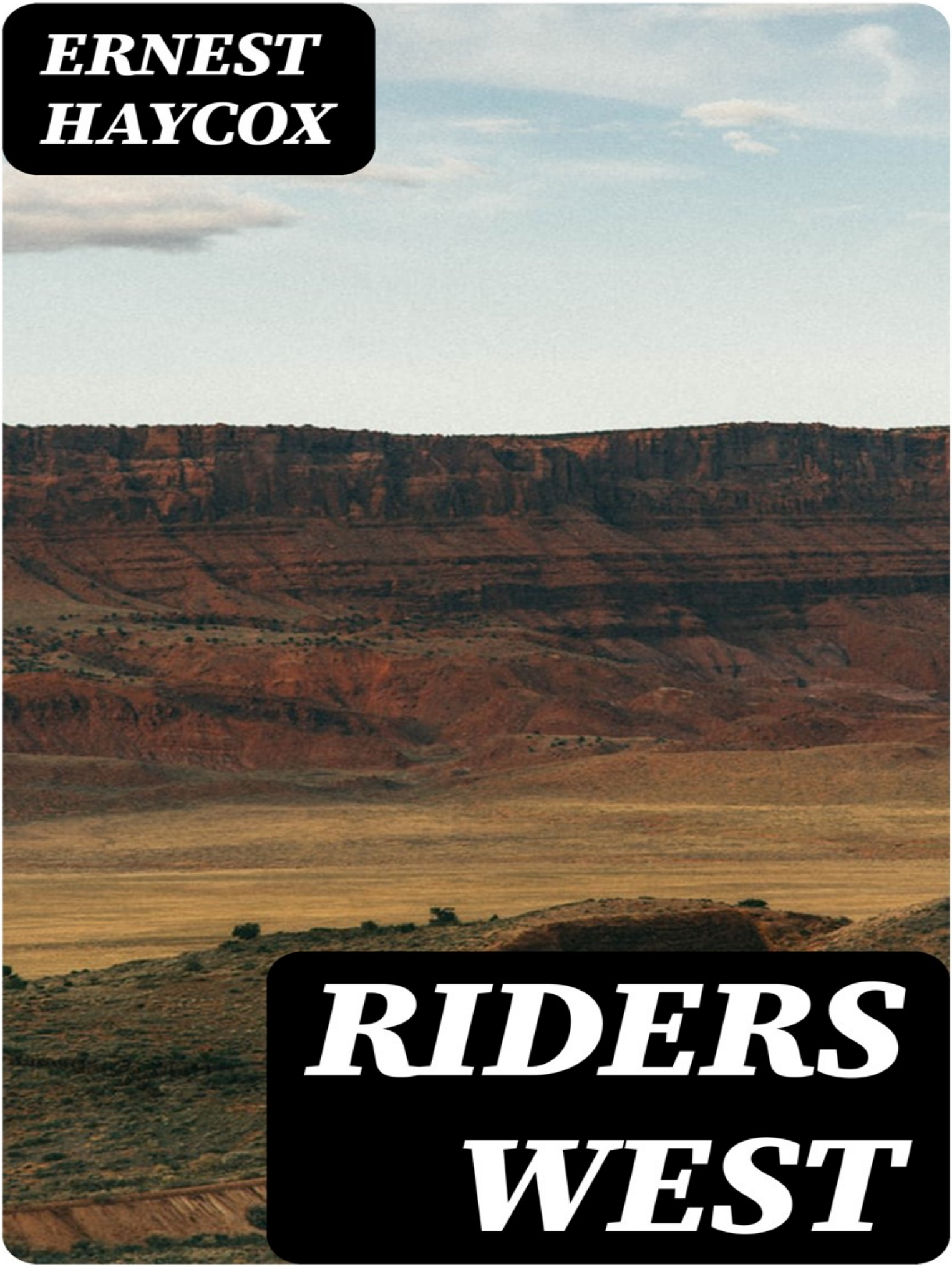
ERNEST HAYCOX



RIDERS WEST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Riders West

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CHAPTER I.
"THE PAST IS DEAD!"

