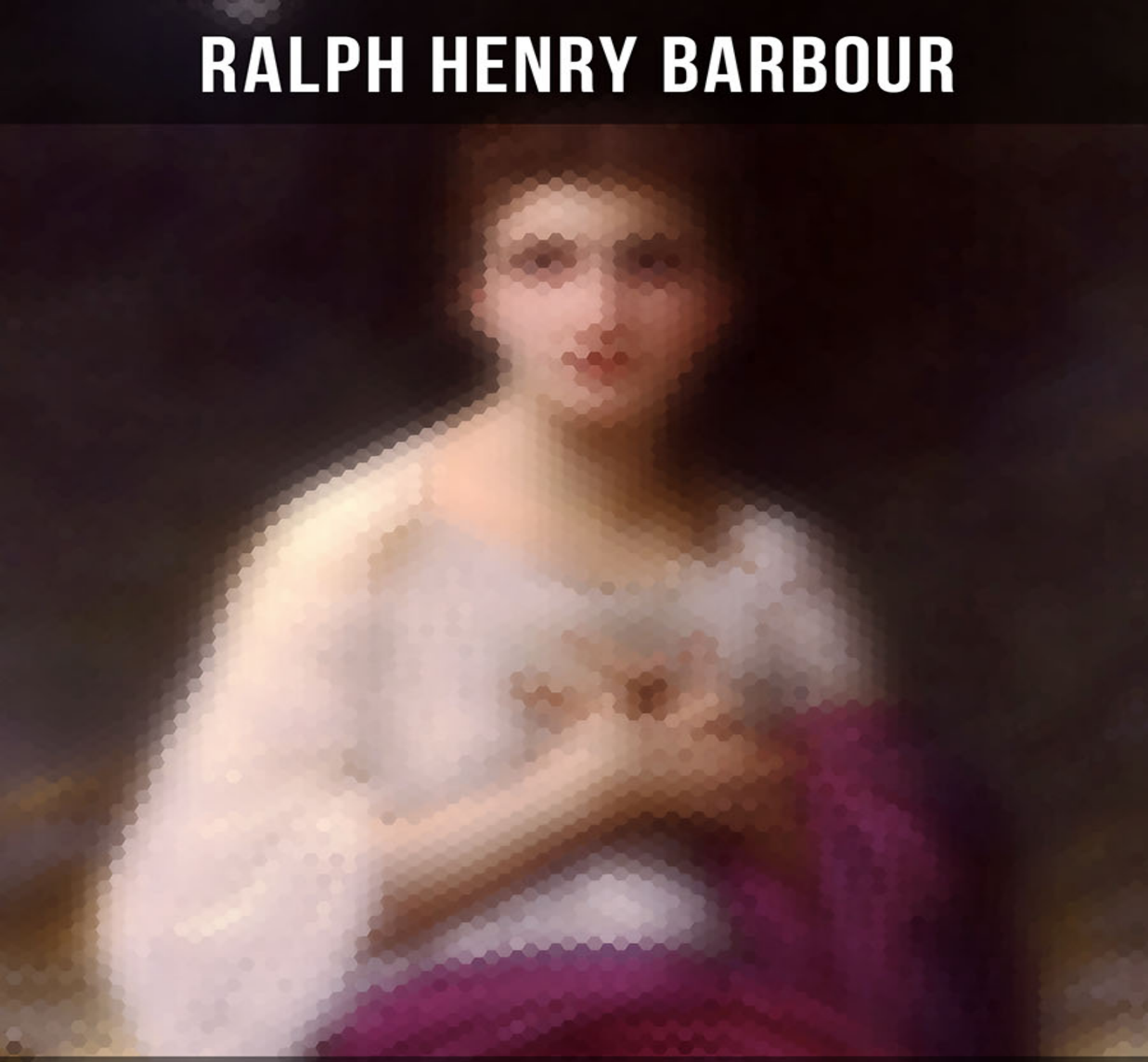
RALPH HENRY BARBOUR



THE LILAC GIRL

ROMANCE CLASSIC

Ralph Henry Barbour

The Lilac Girl (Romance Classic)

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I.

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Two men were sitting beside a camp-fire at Saddle Pass, a shallow notch in the lower end of the Sangre de Cristo Range in southern Colorado. Although it was the middle of June and summer had come to the valleys below, up here in the mountains the evenings were still chill, and the warmth of the crackling fire felt grateful to tired bodies. Daylight yet held, although it was fast deepening toward dusk. The sun had been gone some little time behind the purple grandeur of Sierra Blanca, but eastward the snowy tips of the Spanish Peaks were still flushed with the afterglow.

