

Ernest Haycox



*Head
of the Mountain*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[PART 1.](#)

[PART 2.](#)

[THE END](#)

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[Table of Contents](#)

AT the upper deck's railing Hugh Rawson watched the *Annie Conser's* bow swing shoreward to search for Klickitat's landing stage. An ink-dense bluff rose behind the river, crowding the town into a single street whose lights lay out upon the water like the pickets of a yellow fence. Against the night's enameled black, star masses made their foamy glittering and the clear winds of spring blew lightly in from the empty reaches of Eastern Oregon. In Portland, where he had spent a month abed, the climate was a heavier and a sleepier thing; this mild air blowing against him was the fragrant breath of a woman gladly whispering him home.

Rawson lifted his carpetbag and took the forward stairs in a sidewise manner to protect a left leg not yet dependable. He moved ashore with this cautiousness, but in a moment his hustling habit got the better of him and he put out a hand to make his way through the crowd toward the Klickitat House standing fifty feet from the river. He signed the register and went up the stairs and along a dim hall to a room. There, he removed coat and shirt, unbuckled the money belt around his hips, washed away the day's dirt, and dressed again. His skin had the olive tint of an active man too long indoors; his mouth was broad with small creases across its center meatiness, his nose was heavy, his cheekbones were flat and high. His face needed filling out and in fact he needed twenty more pounds all about his

body to bring him back to the hundred and eighty pounds he had been. When he turned to the bed, he placed too much weight on his left leg and woke its unhealed nerves. He murmured, "Dammit," and drew his .44 with its holder and belt from the carpetbag, but he laid it aside while he rummaged the bag for a derringer. Cinching the money belt beneath his coat, he turned to the lobby.

Both lobby and bar of the Klickitat were crowded. Klickitat was a depot town; the boxes and barrels and bales of merchandise dropped by steamboat at the landing were picked up and carried on, eastward and south-eastward, to the mining camps far beyond the Snake, along the Powder and the Malheur, into Boise Basin, over flinty hills and through colored gorges into Central Oregon, to solitary ranches on the high desert, to prospectors' settlements ephemerally lodged beside the gravelly bars of the John Day.

A denied appetite came powerfully upon him and the rear view of a familiar figure at the bar—a tremendously upholstered shape within a shabby blue suit tailored like a square tent—drew him forward. He created a place at the bar by shouldering Jake Mulvey into a smaller area.

"Get my letter?"

"I did," said Mulvey, and used a finger to catch the barkeep's eye. He smiled then; his mouth was benign and small and bride-red behind the ragged screening of a mustache. He was at least fifty-five, yet youngness seemed to have been permanently caught within the preservative lard which padded him head and foot. He looked at Rawson's leg.

"You're pushin' that too soon. You need a lot of feedin'. How."

They drank and crossed the lobby to the dining room. Rawson saw an empty table at a far corner; half over the room he heard his name called and swung to catch sight of George von Stern at another table—von Stern and Evelyn. He said to Mulvey, "Go on, I'll be with you in a second," and made his way toward these two. Von Stern got up and reached for Hugh's hand, and shook it thoroughly.

"Hughie, glad to see you—glad to. You all right?"

"Will be."

Evelyn said, "Don't ignore me."

The room's lamplight broke into brilliant splinters against her eyes. Her hand closed firmly around his hand and her glance searched him with a warming curiosity. Her lips were plush cushions against her skin, placid but falsely so, for she was not a placid woman. A yellow hat lay on hair which was the lightest possible brown, and her dress was a rusty gold, if gold could rust, the upper part of it cleverly broken and reshaped, she being the dressmaker. She was a large girl with a pleasant composure, but a contradictory vigor sparkled in her eyes and around her mouth a restless charm fugitively hovered, waiting escape. She was a light-loving woman, not calm, not cool; variety pleased her—the unexpected changes and contrasts which variety brought.