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Beyond the blurred car window the land lay dark and formless and unvarying—a flat emptiness across which the westbound train rushed hour after hour and yet seemed to make little progress. Occasionally the shape of a corral whipped by, less occasionally glimmering ranch lights reached forward from the remoteness of the prairie; but these were minute flaws to accent the loneliness of a world lost in its own immensity. When some restless passenger opened either vestibule door, the clacking assaults of iron on iron rushed in, and biting air currents turned the gauze gaslights of the coach redly dim. Cecile, a social and warmth-loving creature to her last plump fiber, made a small shuddering gesture.

"This is simply insane, Nan. It really is. You've got to change your mind in the next half-hour. Listen to me. You can't drop out of your own set—it will be so horribly dreary. If you must run, come on to the coast, where at least you'll meet your own kind of people."

Nan Avery answered with a falling inflection, with a queer lack of tone. "The past is quite dead, Cecile. I buried it, laid on the flowers, and shed my tears." She sat relaxed, supple hands crossed in her lap, the neat military shoulders swaying in response to the motion of the car. Nothing, Cecile thought, could ever erase the smooth, fine regularity of Nan Avery's face. It was definite, it was proud, it was close to being beautiful. The mass of brushed copper hair heightened a whiteness of temple and brow; and had some odd disciplinary effect on the gray, straight-glancing eyes. All the Averys were like that, very direct and honest, very

strict with themselves. What saved Nan from the otherwise Puritan sobriety of the tribe was a zest for living, a vital gayety that once had colored everything she did or said.

But she was not gay now. She sat there with an air of inner quiescence, as if all thinking and all hoping had ceased to be important; and in those expressive eyes was a foiled, faint bitterness. No strong character herself, Cecile felt a queer sense of desolation to see this swift surrender. For it was surrender; it was defeat. Even Cecile knew that after five miserable days on the train. Somewhat desperately she said:

"I actually can't bear the thought of leaving you. Nan, you'll come home after everything has settled and been forgotten."

"No," murmured Nan in the same detached manner. "I don't know what lies ahead. It doesn't matter. But I'll never go back."

"But why, of all places, should you choose to live out here?" cried Cecile.

Nan Avery's words were aloof, impartial—as if she were viewing herself from afar. "My life has been luxurious and easy. See what has come of it. Now I shall really find out if I'm any good."

"Oh, you little fool, there is no blame on you!"

"But there is," said Nan softly. "My name has been dragged around the mud. However right or wrong it may be, people are talking. They always will." Then a small echo of hurt anger warmed her speech. "Can't you see what that does to me? It—it makes me feel like soiled linen! I hate it! I hate myself! I never expected it and never deserved it. But it happened, and so it must be my fault. Why should I try to find excuses? Well, it won't happen again. What's done is done, and I am through crying."

"You don't know anything about this country," brooded Cecile. "Nor anybody in it. You're stepping into a wilderness.

Really you are. You might as well be dead as far as your friends are concerned."

"Just as I want it to be," said Nan indifferently; and her clouded glance turned to the vague landscape. A red-and-green light bloomed and vanished. The engine's whistle signal fled by in long, undulating ropes of sound.