Nearby three ragged burros were cropping the scanty growth. Behind them the sharp elbow of the mountain ascended, scarred and furrowed and littered with rocky debris. Before them the hill sloped for a few rods and levelled into a narrow plateau, across which, eastward and westward, the railway, tired from its long twisting climb up the mountain, seemed to pause for a moment and gasp for breath before beginning its descent. Beyond the tracks a fringe of stunted trees held precarious foothold on the lower slope of a smaller peak, which reared its bare cone against the evening sky. There were no buildings at Saddle Pass save a snow-shed which began where the rails slipped downward toward the east and, dropping from sight, followed for a quarter of a mile around the long face of the mountain. It was very still up here on the Pass, so still that when the Western Slope Limited, two hours and more late at Eagle Cliff, whistled for the tunnel four miles below the sound came echoing about them startlingly clear.

"Train coming up from the west," said the elder of the two men. "Must be the Limited." The other nodded as he

drained the last drop in his tin cup and looked speculatively at the battered coffee pot.

"Any more of the Arbuckle nectar, Ed?" he asked.

"Not a drop, but I can make some."

"No, I've had enough, I reckon. That's the trouble with dining late, Ed; you have too much appetite."

"We'll have to get some more grub before long," was the reply, "or it'll be appetite and nothing else with us. I can eat bacon with the next man, but I don't want to feast on it six days running. What we need, Wade, is variety."

"And plenty of it," sighed the other, stretching his tired legs and finding a new position. "The fact is, even after this banquet I feel a little hollow."

"Same here, but I figure we'd better go a little short till we get nearer town. We ought to strike Bosa Grande to-morrow night."

"Why not hop the train and go down to Aroya? We can find some real grub there."

"Couldn't get back before to-morrow afternoon. What's the good of wasting a whole day?"

"Looks to me like we'd wasted about twenty of them already, Ed."

Craig made no reply. He fished a corn-cob pipe and a little sack of tobacco from his pocket and began to fill the bowl. Wade watched for a moment in silence. Then, with a protesting groan, he rolled over until he could get at his own pipe. Craig drew an ember from the edge of the fire with calloused fingers, held it to his bowl and passed it on to Wade. Then with grunts of contentment they settled back against the sagging canvas of their tent and puffed wreaths of acrid smoke into the twilight.

The shadows were creeping up the mountain side. Overhead the wide sweep of sky began to glitter with white stars. A little chill breeze sprang up in the west and fanned the fire, sending a fairy shower of tiny lemon-yellow sparks into the air. And borne on the breeze came a hoarse

pounding and drumming that grew momentarily louder and reverberated from wall to wall. The ground trembled and the grazing burros lifted their shaggy heads inquiringly.

"She's almost up," said Wade. Craig nodded and replaced his pipe between his teeth. The noise became multisonous. With the clangor of the pounding wheels came the stertorous gasping of the engines, the creak and clatter of protesting metal. The uproar filled the pass deafeningly.

"She's making hard work of it," shouted Craig.

"Probably a heavy train," Wade answered.

Then a path of pale light swept around the elbow of the mountain and the wheezing, puffing monsters reached the head of the grade. The watchers could almost hear the sighs of relief from the two big mountain-climbers as they found the level track beneath them. Their breathing grew easier, quieter as they clanged slowly across the pass a few rods below the camp. The burros, having satisfied their curiosity, went back to supper. The firemen in the cab windows raised their hands in greeting and the campers waved back. Behind the engines came a baggage and express car, then a day coach, a diner and a sleeper. Slower and slower moved the train and finally, with a rasping of brakes and the hissing of released steam, it stopped.

"What's up?" asked Wade.

"Hot-box on the diner; see it?"

"Yes, and smell it. Let's go down."

But Craig shook his head lazily, and Wade, cinching his loosened belt, limped with aching legs down the slope. The trainmen were already pulling the smouldering, evil-smelling waste from the box, and after watching a minute he loitered along the track beside the car. Several of the shades were raised and the sight of the gleaming white napery and silver brought a wistful gleam to his eyes. But there was worse to come. At the last table a belated diner was still eating. He was a large man with a double chin, under which he had

tucked a corner of his napkin. He ate leisurely, but with gusto.

"Hot roast beef," groaned Wade, "and asparagus and little green beans! Oh Lord!"

He suddenly felt very empty, and mechanically tightened his leather belt another inch. It came over him all at once that he was frightfully hungry. For the last two days he and his partner had been travelling on short rations, and to-day they had been on the go since before sun-up. For a moment the wild idea came to him of jumping on the train and riding down to Aroya just so he could take a seat in the dining-car and eat his fill.

