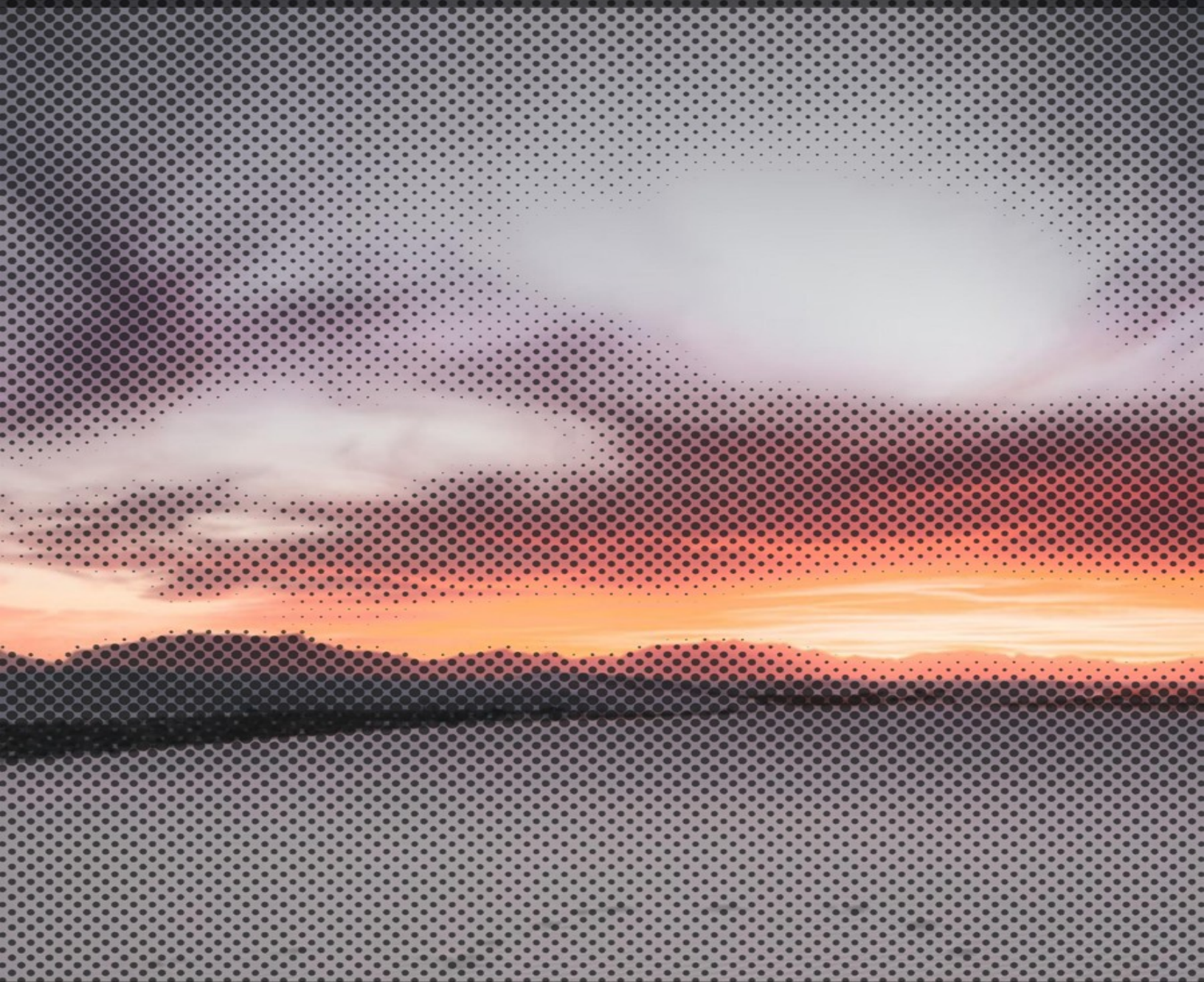


Ernest Haycox



*The Silver
Desert*

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The Silver Desert



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CHAPTER 1

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DRIVING from Carson to Reno, Lily Tennant saw the sullen banner of dust boil up in the valley and cross the highway like smoke from a grass fire. When she came nearer, pressing a slim foot on the brake pedal, its yellow cloud billowed against her and dimmed the burning brilliance of the Nevada sun. Squarely blocking the highway, a man sat in the saddle of a true palomino pony and presented her with a long broad back. Cattle filed out of the desert on the left, crossed the road and went bawling and fretful into the desert on the right, lumbering hooves churning up the bitter alkali. Lily Tennant came to a full stop and sounded her horn.