The conductor came in to collect fares from a group of obvious cowhands at one end of the car, and Cecile, always intensely interested in people, looked at the visible figures with a silent admiration. During the past two days the transcontinental had become a sort of accommodation local that collected and dropped travelers at each station. Sometimes it would be a woman, sometimes a family; but usually it was otherwise, for this clearly was a man's country. The coach was crowded with men now, of a type entirely new to her. They were tall or short and of all degrees of appearance, but certain particulars about them were inevitably uniform. For one thing, a characteristic slimness of body; for another, a similarity of boots, vests, and broad hats. When they walked they were awkward. When they sat they talked with a slurred briefness, and they used their hands freely to piece out phrases, Indian-like. Their faces were watchful, somehow deliberately wooden. Their eyes were more often than not blue, a blue turned almost green by the surrounding darkness of tanned skin. They moved about a great deal, played poker interminably, always were rolling cigarettes. The coach was a fog of smoke. Directly across the aisle a pair of them, more subdued than the rest, sat silently along the miles, and only when the end doors opened did they show interest—a momentary alertness that was quick and hard. Both had their saddles beside them, and both wore belts and guns. By now Cecile was accustomed to the weapons. More men wore them than didn't. She was thinking of the scratched scar on the face of the younger one when Nan broke a prolonged silence:

"You really don't know how glad I am to have you along. No, you don't, Cecile. It has kept me from remembering things I don't want to remember. But when I get off, you'll go on and I shan't ever see you again. After you reach the coast, take another route home. If you want to write, address the letter in care of the lawyer. Save for yourself, he is the only person who has the name of the town I'm going to. He will never tell." Then Nan bent forward and said soberly: "And you must never tell. I don't want the past to follow me. It is too hard to get rid of."

The conductor came along the aisle and paused. "We reach Trail in twenty minutes. I'll see about your luggage. Kind of sorry you have to put up with this smoke, but you can't do much with these fellows."

Nan's answer was limpidly cool: "I have observed that men like to make their own rules."

The conductor, appearing a little puzzled, went on.

Cecile spoke: "You never used to be bitter, Nan. It isn't like you to be unkind."

"That, too," said Nan gently, "is part of the past. I shall not again trust a man, make allowances for him, ask favors of him."

"You'll soon forget that notion," said Cecile, very positive. She could not let such heresy go unchallenged; for if she was not reflective, she had the wisdom of her own desires.

"No," contradicted Nan. "Now remember what I told you. Don't ever give anyone my address."

Cecile flushed. "I shan't."

But Nan, looking sharply at her friend, thought she had touched an otherwise frame of mind. So she said: "If you do, I'll of course have to move on. Beyond even your letters."

"Oh, Lord, Nan, I won't!"

"The break is complete," Nan observed, more to herself than to Cecile. "I am glad I had just enough courage to make it."

"But what will you do?" demanded Cecile forlornly.

"Does that matter?"

"I hate to leave you like this," worried Cecile.

Cold air poured into the car, and the lights dimmed again. A man hurried forward, stopped beside the pair across the aisle—a young and bulky man with a wide, loose mouth and a flattened nose. It was not possible to avoid hearing him speak.

"Get on at Green Springs, boys?"

"Howdy, Hugo. Yeah."

Hugo's glance swept the coach and fell on the women with a focused brightness. Cecile felt that she was being weighed, considered unimportant, and dismissed from thought. The man's voice dropped to a lower pitch: "Dan Bellew is on this train."

That name had its instant effect. The younger of the pair stood up and looked to either end of the car. The other said: "When did he come aboard, Hugo?"

"At Big Mound."

"He's seen you?"

"Think so," answered Hugo.

The older one was obviously irritated. "He's always showin' up where he shouldn't be. I don't want him to see us."

"Get in the washroom," said Hugo.

The other rose. The older man murmured something Cecile, now frankly listening, didn't catch; then the two went along the aisle and disappeared into the washroom. Hugo sat down in the vacated section and hoisted his feet to the red plush seat. Nan was speaking again:

"When you get back home, Cecile, you'll probably meet Jamie Scarborough. There's no doubt he'll ask you about me. Tell him nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"You're sure?" asked Cecile.

"Well," amended Nan, "tell him this—tell him I don't want to see him or hear from him. And that there is absolutely no use trying to find me."

"That will hurt Jamie," observed Cecile.

"How about me?" answered Nan curtly.