"Your friends," she said, "intended to make a party and come to Portland to see you, but the road out of Ophir's been so terrible." She drew her hand away; her interest hung on. "Eat with us."

"Business with Mulvey."

"It's a fool question," said von Stern, "but have you got a notion who shot you off the seat?"

Rawson swung his body back and forth. "Listen. Hear the hip joint squeak? When I'm driving I won't know whether it's the coach rattling or me."

He smiled at Evelyn and he brought her smile back. He watched it grow and hold steady, and he tilted his head and seemed to observe it from a distance; then he made a motion with his hand and turned away. Evelyn watched him go between the crowded tables, slightly limping, now and then touching a table to steady himself.

She said, "If that's permanent I'll never again think there's anything kind in this world." She said it with a force that brought von Stern's glance to her. He said, "I thought this might sober him up. It didn't. He doesn't give a damn about anything."

The girl drew her glance from Rawson; she placed her hands on the table and tipped her head. "Oh no," she said, the words feather-soft, "he's changed. George, who'd hate him enough to shoot him while he was driving? He doesn't have that kind of enemies."

"They were after the express box."

"Could it have been a Piute?"

"An Indian's not interested in gold."

"Gold's a terrible thing," she said.

The color of von Stern's eyes, a thick coffee brown, was a rich mud behind which his emotions lay well covered; even when they reached surface they were never entirely free from a certain hint of reserve. He had a grave and coppery face, he was rawboned and strong-muscled with handsome

and curled black hair always a little tumbled about his head, and he dressed himself carefully and kept himself shaved and groomed; a diamond ring, the great stone held in a gold snake's-mouth mounting, circled the index finger of his left hand. Softly speaking, he turned the diamond from side to side, watching the imprisoned flame flash. "Gold can do anything, and men will do anything for it. Greatest creator—greatest destroyer. I know of nothing with its power, and power's what we all want."

Rawson said, "I'll ride to Head of the Mountain and take the reins as before."

"Lay around a couple of weeks in Ophir and feed up," said Mulvey.

"I'm going after that fellow."

"It was six weeks ago and the country's full of drifters and there'd be no trace, unless you know who did it."

"I never saw him. He was behind a tree when he fired."

"Maybe he meant to fire a warning shot and hit you by mistake."

"At twenty feet? Nobody can shoot that poor. And if it was just the express box he wanted, he'd not shoot the driver and stampede the coach to hell and gone down the road. Maybe he wanted the box, but he wanted to kill me first. We'll be carrying a lot of dust out of Ophir this year. He'll try again—same idea as he had before—and I'll be on the box. Unless I catch him, he'll catch me."

"Rough game," said Mulvey,

Rawson used a thumbnail to scratch lines back and forth upon the tablecloth, closely watching the traveling of his hand and searching for a thought that would stand fast long

enough to be captured by words. He was twenty-five, yet his face was the sort that experience did not edge or harden and his eyes, exceedingly blue, were tranquil. He shook his head. "This man's a pair of red eyes watching me from the brush. He missed once, but he's prowling and he'll try again. He's the same as telling me I'm not bright enough to stay alive. I'm interested."

"You stayed in bed too long and thought too damned much. You swallowed the hook. Wait till marbles start rollin' around your belly and your eyeballs feel full of pitch and needles."

"I'll take back the run from Bart Lennon," said Rawson, "but I'd like to use him for relief man when I want to prowl."

"That's all right," said Mulvey. He sat back in the chair, finger tips making a tepee before his eyes. He sighted across the finger tips to Rawson. "Couple years ago we never had much trouble, maybe a holdup or two, but nothing to worry about. I see it getting worse. It's the old story. Soon as a camp shows up rich the bad ones come from everywhere and the small crooks get together and pretty soon you've got a gang with some smart fellow running it. I think that's what we've got."

Leaving the dining room, Rawson noted that Evelyn and von Stern had already gone. Mulvey said, "I'll see you in the morning," and crossed the lobby while Rawson returned to the bar to buy himself a supply of cigars. He lighted one and left the bar, intending to settle his supper with a stroll along the town's main street. Passing the parlor he looked in and saw Evelyn Harvey there, her face to the lobby; she was alone.