The horseman, seeming to count the passing stock, didn't bother to move. Settling back on a leather seat that stung her with its soaked-in heat, Lily knew then she had made a mistake in pulling the top of the roadster down at Carson. As long as the car was in motion there was some breeze to cut the furnace-like temperature of the afternoon; but trapped here in the desolate open the sun instantly scorched her exposed skin. She laid her arm on the edge of the door and drew it sharply back; the enamel was that hot. The car's chromium trim threw off a thousand slivers of sulky light—and her wrist watch told her she had been waiting five minutes. She tried the horn again.

A young steer bolted from the stream of beef, whereupon a second rider appeared from the obscure haze and turned it back into line. A heavier billow of this acrid dust rolled

down upon Lily Tennant and she bowed her head against such insistent misery and saw her dress turning to a grimy drab. When she looked up again the rear vision mirror showed her a still, slim face flushed and faintly damp. Actually, her makeup—as little as there was of it—was dissolving, and the ivory smoothness of her forehead was really dirty. She was, she thought with growing outrage, a complete wreck and nothing but immersion in ice water and a change from the skin out would ever make her the same woman again.

And there the man sat, another strong and dumb character of the wide open spaces, ignoring her torture. Lily Tennant, whom Hollywood knew as a marvel of self-discipline, had a temper as well and now she suddenly let it go and banged the horn button with a violence she hoped would express the pure venom of her feelings.

The tall man wheeled his horse reluctantly and rode back to her car with a deliberation that was unutterably wicked. All she saw of him as he bent slightly from his saddle was a steel-gray glance and sun-bleached brows above a bandanna covering the rest of his face. The hair showing beneath his hat was black as ink, the exposed surface of his face was deeply tanned.

"After all," said Lily Tennant, acidly quiet, "this is a state highway."

"That's right."

"So—haven't I been punished enough?"

He hooked a leg around the saddle horn; and that indolent gesture, too, served to feed her just anger. Nor did

it help to know that his glance, solidly steady, saw her at her cooked and wilted worst. He said: "Why?"

"For daring to honk at you when I came up here ten minutes ago."

"Wrong guess," he said, and afterwards thought to pull the bandanna down from his face. Yellow dust puffed up when he brushed it aside. He had long, solid lips and the rest of his features were smooth and taciturn and indifferent, matching the inscrutable gray of his eyes. "I am only trying to get my cattle across the road," he added.

"I am only trying to get to Reno."

"You'll have plenty of time to waste after you get there," he observed quietly.

"If that could possibly be any of your business," Lily Tennant retorted.

Instantly she regretted the open anger of her words, recalling the shrewd observation of Sam Wein in Hollywood who had done so much for her. "You got a temper," he had said. "It's the electricity that pushes you on. But don't never waste your temper on the wrong things, Lily. Save it for the times when an explosion will blast something that's got to be blasted."

"Sorry," said the man on the horse. His tipped-down face was young, but as masculine as any she had ever seen. He was slim. His hands folded across the horn, were heavy and his shoulders moved now and then with a faint restlessness. Physically quiet as he was, Lily Tennant felt the impact of a willful personality drastically curbed behind the grave cheeks. She saw her words hadn't penetrated his guard and she ceased to regret them.

"I wasn't trying to be personal," he added. "Only stating a fact. But maybe I might as well commit the sin I've been spanked for. From California, aren't you?"

"As the license plate will tell you."

"I don't need to see the license plate. Your temper—which is accustomed to being obeyed—tells me." The soft, spurious urbanity at once reached its mark; she felt herself being put in place. His sudden grin only ground the injury in. He removed his hat. "I apologize for blocking your royal signal." The second rider appeared from the alkali fog again and shut off the stream of cattle.

Lily kicked on the engine and moved the car forward abreast the tall man. "Thank you, Moses," she said succinctly, "for commanding the waters to divide." Her head bowed with an exaggerated respect and then the long delayed roadster roared out of the confusion into the full punishment of that burning Nevada afternoon. She struck the junction of the Reno-Virginia City road furiously, spewed a storm of shoulder gravel behind and pressed her shoe against the foot throttle with nothing less than manslaughter in her heart. Reno's buildings, just ahead, were outlined against an atmosphere that seemed to flow like liquid glass. The smell of the earth was tinder-dry. Inside the town limits, she drove more sedately across the Truckee, stopped in front of a house pleasantly surrounded by locusts, and left the car.