Cecile started to speak and stopped. The inquisitive half of her mind was engaged in the affair across the aisle; and now she saw the rear vestibule door swing open before a high-built man. He stood in the opening for a while, visually searching the car. Then he came on and halted before the apparently indifferent Hugo, one hand idly resting on the arm of Cecile's seat. Over a long interval he said nothing—only looked down with a faint amusement that had no friendliness in it. He was, Cecile thought, cut in much the same pattern as the others; with a slimness of waist that strengthened his shoulders and a sense of solidity and deep-seated health about him. The flare of his hat accentuated all the angles of a rather broad face, sharpened the sweep of jawbones. His skin was ruddy and quite smooth, save for those finely etched weather wrinkles about the temples which seemed so universally stamped on these riding men. And that sense of inner amusement turned a broad, compressed mouth into a slightly skeptical curve. There was, Cecile said to herself, something just a little formidable about him. His continued silence disturbed her.

Quite apparently it also disturbed the reclining Hugo. His attitude of unawareness failed him. Turning his head, he looked up through half-closed eyes and casually spoke:

"Hello, Dan."

Dan Bellew's "Hello, Hugo," was equally casual. He pushed back the brim of his hat. "Traveling for your health?"

"A little business," muttered Hugo.

"Going to Trail?"

"Yeah."

"That's strange."

"What's strange about it?" demanded Hugo, on the defensive.

"Shouldn't think you'd find much business in a town you got run out of," mused Bellew. He had never taken his

attention from the other, and that attitude of being sardonically entertained grew more obvious. It seemed to Cecile he was playing with this Hugo. Turning, she found Nan watching the scene, and she said to herself, "Nan's not too depressed to see a good-looking man."

"My business is my business," grunted Hugo.

"Would be if it was a legitimate business," observed Dan Bellew. "You wouldn't really try to fool me, would you, Hugo?"

"What do you want?" rapped out Hugo.

The lurking grin broke through Bellew's face, hard and sharp. "Just came in to tell you that you're not going to Trail."

"I think I am," contradicted Hugo flatly.

"You've been wrong before," drawled Bellew. "You're wrong again."

Hugo said nothing, but he was staring back at Bellew with a winkless attention. His body had gone still on the seat; his hands were idle beside him. The softness, the suavity of this quarrel astonished Cecile, who glanced at Nan in mute astonishment. Nan—and this was surprising, too—looked on with little signals of anger staining her cheeks. The conductor came down the aisle, stopped in front of Bellew and recognized him with a friendly nod.

Bellew said: "This man has made a slight mistake, Sam. He thought he was going to Trail, but he finds he isn't. He'd be pleased if you'd stop the train just long enough for him to get off."

It was, of course, rank insolence, and Cecile waited breathlessly for the conductor's explosion. Oddly, the latter's answer was mild to the point of being conciliatory:

"Maybe he's got a different idea, Bellew."

"Hugo," stated Bellew gently, "seldom has ideas of much importance. Sorry to bother you, Sam. Please pull down on that bell cord."

The conductor was handling the situation gingerly. He looked now to the seated Hugo, Hugo abruptly rose. "You're puttin' me afoot on the prairie, Bellew?"

"My apologies."

Cecile could see no weakening of the deadlock. But the conductor apparently did, for he reached up and seized the bell cord. There was a swift reply from the engine's whistle ahead and an immediate shrilling of the applied brakes. All the other men in the car had turned silent and were watching with an absorbed, inscrutable interest. Hugo's countenance was dry of expression; nothing of his thinking showed through except for a brighter flare of light in his greenish eyes. He said, very briefly:

"All right—this time, Dan."