"They wouldn't make much out of me at a dollar a throw," he reflected, with a grin. But it wouldn't be fair to Craig, and he abandoned the idea in the next breath. He couldn't stand there any longer, though, and see that man eat. He addressed himself to the closed window before he turned away.

"I hope it chokes you," he muttered, venomously.

Some of the passengers had descended from the day coach to stretch their limbs, and with a desire to avoid them Wade walked toward the rear of the train. Daylight dies hard up here in the mountains, but at last twilight held the world, a clear, starlit twilight. Overhead the vault of heaven was hung with deep blue velvet, pricked out with a million diamonds. Up the slope the camp-fire glowed ruddily. In the west the smouldering sunset embers had cooled to ashes of dove-gray and steel, against which Sierra Blanca crouched, a grim, black giant. Wade had reached the observation platform at the end of the sleeping-car. With a tired sigh he turned toward the slope and the beckoning fire. But the sound of a closing door brought his head around and the fire no longer beckoned.

On the platform, one hand on the knob of the car door as though meditating retreat, stood the straight, slim figure of a girl. She wore a light skirt and a white waist, and a bunch

of flowers drooped from her breast. Her head was uncovered and the soft brown hair waved lustrously away from a face of ivory. The eyes that looked down into his reflected the stars in their depths, the gently-parted mouth was like a vivid red rosebud in the dusk. To Wade she seemed the very Spirit of Twilight, white and slim and ethereal, and so suddenly had the apparition sprung into his vision that he was startled and bewildered. For a long moment their looks held. Then, somewhat faintly,

"Why have we stopped?" she asked.

So unreal had she looked that his heart pounded with relief when she spoke.

"There's a hot-box," he answered, in the tones of one repeating a lesson learned. His eyes devoured her face hungrily.

"Oh!" said the girl, softly. "Then—then you aren't a robber, are you?" Wade merely shook his head. "I heard noises, and then—when I opened the door—and saw you standing there—." The first alarm was yielding to curiosity. She glanced at the scarred and stained hand which grasped the brass railing, and from there to the pleasant, eager, sunburnt face under the upturned brim of the battered sombrero. "No, I see you're not that," she went on reflectively. "Are you a miner?"

"No, only a prospector. We're camped up there." He tilted his head toward the slope without moving his gaze.

"Oh," said the girl. Perhaps she found that steady, unwinking regard of his disconcerting, for she turned her head away slightly so that her eyes were hidden from him. But the soft profile of the young face stood clear against the darkening sky, and Wade gazed enravished.

"You are looking for gold?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And—have you found it?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" There was sympathy in the voice and in the look she turned upon him, and the boy's heart sang rapturously. Perhaps weariness and hunger and the girl's radiant twilit beauty combined to make him light-headed; otherwise how account for his behavior? Or perhaps starlight as well as moonlight may affect the brain; the theory is at least plausible. Or perhaps no excuse is needed for him save that he was twenty-three, and a Southerner! He leaned against the railing and laughed softly and exultantly.

"I've found no gold," he said, "but I don't care about that now. For I've found to-night what is a thousand times better!"

"Better than—than gold!" she faltered, trying to meet his gaze. "Why, what—"

"The girl I love!" he whispered up to her.

She gasped, and the hand on the knob began to turn slowly. Even in the twilight he could see the swift blood staining the ivory of her cheek. His eyes found hers and held them.

"What is your name?" he asked, softly, imperatively.

Oh, surely there is some quality, some magic power in mountain starlight undreamed of in our philosophy, for,

"Evelyn," whispered the girl, her wide eyes on his and a strange wonder on her face.

"Evelyn!" he echoed radiantly. "Evelyn! Evelyn what?"

"Walton," answered the girl obediently. He nodded his head and murmured the name half aloud to his memory.

"Evelyn Walton. And you live in God's country?"

"In New York." Her breath came fast and one hand crept to her breast where the flowers drooped.

"I'll remember," he said, "and some day—soon—I'll come for you. I love you, girl. Don't forget."

There was a quick, impatient blast from the engine. The wheels creaked against the rails. The train moved forward.

"Good night," he said. His hand reached over the railing and one of hers fell into it. For a moment it lay hidden there, warm and tremulous. Then his fingers released it and it fled to join its fellow at her breast.

"Good night—dear," he said again. "Remember!"

Then he dropped from the step. There was a long piercing wail of the whistle that was smothered as the engine entered the snow-shed. The girl on the platform stood motionless a moment. Then one of her hands dropped from her breast, and with it came a faded spray of purple lilac. She stepped quickly to the rail and tossed it back into the twilight. Wade sprang forward, snatched it from the track and pressed it to his lips. When the last car dipped into the mouth of the snow-shed he was still standing there, gazing after, his hat in hand, a straight, lithe figure against the starlit sky.