Even on this hot day she went up the walk with a stride that had in it the faintest touch of a swagger, with a quick rhythm that synchronized and turned utterly graceful the supple members of her body. She was a slender girl,

somewhat above the average height and her shoulders, small and straight, were presented squarely at the world in a manner that flaunted serene confidence like a banner. Four years of fighting her way up through the Hollywood extra ranks had given her that; but the unquenchable vitality so apparent in every motion was her birthright.

Hannah opened the door—Hannah being a dark, plain woman with a slightly resigned expression—and Lily let out a long sigh as she passed into the shaded coolness of the living room. She removed her hat impatiently and threw it on a divan; and her heavy brown hair, thus released, fell turbulently down across a white forehead.

"Hannah, I'm wrecked. Fill the tub."

"Yes, ma'am. There's three telegrams."

"Is Kit Christopher here?"

"No, ma'am. Mr. Timmy Akin called about an extra guest. May I know how many there will be for dinner?"

"Oh, eight or ten. It doesn't matter. You can handle them. And mix me a glass of iced lemonade, Hannah. A tall one."

Hannah contrived to put sorrowing patience into her "yes, ma'am," and went from the room in soft-shoed silence. Hannah's manner, Lily knew, was purely fictitious; for Hannah could rise to any crisis. At the living room table, Lily Tennant looked down on the three yellow telegram envelopes lying there and wondered if she had ever sufficiently thanked Jay Stuart. For when the days of cooking her own breakfast over a glass flame had come to an end—only two weeks ago she had walked from Superb's office with the contract that meant stardom in her pocket—it was Jay Stuart who had brought Hannah to her with the briefest

explanation. "This is your personal maid and your cook—the only one in California you want." Jay Stuart knew so much about the good things in life.

Standing there, Lily delayed opening the telegrams, her expression faintly darkened by thought. Her face was not extraordinarily beautiful; it had not the possibilities of mystery or graphic storminess of the great stars. The even contours of her features did not lend themselves to the creation of glamour, to shadowed subtleness. Lily Tennant, as far as Hollywood was concerned, was a type—and that type was definitely the American Girl. But the odd, deep powder-blue coloring of her eyes lifted her completely out of the commonplace definition of type; for in those eyes was a directness as true as the flight of an arrow and a depth that suggested many things. It was Sam Wein, foxy old press agent, who had defined Lily Tennant. "You ain't Continental. You ain't the face that launched a thousand ships. That stuff's dime a dozen now. You're Lily Tennant, see? You're what the American man dreams of. Get it? You've got fire and laughter, you're loyal and you're straight. You could carry a water bucket on a ranch or move through a palace and never miss a step either way. You're a good scout. But get this, Lily. Beyond all that, when you look at a man you're a woman all the way through. A full-blooded woman—and it gets into the gelatin—and you'll be as great as the greatest of them some day. Am I telling you?"

She ripped open one of the envelopes and pulled out the message. It was from Jay Stuart, who had so swiftly assumed a major share of her attention these recent days:

PLAY YOUR GAME WITH THE STUDIO AS YOU THINK BEST
NEVER LET THEM TAKE YOU TOO MUCH FOR GRANTED BUT
DON'T OVERPLAY YOUR INDEPENDENCE RIGHT NOW WAIT
TILL YOU'VE MADE YOUR FIRST PICTURE YOU HAVE BEEN
GONE A WEEK AND I HEAR SUPERBS GETTING RESTLESS
ABOUT IT IT ISN'T GOOD POLITICS TO GUM UP THEIR
SCHEDULE BETTER COME BACK ANYHOW I MISS YOU
HOLLYWOOD IS PRETTY EMPTY FOR THIS OLD TROUPER
WHILE YOU ARE AWAY REMEMBER I SAID YOU WERE GOING
A LONG WAY IN PICTURES AND THAT I WANTED TO TRAVEL
AS FAR DOWN THAT ROAD WITH YOU AS YOU WILL LET ME
JAY

It was a perfect projection of his personality—discerning, very smooth, gently insistent. She laid the message back on the table and pursed her expressive lips; she let her glance touch the platinum bracelet on her right wrist. Hannah spoke from the hall.