Something of Bellew's preoccupation left him. He stepped back a pace and waited for Hugo to precede him down the aisle. The door opened and let them out, and afterwards there was a moment's strange quiet as the train came to a full halt. Cecile heard feet strike the graveled roadbed; a man in a near-by seat murmured, "Told you so." Then the coaches lurched ahead under a wrenching application of power. The conductor returned to collect Nan's baggage. "Ten minutes to Trail," he warned her. Presently Dan Bellew came again into the coach and walked to the deserted section. For a little while he looked down, rolling a cigarette with an air of abstraction. Cecile wondered about that until the man abruptly reached over and lifted the skirts of the two saddles still lying there.

He seemed to find something of particular interest.

Straightening, he studied the car, and when he lit the cigarette the matchlight glowed against a smooth, guarded face. Cecile was startled to hear Nan Avery speak in a clear anger:

"Arrogance in men is not a pretty thing to see."

Cecile swung to caution her friend, but she saw instantly that Nan had meant the observation to be heard. Nan sat

straight, her chin up—sure sign of her temper—and she was directly meeting the surprised look of Dan Bellew. He had turned; he had withdrawn the cigarette from his mouth. His eyes, Cecile thought, confusedly, could be very bleak and unfriendly. They were now. She had the distressing feeling that he was stripping Nan's mind for his own cool satisfaction. Yet even as she thought so a sure gleam of humor replaced the severity of his glance.

"Little girls, especially strange little girls, should be seen and not heard," he said and walked away.

"Why didn't the other man fight back?" fumed Nan.

"You deserved what you got," said Cecile candidly.

"What right has he to put anybody off this train?" demanded Nan irritably. "It was outrageous. I hate men who use force like that."

"Must have been a reason," said Cecile practically. "He doesn't look like one to do anything without cause. Anyhow, why should you care?"

Nan caught a quick phrase on her tongue and turned to the window.

After a long period she spoke: "You're right. I shouldn't mind it. Only there is so little fairness in this world, especially among men."

Cecile was thinking, in half a panic, of other things.

Through the window she saw the clustered lights of an advancing town. The train was again whistling for a stop, and some of the cowhands were collecting their effects. The conductor put his head into the coach and shouted, "Trail—Trail!" Nan's face was turned back to her, a sign of strain showing through the long-maintained composure.

"I guess this is the end, Cecile. Remember what I've told you. And be a good girl."

"It's so damn hard to see you go!" cried Cecile.

"Don't!" warned Nan. She rose and walked along the aisle. There were quite a few men in the vestibule, and the two women stood silent and constrained while the cars

came to a sighing halt. The conductor swung down and held up his arm for Nan. One faint light seeped out of a station house—and that seemed to be all of the city of Trail, to which she had blindly bought a ticket. Behind her was the pressure of the men impatient to be off; but Cecile was clinging to her shoulder, and suddenly she turned and kissed the girl. Cecile, frankly crying, said:

"You little fool!"

"Nothing," said Nan in a small voice, "can be any worse than what was." Then she got down and stood uncertainly to one side. Cecile disappeared, the men filed out. Steam jets from the engine made sharp reports through the night, and the bell's ringing rolled resonantly across an emptiness that seemed to have no boundaries. The conductor waved his lantern in a full bright circle and swung up, the cars gathered momentum and slid by.

She saw Cecile's face pressed against a window, very dim; and presently there was only a line of faintly, glimmering lights curving across the flat land westward.

She stood there in the darkness, with her luggage around her, ridden by a loneliness she could not help. The rest of the deposited passengers had gone off, and she was quite alone, smothered in the shadows. Small impressions came to her—the smell of sage and wood-smoke, the clatter of a telegraph key. Along the station wall was a sign that read: "See Townsite Jackson." But her mind was on that fast-fading red-and-green glow of the train; and as the lights grew dimmer and dimmer, so did her courage. Out there vanished the last of her old life, gone forever with nothing to replace it: and it was like a dark omen to think that her last view of Cecile had been blurred and uncertain. She found herself thinking desperately: "Why should this happen to me?" As much as she had prepared herself for this final break, the sweeping reaction of helplessness and regret was worse than she had ever imagined it could be; it carried her

downward into an abyss from which there seemed no return.