II.

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Well down in the southeastern corner of New Hampshire, some twenty miles inland from the sea, lies Eden Village. Whether the first settlers added the word Village to differentiate it from the garden of the same name I can't say. Perhaps when the place first found a name, over two hundred years ago, it was Eden, plain and simple. Existence there proving conclusively the dissimilarity between it and the original Eden, the New England conscience made itself heard in Town Meeting, and insisted on the addition of the qualifying word Village, lest they appear to be practising deception toward the world at large. But this is only a theory. True it is, however, that while Stepping and Tottingham and Little Maynard and all the other settlements around are content to exist without explanatory suffixes, Eden maintains and is everywhere accorded the right to be known as Eden Village. Even as far away as Redding, a good eight miles distant, where you leave the Boston train, Eden's prerogative is known and respected.

Wade Herrick discovered this when, five years after our first glimpse of him, he stepped from the express at Redding, and, bag in hand, crossed the station platform and addressed himself to a wise-looking, freckle-faced youth of fourteen occupying the front seat of a rickety carryall.

"How far is it to Eden, son?" asked Wade.

"You mean Eden Village?" responded the boy, leisurely.

"I suppose so. Are there two Edens around here?"

"Nope; just Eden Village."

"Well, where is that, how far is it, and how do I get there?"

"About eight miles," answered the boy. "I kin take you there."

Wade viewed the discouraged-looking, flea-bitten gray horse dubiously. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Have you ever driven that horse eight miles in one day?"

"Well, I guess! There ain't a better horse in town than he is."

"How long will it take?"

"Oh, about an hour; hour an' a half; two hours—"

"Hold on! That's enough. This isn't exactly a sight-seeing expedition, son. We'll compromise on an hour and a half; what do you say?"

The boy examined the prospective passenger silently. Then he looked at the horse. Then he cocked an eye at the sun. Finally he nodded his head.

"All right," he said. Wade deposited his satchel in the carriage and referred to an address written on the back of a letter.

"Now, where does Mr. Rufus Lightener do business?"

"Over there at the bank."

"Good. And where can I get something to eat?"

"Stand up or sit down?"

"Well, preferably 'sit down.'"

"Railroad Hotel. Back there about a block. Dinner, fifty cents."

"I certainly am glad I found you," said Wade. "I don't know what I'd have done in this great city without your assistance. Now you take me over to the bank. After that we'll pay a visit to the hotel. You'd better get something to eat yourself while I'm partaking of that half-dollar banquet."

An hour later the journey began. Wade, fairly comfortable on the back seat of the carryall, smoked his after-dinner pipe. The month was June, there had been recent rains and the winding, dipping country road presented new beauties to the eyes at every stage. Wade, fresh from the mountains of Colorado, revelled in the softer and gentler loveliness about him. The lush, level meadow, the soft contour of the distant hills, the ever-present murmur and sparkle of

running water delighted him even while they brought homesick memories of his own native Virginia. It was a relief to get away from the towering mountains, the eternal blue of unclouded skies, the parched, arid miles of unclothed mesa, the clang and rattle of ore cars and the incessant grinding of quartz mills. Yes, it was decidedly pleasant to have a whole summer—if he wanted it—in which to go where he liked, do what he liked. One might do much worse, he reflected, than find some such spot as this and idle to one's heart's content. There would be trout, as like as not, in that stony brook back there; sunfish, probably, in that lazy stream crossing the open meadow yonder. It would be jolly to try one's luck on a day like this; jolly to lie back on the green bank with a rod beside one and watch the big white clouds sail across the wide blue of the sky. It would seem almost like being a boy again!

Presently, when, after passing through the sleepy village of Tottingham, the road crossed a shallow stream, Wade bade the boy drive through it.

"Don't have to," replied unimaginative fourteen. "There's a bridge."

"I know there is," answered Wade, "but my doctor has forbidden bridges. Drive through the water. I want to hear it gurgle against the wheels."

He closed his eyes, expectantly content, and so did not see the alarmed look which the boy shot at him. The horse splashed gingerly into the stream, the wheels grated musically over the little stones, and the water lapped and gurgled about the spokes. Wade leaned back with closed eyes and nodded approvingly. "Just the same," he murmured. "It might be the ford below Major Dabney's. This is surely God's own country again."

Further on they rattled through the quiet streets of East Tottingham, a typical New England village built around a square, elm-shaded common. It was all as Ed had described it; the white church with its tall spire lost behind the high