"Your tub's ready, Miss Lily. Was there any particular dessert you wanted served tonight?"

"Anything cold," said Lily, and went instantly to the tub. Relief sailed through her when she stepped into the water and she felt regret again for having lost her temper on the road. Sam Wein would have disapproved, and when she thought of Sam's fat and homely face beaming through the smoke of an ever present cigar she wished he were in Reno to give her counsel she so desperately needed. Four years of bitterest struggle lay behind. She had what she wanted, a contract that meant stardom. She wasn't afraid of failure—never of that. But stardom meant the end of all her security

and it meant the beginning of something she saw vaguely, and dreaded as she saw it. It was why she had fled Hollywood. Here in comparative quiet she had hoped to think it out.

The phone rang. Hannah's soft tread shuffled down the hall and Hannah's voice, without any expression said: "She's busy, Mr. Akin. Wait a moment." Outside the bathroom door Hannah said: "It's Mr. Timmy Akin wanting to know if he may bring another guest."

"Of course. That makes nine, doesn't it?"

"Ten," said Hannah sadly and went away.

Out of the tub, Lily Tennant studied herself candidly in the panel mirror. It had been a mistake to suppose that one could think any more clearly in Reno than in Hollywood. Something happened when you stepped up from the ranks and became an individual personality. People surrounded you. Camp followers and self-seekers and strange new friends. There wasn't any privacy any more.

Kit Christopher's amused tones came through the door. "I'm home, darling. People who sing in bathrooms always come to bad ends."

"Have I been singing?"

"Perhaps it was a soliloquy."

"I seem to discover I've already come to a bad end, Kit."

"Well, sin is such a comfort when you get to know it."

Lily slid into mules and a wrap, poked the edges of her thick brown hair carelessly back from her forehead. Coming out of the bathroom she found Kit Christopher limp on the divan, blowing smoke circles at the ceiling. Lily settled in a chair and sipped at her waiting lemonade.

"Been slumming?"

"Reviving old memories. Bob Nesbitt and I were divorced here three years ago. Bob came up just before the final decree. We had a wonderful week—and we parted better friends than ever. I wasn't his property any more and he treated me as though I were a desirable woman again. Love's got some funny angles, honey."

She was, Lily thought, representative of all that Hollywood stood for—an urbane, truly sophisticated woman with a gleam of humor in her eyes that covered a very quick mind. In a way she was hard as nails, unsentimental and unafraid of anything. What affection she possessed was saved for her few friends. Tall and quite slender, and not more than thirty, she did better than any other character actress in Hollywood, the civilized, ultra-modern drawing room type. All her keen, faintly dusky features were quizzically alert; and two pearl drops displayed on ears from which her black hair was pulled partially back lent the last immaculate touch. She was a smiling worldling, seeming to possess an ironic wisdom too definite ever to be disturbed.

"What've you been brooding about, honey?"

Lily rose and went to the table, handing Kit the telegram from Jay Stuart. As an afterthought she took up the others. One was from Sam Wein:

IF THIS ABSENCE IS AN ACT GIVE ME MY CUE IF YOU ARE
MAD ABOUT SOMETHING WHY DON'T YOU LET OLD SAM
KNOW SUPERBS MAKING FUNNY NOISES AM I ASKING SAM

The other, from Rex Gilman, Superb executive, was more brief and pointed.

LITTLE GIRLS CAN'T AFFORD TEMPERAMENT WE HAVE A
PICTURE TO SHOOT TAKE TONIGHTS PLANE REX

She passed these to Kit and went back to her chair. But she didn't sit down. She stood in front of Kit.

"I'm not putting on an act, Kit. I'm not going temperamental."

"Of course not. You got stage fright and ran away."

"More than that, Kit."

Kit Christopher's expression reminded Lily then of Jay Stuart. It held the same bland, material wisdom. "I knew something was bothering you," said Kit. "But, of course, I wasn't asking."

"Look, Kit, as long as I was an extra girl, nobody paid much attention to me. I was just Lily Tennant. I could do what I pleased and act as I pleased without being watched or criticized. I was a normal person. I'm not now."

"Didn't you see that coming?" queried Kit gently.