She heard a shifting of weight on the gravel. That literally dragged her from her reflections. Turning, she found the tall shadow of a man standing by. When he spoke she instantly recognized—with a revival of resentment—the casual calm voice of Dan Bellew:

"Were you expecting someone to meet you?"

CHAPTER II.
THE FORESHADOWED TEMPEST

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"No," said Nan, pointedly brief.

"Then I'd better help you to the hotel."

It further irritated her that he refused to accept the implied dismissal. He was only an arm's length away, looking down from his height, immovably certain. She couldn't read his expression very well through the dark, but she believed he was smiling with that same faintly amused manner he had used on Hugo in the car. A critical inner voice told her she was being ungracious and a fool, yet her answer went curtly back to him: "I'm quite able to help myself."

He didn't hear it, or if he did he brushed it aside as being inconsequential. His body swung around to meet the arriving sound of some other person. A shadow, small and narrow, made a breach in the night, and a voice containing the surcharged weariness of the world drifted forward: "Wasn't sure you'd be on this train, Dan. Your horse is in front of Townsite's."

"Solano," said Bellew, "you lean against the wall over yonder for about ten minutes. If you see anybody walking up the track, come and tell me."

"Yeah," murmured Solano and backed away.

Bellew took possession of the luggage. "There is only one hotel," he explained, "and it's a potluck affair. Around the left side of the station."

Nan closed her lips against a quick, resenting answer and fell in step. He was, she decided, one of those dogged men against which irony made no impression; and she was too weary to argue. When they turned the corner of the station

she saw the lights of the town run irregularly down one long street and halt against the farther darkness of the flats. There were a few tall trees growing up from the sidewalks, and the buildings she passed beside were all of weathered boards, set apart by narrow alleys. A rider loped out of the shadows and drew into a hitch rack, leaving a series of dust bombs behind him. He crossed in front of them, threw a musical "Howdy, Dan," over his shoulder, and pressed through the swinging doors of a saloon, Yellow radiance momentarily gushed out, and a confused murmuring of many voices rose—and died as the doors closed. They arrived at a square which seemingly centered the town, went over it and came up to a building identified by a faded sign on its porch arch: "TRAIL HOUSE—1887—Maj. Cleary." Bellew stepped aside, and thus Nan preceded him into a lobby—gaunt beyond description. Behind a desk stood a cherubic man whose eyes were brilliant beads recessed in a pink round cushion; there was the air about him of having been waiting indefinitely for her.

"Customer for you, Cleary." said Bellew.

"Et supper?" asked Major Cleary in a ridiculously treble voice.

"Yes," said Nan. She was busy for a moment signing the register, one part of her mind wondering how she should thank a man she had no desire to thank. When she turned around she found Bellew had settled the problem for her; he had quietly retreated and stood now at the doorway. A woman's quick pleased exclamation raced in from the street: "Hello, Dan—I thought you'd be back this evening."

Cleary came about the counter and took Nan's luggage, saying, "Up these stairs, please." But Nan, faintly curious, remained still. Dan Bellew was smiling, and in another moment a girl walked into the lobby with a swift, boyish stride. She was very slim, not more than twenty. Her face was slightly olive and clearly modeled. Black hair clung loosely and carelessly to a restless little head, and two

shining eyes seemed to gather all the light of the lobby lamps and throw it laughingly up to Bellew. "She's pretty," Nan found herself thinking, impartially. "Very pretty." The rest was obvious, for the very manner in which this girl took Bellew's arm and raised her shoulders was a frank, unconscious admission of what she thought.

Bellew was indolently speaking:

"I'm put out with you, Helen. Didn't meet me at the train. No girl of mine can neglect me like that."

Helen's laugh was exuberant, throaty. "Careful. Dan, careful. I'm apt to take you seriously."