He removed the cigar when he went in, holding it cupped in his hand; he looked down and noticed the uncertainty around her mouth. She made a small gesture and he settled himself and swung to face her, and at that moment a sensation went through him, as leaves would be lifted by a spiraling wind. She said, "I thought it would be nice to get out of Ophir for a bit. George had to make a trip so I just came along. But three days around here's enough. I'll be glad to get back."

He stared at his cigar. A month in bed had lightened his hands and had softened the calluses across his palms. It was clear that she wanted him to know, as soon as possible, why she and George were in town together. He raised his head and noticed how carefully she watched his face. He nodded. It surprised him that she felt it important to explain anything to him; she was old enough to run her own life.

She pointed to the cigar. "You want to smoke that thing. Let's walk." She took his arm and they passed into a street speckled with yellow lamplight. He looked at her, his smile coming through the spotty shadows. "Things been all right with you during the last month?"

"Yes," she said, "and it's nice you're interested. Wait a moment."

She turned into a store. He thrust his hands into his pockets and laid a shoulder against the doorsill, watching the inside scene. The lights of the store, striking her bronze dress built up a sparkling glow around her. She made her purchases and came out and took his arm.

"Night's so lovely," she murmured, accommodating her pace to his steady stepping. They followed this street until

the shop lights and the rough sounds of the town dropped back and the shadows of outlying sheds came upon them, the streets becoming a road whose ruts were deep as plow furrows.

"Pain's an awful thing," she said.

"After it goes away a curtain comes down and you can't bring back how bad it was. Otherwise we'd all be cowards."

"It leaves something behind. Your voice isn't the same. Neither's your smile."

"That's from lying in bed thinking too much. How's everybody? How's Ad Carrico?"

"Somebody's got to talk to him."

"That again? Well, it's Easterline's wife, not mine."

"It's sad. Sad for all of them."

"I don't know who's wrong there, Ad or Beth Easterline."

"I'm not talking about anybody being wrong."

They turned and walked back toward the beginning of the sidewalk and the first muddy stain of the town lamps. He halted and swung her around, her arrested body becoming a slight weight pushing against his hand. She was still, and smiling, and watchful. "Somebody's got to be wrong," he said. "She made a bad bargain with Easterline and you think she should keep it. That's the wise thing, but she won't be wise. She knows it can't last, for Ad will be transferred someday, but it's like dying—she won't die till she must."

"If it's that serious," he said dryly, "maybe they'd better skip the country together."

"He'd ruin his career as an Army officer no matter how they worked it out."

He reached out with his other hand and now held her arms, trying to catch sight of her expression through the shadows, still receiving the mild inward insistence of her body. He dropped his hands and saw her check herself and heard the quick trembling of laughter in her throat. He laid his arms around her and she came in at once, lifting her head until he saw the distinctness of her smile; laughter seemed to bubble through her when he kissed her, her palms lodged lightly on his shoulders and her mouth met his and remained a moment and then fell away. She turned him and walked on with him into the clearer glowing of the house lights. "Welcome home, Hughie."

Later, alone in her room, she faced herself at the dresser's mirror; she put her hands on the dresser top, bent forward, and watched her features come back to her. Her lips were heavier, they were like sponges slowly being saturated; her face was alive, not simply pleasant but sharpened as though a stinging air had touched it; the pupils of her eyes were large and had a heavy glow in them. That was the face of a woman who had been roused too much, who hoped for too much. He had no idea what he had done to her; at this moment he was no doubt at the bar, amiably wasting his time with other men, the scene forgotten.

But she couldn't blame him for not knowing something she herself hadn't known. Coming to Ophir, the year before, she had met him and had liked him, yet had not considered him to be more than a careless, good-looking young man contented with his job. The rest of it had grown without her knowledge until the time of his accident. That, and his