Lily's answer was slow. "No—I guess not. I was so busy fighting for a place in the sun that I never gave it a thought. Well, overnight I've become Lily Tennant, a possible star. I have lost all my privacy. If I go on I'll never get that back."

"No—you never will."

Lily impelled by an energy that seldom let her remain inactive, moved around the room. "That isn't frightening me so much. It's another thing. Let's not fool ourselves, Kit. I'm saying good-bye to something else—whether I want to or not. Decency, Kit."

Kit Christopher's lips made an enigmatic curve. Lily went hurriedly on.

"There's a lot of fine things and fine people in Hollywood. But there's a lot of rottenness too. And when any girl becomes a star it is the rottenness the world thinks of. Hollywood has been kind to me. But Hollywood can be very cruel. People there will put the worst implication on every word I say, every step I take. I'm just common property for everybody to share. All the same old dirty stories, the same sly winks, the same raised eyebrows—that's what's ahead, Kit."

Kit Christopher looked across at Lily Tennant's platinum bracelet. "By any chance are you thinking of that?"

Lily lowered her eyes. "I took it from Jay because he was very kind to me. Because he seemed to get so much pleasure from giving it."

"Also," said Kit Christopher, with a faint dry drawl, "because it was flattering, because when Jay Stuart passes out a platinum bracelet to a girl it means she is definitely on the way up."

"Yes," agreed Lily, quite candid. "But I didn't see the other side of it until a day ago."

"What other side?"

"As far as Hollywood is concerned I became Jay's woman when I put this bracelet on."

Kit Christopher bent to crush her cigarette in a tray. She didn't look directly at Lily. "It's a game with Jay. He's been in pictures since the ark—once he was a star in his own right. He's seen them all come and go. What means more to him now than anything is his reputation for picking the girls who will be tomorrow's box office hits. When he gave you the bracelet he was laying his bet on you."

"Yes?" said Lily, openly skeptical.

Kit's smile was ironic. "I'm not defending the animal, darling. He'll take whatever he can get from you. He'll be insistent about that, for he is a lady's man. If you see it his way, that's his luck. He hasn't any scruples there at all. But if you stick by your guns he'll admire you all the more and still plug for you."

"Until a new girl comes along."

"Certainly," said Kit equably. "It's his fun and his money, isn't it? It's a game with him and he'll play it either way you insist. I suppose many people would call Jay a thorough-going scoundrel. I have always thought him a gentleman after his own lights. Take what you can get from him. He expects you to. As for the other—keep whatever standard you wish and never mind what Hollywood says."

"Kit," said Lily, "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I hate to get mud on me. I hate to think that some of the dirt may creep beneath my skin. I know what I am now but I don't know what I may become. If I go on, Kit, I'm leaving one Lily Tennant behind. We'll never see her again."

Kit Christopher's answer was abruptly impatient. "If you are going to be a star you have got to believe in yourself utterly. You'll have to be cruel at times, and calculating and egotistical. Some things aren't going to be pretty—that's the price of being a star. Above all you'll have to be completely indifferent to the abuse the public throws at you. Even when you know they think your private life is a scandal you've got to smile back."

"I don't like that," said Lily with an extraordinary sharpness.

Kit Christopher smiled. "Did anyone tell you your eyes glow beautifully when you're roused?"

"I don't want to be pulled out of shape. I don't want to be an abnormal human being."

"Lily," said Kit, "why are you worrying? You are one of the few women as lovely off the screen as on it."

Lily Tennant's shadowed gravity dissolved. She couldn't help smiling. "Kit, you're a smoothie."

Kit reached out to touch Lily's arm. "It's hard to sit by and watch innocence get its first shock, Lily. But you'll become hardened to it."

"Should I?"

"We won't go into that, darling. Who's coming for dinner?"

"Just people. Kit, are you at all serious about Timmy Akin?"

Kit Christopher thrust a half-amused glance at Lily and rose and turned to her bedroom. It was a complete answer and didn't need any added definition. But at the door she swung her shoulders slantingly on Lily. "How can you discourage an airedale?"

"Don't be cruel. Timmy's nice."

The older woman's face was utterly smooth; but there was a reluctant sadness in her tone. "The day will come when you'll be just as cruel. Because in self defense you'll have to be. More cruel than I am now—for you are going higher than I can ever go."