Nan followed the heaving Major Cleary up the stairs, vexedly asking herself why she had spent the time looking on. Cleary went into a musty room, lit a lamp, and retreated. When the door closed behind him, Nan relaxed suddenly on the bed, bereft of all energy. She had hoped, distantly, for some glamour of the country to carry her through; but she saw nothing of it, felt nothing of it. Trail was a drab and common and flimsy cattle town on the prairie, and she sat in a room cheerless beyond words. A yellow mirror hung on the wall, a chair covered with dust sat in one corner. These articles and the iron bed on which she sat made up the furnishings. A shade flapped full length against an open window; and there was a hole—it looked like a bullet hole—through one partition. All this grated on her sense of neatness. But, studying her gloved fingertips, she quietly warned herself: "The trouble is not with the place. It is with me. I must not ask for too much." Tired and forlorn as she was, some restlessness would not let her sit still. She got up and went to the mirror, to see there the clouded reflection of a person she scarcely knew. The image disturbed her, and she turned away, thinking: "I've got to keep moving or I'm lost." Abruptly she left the room and went down the stairs. Major Cleary was in a lobby chair, rocking himself to sleep.

"I want to talk with somebody about a house," she said uncertainly. "Something that will be outside of town."

"You'd want to see Townsite Jackson."

"Would you mind getting him for me?"

Cleary looked at her through nearly shut lids. "I doubt if he'd come," he said indifferently. "Better go see him."

"Where?"

Cleary's pipestem described a half-circle. "Catty-corner from here across the square. They's a building there with four doors—bank, post office, store, and land office. Any one of 'em will lead you to Townsite. Fact simply is, any business you may do will by and by take you to Townsite."

Nan said "Thank you" soberly and left the lobby. Certain shadowed forms loitered on the porch, and an idle talk died as she went down the steps and along the boardwalk. Men strolled casually from place to place, without hurry or apparent purpose. The air was sharper than it had been, and she caught the keen taint of burning wood and an intermingling dust scent. Water trickled pleasantly from a trough; a densely black stable's mouth yawned at her, through which traveled the patient stamp of stalled horses. There was, she thought slowly, an air of deep peace here, the peace following a hard day's work. The yellow dust settled beneath her shoes as she crossed the square and turned into the doorway of a starkly rectangular two-story building. Bright bracket lamps hung over a counter, but the long shelves of supplies ran into a dim background, and great mounds of sacked and boxed stuff made breastworks along the floor.

A man walked slowly from some other room.

"I'm looking for Mr. Jackson."

"I'm Townsite," said the man cheerfully.

He was, she decided, a rawboned General Grant; with the same square, closely bearded face, the same indomitable mouth. His eyes were a clear blue and patiently kind. Past middle age, he had the appearance of physical strength. She thought of all this while framing her request. It was more difficult than she had imagined, for she stood on

wholly alien grounds, a transparent Easterner. Unconsciously she threw her shoulders back.

"This," she said, slowly, "is what I've come to see you about: I want some sort of a place, a house only large enough for myself with just a little ground around it. I want it away from town. The rest is entirely up to your judgment. Pick the place, arrange for it. Select whatever I shall need. Tonight, if you please. In the morning I will be here with a check to pay for it—and ready to go."

Townsite Jackson stood still while she spoke. And afterwards he studied her for a long interval with that same slow, judging scrutiny she had experienced at the hands of Dan Bellew. He was smiling, but, behind that smile was a shadow of sympathy and regret.

"I'm always kind of sorry to spoil a fine dream," he told her gently. "Now let's consider this, thing a little more fully."

Dan Bellew stood under the black shadows of a locust and idly talked to Helen Garcia. Then Solano came ambling out of an alley, and Helen walked away. "I saw nothin'," said Solano.