THERE were seven people enjoying cocktails in the living room when Lily turned to the kitchen to see how the dinner looked; Judge Sillavan and his wife, two young unmarried couples of the town and Kit Christopher whose smile lay unchangeable and enigmatic on her lips. When Lily returned, the party was made, for Timmy Akin had arrived with his guest. Seeing that guest, Lily suddenly put down her cocktail glass, a deeper color tinting her cheeks. She straightened, though she did not realize it, and her chin lifted. She went quietly over.

Timmy, whose chief effort was always to please people, grinned happily. "You wanted to know an authentic cattleman, Lily. So here's one. May I present Tom Sebastian of the Barrier ranch? This is Lily Tennant, Tom."

For one small moment neither moved. Looking up to him, Lily saw his features tighten and she instantly guessed he was wondering how best to handle the awkward situation—this man who had held her up with his cattle on the Reno-Carson road. Beside Timmy, who was small and neutral-colored, he was strikingly solid, arrestingly alive. Actually he was tall, taller than she had first noticed. He was dressed in a fine-materialled gray suit and there was a looseness about the coat to accommodate that restless motion of his big shoulders which she had noticed before. Against the whiteness of his shirt his skin was quite dark; and she felt the steadiness of his glance. Timmy stirred, not understanding the stretch of this silence. The rest of the people in the room had ceased speaking.

"It was a pleasant thought, Timmy," said Lily, matching Sebastian's own even calm. She extended her hand to the man. "And it was nice of you to come."

As he bowed she caught a quick and vanishing streak of humor in his gray eyes. He said, taking her hand: "That reassures me, temporarily."

He had finesse, Lily decided, and turned to introduce him to the rest of the party. But Kit Christopher smiled frankly on the man and said, "Timmy introduced me to Mr. Sebastian the other day." And it was immediately obvious that the Reno people knew him well. Judge Sillavan spoke with a heartiness she could not miss. "That's good looking beef you drove in today, Tom."

"It ought to be," Sebastian observed. "I'm paying for the privilege of raising it—according to the market."

"Why don't you get out of the business then?" suggested Kit.

"Cattlemen don't change—they just die."

Lily moved to the table where the glasses were and paused, watching this Tom Sebastian as talk went idly on. He stood with a balanced straightness, as though ready to whirl, and behind his calm she detected once more that recklessness of spirit which colored his ironic words. He, was talking to Sillavan but his glance went over to Kit Christopher and remained there a moment; and then it turned and touched Lily with the same careful attention. He was, she guessed, analyzing what he saw. She picked up a cocktail glass and crossed to him, handing it over. The judge retreated. For a moment Lily had Sebastian to herself.

He said: "If the situation is embarrassing to you I'll be glad to duck out."

Lily matched his cool, blunt manner. "I am not embarrassed."

"Cattle," he said, "sweat off flesh rapidly in hot weather. That's why I seemed so anxious to get them across the road. I'm sorry about it."

"Why apologize for an honest impulse? You were irritated; So was I. Let's not lie about it now."

He drank his cocktail and his eyes showed a quickening interest as they studied her. It was, she thought, the dangerous gray color that made the impact of his glance so much like a jolt of electricity. "Just water under the bridge?"

"That's it."

His grin was a quick break of light across watchful reserve. "Good enough."

Hannah announced dinner and the party trailed into the dining room. Lily, standing at the head of the table, indicated the seats. At the other end of the table Kit Christopher lifted her wine glass. "To all good sinners."

It was a pleasant beginning and Hannah had done well with the meal. The talk, touched off by the cocktail, held a light and urbane gayety and Lily, isolated a moment by her own thoughts, wondered at the strange contrasts of this Nevada land. In the afternoon Sebastian had been a figure from the Old West, herding his cattle through the incredible heat; and here he was, a civilized being, perfectly at ease in sophisticated surroundings. She turned to him.

"Why is it called Barrier ranch?"

"That dates back," said Sebastian agreeably. "In my father's day, 1871, it was about the only piece of civilization up in the north."

Judge Sillavan cut in dryly. "You wouldn't exaggerate if you said it was still about the only piece of civilization there."

"The wild and woolly West still lives," murmured Lily with a faint skepticism.

"Our tourists are very wise," was the judge's amused observation.

"Perhaps," retorted Lily, "we should be prepared to defend our doors tonight against the Indians?"

"No, the Indians are gone," said Sebastian.