"We'll ride to the ranch in the morning," observed Dan. "So you better get your serious drinking done tonight." He crossed the street, all at once fallen into the indolent tempo of the town, and paused at the swinging doors of the Golden Bull. Viewing the crowd inside—and identifying each man with particular care—he stepped discreetly back into the shadows. The girl from the train was at that moment heading for townsite's, and Dan watched the quick sure swing of her body with a silent approval. There was no doubt of her firm, independent mind; the incident on the coach had determined that.

Dan chuckled soundlessly when he thought of the scene. It was somewhat strange that the outline of her features, the gray straightness of the glance, and even the still, angered clarity of her voice remained distinctly with him. Her display of temper had something to do with it, he

reflected; yet beyond that was a clear-cut personality at once colorful and feminine. Meanwhile he searched the odd corners of Trail with a careful eye. Seeing nothing, he strolled down to the sheriff's office and went in.

Jubilee Hawk was at the moment assembling the parts of a rifle scattered along his desk. He looked up swiftly—all the muscles and nerves of this keenly edged young man were turned to abrupt responses—and the oddly angular face relaxed from its concentration. He reared back, sorrel hair shining beneath the light, and reached for his pipe. Dan sat down, rolled a cigarette. It was, invariably, a ceremony between these two ancient friends who knew each other so well. Dan put his feet on the desk, struck a match, and idly surveyed the surrounding walls—Jubilee watching him through the smoke with an oblique, half-lidded interest. When Bellew did at last break the silence it was so casually as to suggest the continuation of a previous sentence:

"When there's carrion around, the buzzards circle down."

Jubilee nodded. "Election's only ten days off, if that's what you mean."

Dan looked across the table. "How'd you like to be an ex-sheriff?"

"May damn well be," grunted Jubilee. "And very soon. Neel St. Cloud is going to frame the election if he can. Once he gets Ruel Gasteen wearin' this star he'll have the best luck of his life. Ruel Gasteen will absolutely obey orders. St. Cloud knows that."

"How," went on Bellew idly, "would you like to be a dead sheriff?"

"Thought we'd get to the nigger in the woodpile pretty soon. Let's have it."

"I'm going to catch thunder for monkeying in your business," said Dan whimsically. "But anyhow, Hugo Lamont was on the train tonight."

"So?" Jubilee straightened. "I ran him out of here once by the slack of his britches."

"I knew that. Why do you suppose he wanted to come back?"

"Vote St. Cloud's ticket of course."

"No," answered Bellew. "No. If it was that, he'd wait until the last day. Only reason he'd venture into this town again would be to take a shot at you. He's got a score to settle."

"I can run him out again," was Jubilee's laconic observation.

Bellew smiled. "As I said, I'm going to get the devil for interfering. But I was afraid if he got here he'd broach you before I could put my warning in. So I stopped the train and set him off. If he's comin', it will be afoot. You're warned."

"I wish you'd quit goin' to trouble for me, Dan."

"I'm not sure there wasn't somebody else of interest on that train," added Bellew, very thoughtful. "Saw a couple of saddles in an empty section. You watch your step."

"Why should everybody have the sudden desire to make a target out of me?"

"St. Cloud isn't any too certain he'll win the election. If you got unfortunately killed in line of duty it would simplify matters for him. He's determined to put his whole ticket of scoundrels into office."

"He's a cool enough cucumber to figure all the angles."

"Never underestimate him," said Dan. "He has a first-rate mind. And when you harness a good head to crooked schemes, you've got a situation full of dynamite."

Silence came again, prolonged and studious. Jubilee ran a hand through his sorrel hair and appeared puzzled. "This is a rougher, tougher country than it used to be, Dan. More trouble, more suspicion, more thievin'."

"I've watched the grief gatherin' up for the last couple years," agreed Bellew. "The trouble is right over yonder in Smoky Draw, my lad. Neel St. Cloud never used to be anything but a talking man. Then he got himself an idea. He's been working on it ever since."

"What idea?"