"Other things remain?" she challenged him.

"Maybe," he said.

Timmy Akin broke in. "I heard this today. A man was shot dead at a waterhole last night, not far from here."

"The romantic West in best tradition," murmured Lily Tennant. "Timmy, you are incurable. The rustlers and stage robbers are practically all in Hollywood now, doing pictures."

But Akin's information did something to the Reno people. Judge Sillavan bent toward Tom Sebastian. He said "Did you know about that?"

"Yes, It was Pete Rice."

"At Crockford Wells, then?" said Sillavan, quietly.

"Yes."

Sillavan's talk was obscure to Lily. "That's hitting close to home."

Tom Sebastian said: "Didn't I tell you all cattlemen were dumb? They don't change—they die." But he shifted from

that topic casually, turning to Lily. "You don't have much faith in the traditional West, do you?"

"I think you cling to sentimental memories. You are a modern man, but you wish to believe you are a part of the old times. I have seen the gambling tables and the long mahogany bars in Reno. They are picturesque. They're good theater for the tourists. But they're old-fashioned now."

"Let us grieve for the lost innocence of this irreverent generation," complained Sillavan.

"Not irreverent," corrected Lily with a faint smile. "But unsentimental."

"There you have it," applauded Kit Christopher from the end of the table.

"You are hard people, you youngsters," said Sillavan. "You don't believe in anything. Maybe my generation was a little too given to weeping in its beer when the professor played Home Sweet Home. But we believed in our tears. You people forbid yourselves the luxury of honest emotion because you're afraid of it. So you are all turning brittle and transparent."

"We are being spanked," intervened Kit Christopher.

"And don't tell me you're a realistic generation," went on the judge, amiably severe. "You're novices at that. My generation could step over dead men on the way from church to Sunday dinner and never turn a hair. We could put a school at one end of the town and a public crib at the other. That's realism, my infants."

Lily said with extreme quietness: "What should we believe? What is there to believe?" She looked at Tom Sebastian. Hannah, moving quietly around the room,

touched the light button and the sudden crystal gush from the chandeliers set off in quick fire the copper glints of her chestnut hair. Her firm, full lips remained steady. Her chin tipped upward and her round and actually beautiful shoulders were caught in a still straightness.

Tom Sebastian spoke with some brusqueness. "That's an empty question. You don't mean it."

"I am puzzled by a great many things that seem unanswerable."

"Maybe there are no answers," said he. "Why bother? Live the day out and let it go like that."

Judge Sillavan said unexpectedly: "I love all you youngsters. Because you are young and full of hell. You can be reckless and take your spills and still laugh. That's important."

They were finished with coffee. Lily said, faintly restless: "Let's go somewhere."

Kit Christopher's hands expressed despair. "Lily, can't you ever stay put?"

But Tom Sebastian had risen promptly, his white grin once more breaking. The party adjourned to the living room and the women went for their wraps. Judge Sillavan's ruffled silver head bent down; he clipped a cigar with a gold pen knife attached to his watch chain. His quiet talk was for Tom Sebastian alone. "Pete Rice was a gentle soul. But he was one of your friends."

"They are hitting me through my friends," observed Tom taciturnly. "Men can't afford to be my friends any more."

"Certainly—certainly. Nevada politics. Been so since the very beginning." Sillavan looked up and his very old and

very shrewd eyes glittered with some of that ruthlessness that had been his long ago. "It will get worse for you. Well, you are as rough and tough as any of your enemies and you have but one weakness, which is a set of scruples against deliberate murder. The other side doesn't have any such scruples. Do you know what it's all about?"

"Freeze-out."

Judge Sillavan's smile was very thin. "Come see me at the office tomorrow." He stopped talking and bowed to the approaching ladies with a gallantry that held the flavor of a distant past. There was something in the manner of this old-type Westerner that reminded Lily of opening an attic trunk and finding there the crinoline and linsey-woolsey of a dead age. The party trooped out toward the cars at the curb but Lily touched Sebastian's arm and they went walking on through the fragrant dusk of the quiet street. The people behind were cheerfully in argument. These two were silent, and remained so all the way into the brightness of Reno's center. Orchestra music flowed from a hotel and couples in evening dress casually and gayly passed them. Along the curbs men in boots and broad hats watched this parade without emotion. Many of them spoke to Tom.

Lily said: "You know a lot of people."

"In Nevada everybody knows everybody else. You want to remember—" He ceased speaking and Lily, following the turn of his head, saw a great mass of a man idly posted against a building wall. He had a chest so extraordinarily deep and broad that it made the rest of his body seem thin, and his features were queerly flattened against a brick-brown skin. His eyes, of a muddy opaque color, clung

winklessly to Tom Sebastian. And then, in spite of the utterly desolate expression of his face, a smoldering dislike flashed plainly across it. Her glance whipped back to Sebastian and she noticed at once how friendless was his own expression. Afterwards, when they went on, that unforgiving tautness around Sebastian's lips remained in her mind. She spoke.

"Who was the grotesque giant?"

"A half-breed by the name of Star Humboldt."

"Not a charming personality."

He looked down at her, not quite smiling. "He's not in the tourists' guide, Lily."

The party swung into the Goldfield Club into the sudden confusion of sound and smoke. Down the long room stretched the successive gaming tables, well patronized; and through it moved that queer stream of people which gave Reno its particular color, cowhand and prospector and townsman rubbing shoulders indifferently with the sightseer in his crumpled clothes and the divorcee in evening dress. The party eddied slowly along, propelled by the players drifting from table to table. Five men in white duck served behind a long polished bar.

Kit Christopher wanted to try roulette and Timmy Akin obediently found a place for her. The Reno people were chatting with others who had come up. A man passing by touched Sebastian on the shoulder and said: "Want to see you later, Tom," and went on without waiting for an answer. Turning back to Lily Tennant, Sebastian found her regarding the roulette table with an amused indifference.

"Not interesting to you?"

"Not very."

Kit Christopher had tried her luck and found it bad; she came away from the table with an expressive shrug and the party went into the street again, Lily and Tom bringing up the rear. Tom Sebastian spoke with a strange bluntness.

"What interests you?"

Her face rose, showing a queer liveliness. "Anything. Anything that is real."

"You're not bored. You're troubled."

"How would you know that?"

"You're too much alive to be bored."

"Thank you, Tom." The party turned into an alley and entered a doorway overhung by a single light. But Sebastian put a slight pressure on Lily Tennant's arm and stopped; and his head turned back to the main street. Looking in that direction, Lily presently saw the great figure of Star Humboldt cruise across the mouth of the alley. Humboldt threw one glance down the alley, toward Sebastian, and then passed on.

"What is it?" asked Lily.

Sebastian only shook his head, his cheeks holding an oblique and secret humor. They followed the party into another of Reno's clubs, this one smaller and quieter than the Goldfield, with its crystal chandeliers throwing off a faint air of elegance. Kit Christopher was again trying her luck, but Lily Tennant stood fast in the center of the room and looked about with a cool curiosity; and then the curiosity died and left her aloof and indifferent. Tom Sebastian turned a little to catch the straight, level effect of her glance. He bent toward her, reserve going from his manner.

"How long are you going to be in Reno?"

"A day—a week. I don't know, and it doesn't matter."

He said: "You haven't seen—" He broke off the sentence and folded his two hands in front of him. His cheeks went keen and perceptibly reckless; he spoke quite brusquely. "You're a lovely woman, Lily."

Her eyes held him. Her voice was serene, speculative. "You are a man of extremes."

"You've seen Reno. But there's another side of Nevada you don't know—"

The party was retreating from the roulette table. Kit Christopher said: "I'm the world's worst gambler." A man came through the doorway with a swift swing of his shoulders and stopped quite suddenly beside Sebastian.

"Tom," he said, "how are you?"

Sebastian's answer fell short of friendliness. It was nothing more than acknowledgment. "Hello, Buffalo."

He was a smiling man, this newcomer. His eyes were lightest hazel and his yellow blond hair—he had at once removed his hat—curled carelessly down his forehead. He was as young as Sebastian, with quite bold features across a lightly florid skin. In the muscular roll of his shoulders and the glinting liveliness of his glance was a visible hint of animal magnetism. A pointed silence fell as he stood there, half faced toward Lily Tennant. Sebastian, coolly polite, said: "Miss Tennant, may I present Buffalo Galt?" and plunged his hands into his pockets. Then he added: "And Miss Christopher, and Timmy Akin."

Buffalo Galt's bow was deliberately gallant. "This," he said, "is a pleasure I deliberately sought."