



Youth Rides West

By Will Irvin

COPYRIGHT BY WILL IRVIN

THE STORY SO FAR

On their way to the new Cottonwood gold diggings in Colorado in the early Seventies, Robert Gilson, easterner, and his partner, Buck Hayden, a mountain miner, find the hold-up of a stage coach, from which the express box is stolen before the bandits are scared off. Among the hold-up victims are Mrs. Constance Deane, and Mrs. Barnaby, who intends to open a restaurant in Cottonwood. Gilson meets Marcus Handy, editor, on his way to start the Cottonwood Courier. Arriving in town, Gilson and Hayden together purchase a mining claim. A threatened lynching is averted by the bravery of Chris, Gilson's partner, who, despite his reputation as a desperado, with gold diggings, what with its unending labor and small rewards, and so the sudden appearance of Shorty Croly, old-time partner of Buck, is not altogether disconcerting to him. Gilson joins the bandits to sell his share in the claim to Shorty. His acquaintance with Mrs. Deane ripens. As the Courier grows in power a civic spirit is awakened. Following a crime wave, which the marshal seems to overlook, Handy, in his newspaper demands a clean-up.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued

I read; and I realized that Marcus had outdone himself. His literary faults and merits alike were, as a usual thing, those of the old-time mining-camp editor. He overloaded his thoughts with words and figures of speech; he wrote in stock phrases. But this editorial was simple, explicit, as forceful and as straight to the point as a pistol shot. It recited, with the Curtis affair as a text, the present state of Cottonwood camp—holdups, robberies, brace faro games and all. "Where are our schools?" it inquired. "Where is our fire protection? Does any sensible man doubt that a single fire in the heart of town would sweep Cottonwood off the map? Where is our provision for public health? The back alley of Main street smells as loud as our municipal morals. Where, above everything, is our protection against crime? Do the present authorities really want to suppress our epidemic of holdups and highway robberies? Have we here the greatest camp in the Rocky mountains?" The editorial trailed off into the glories and possibilities of Cottonwood, and ended with a demand for a municipal government—"to replace the existing regime of weak, inefficient biut."

I looked up from my reading, and my eyes must have told Marcus what I thought.

"It's the Rubicon, I guess," said Marcus; "may get me killed in the next twenty-four hours." And here, as though the weight had begun to lift from his spirits, he became his normal, dramatic self.

"Don't give a d—n if I do die," he chuckled. "By G—d, the sooner they kill me, the sooner we'll clean up Cottonwood!"

I no longer concealed from myself that I loved Constance Deane, loved her with every kind of warm emotion that a man can hold toward a woman, but mostly—so young was I—as a devotee loves his saint. Like one who sinks by imperceptible degrees under a narcotic, I passed gradually into this torturing yet agreeable madness. And, like a bad patient, I fought the ether. According to the ethics upon which I had been reared, to love a married woman was a thing no decent person so much as contemplated. When it happened—I had heard, rumors of cases—one whispered the news to his intimates in the shocked tone with which one mentions hideous vices. For all our repressed exteriors, we were a romantic lot in the circles of my origin, resolutely shutting our minds to such facts of life and lessons of experience as did not fit the picture we found in our sugary fiction. Somewhere there waited for you the One Being. Destiny would bring her down a flowery path to you. Of course, she would be unmarried; it was always arranged that way. There were soft passages at which the sickly imagination of youth grew sweetly faint. Then you were married. And afterward—but imagination halted there. Marriage did not come within the scheme of romance.

I first looked at the facts of this sentimental entanglement—shyly, as round the edge of a door—when I had been for less than a week a boarder at Mrs. Barnaby's.

The presence of Mrs. Deane at that board I'd worked according to the shrewd Jim Huffaker's prophecy. Her unconscious, she was half to Mrs. Barnaby's fishing. Within two days after she consented to receive me, Mrs. Barnaby took no more transients. At twelve dollars a week—ruinous rates for those days—she filled her table with permanent guests. Even could she boast that she shared with Jim Huffaker "the best patronage in camp." As Jim drew the kind of man who in settled communities goes in for clubs, so we gathered up those with inhibited desires for the comfort and society of decent women. Hutchins, a dapper clerk at the bank, Selden, chief owner in one of the most promising galena claims, Selden, the assayer, Barton, the mining broker, old Pop Eldridge, agent for the stage company—these, probably because they gave me most reason for incident jealousy, remain most vivid in my memory. Mrs. Barnaby, it appeared, sternly erased from her waiting list

stories of maidens going to far, perilous places, who assumed for protection the title and symbol of marriage. That was it; that must be it; I could float away now on the enchanted river of my dreams.

It did not seem so plausible when I woke early—for me—next morning, with the brilliant mountain light streaming through my window. I must know. An hour ahead of the dinner time which was my breakfast, I went over to Mrs. Barnaby's and to that tent where Mrs. Deane lodged.

She came at my call through the flap, faced me with no halt or embarrassment of manner, not even the touch of an emotion like fear. And I realized it was not going to be so easy.

"I saw you at the ball last night," she began. "It was most interesting! Though I must admit I'm tired this morning. You wild Westerners are energetic dancers, Mr. Gilson!" "Why didn't you claim your dance?" I forced a laugh.

"I noticed you dancing with Barton. You seemed to be enjoying yourself," I said; and my ill-natured mood must have shown through these simple words. For Mrs. Deane's head came up straight, and her eyes became as it was by a sense of vivid sympathy, seemed to spur the confessor on. When I think of her as she was in that rosy dawn of a stormy morning, I see her always as she sat at the head of Mrs. Barnaby's table, the lamp-light drawing flecks of gold from the curl of golden-brown hair which tumbled across her shoulder, throwing from her brows shadows that could not veil the blue glint of her eyes, blurring to mystery the quick, whimsical expressions of her mouth. I hear her laughter running its gamut like a flute; the delicious pause and drip of her voice when she hesitated between syllables. And then that vision rises always the vulgar, invidious glitter of Sam Barton.

My dawning jealousy could find in the conduct of the rest no flaw to criticize. Never had queen more respect, never saint more reverence, than she from this tiny court of hers—all except Barton. He glistened, did Sam—Barton—his diamond studs and rings, his heavy watch charm, even his too perfect teeth. Most of his profession and kind took meals at Jim Huffaker's, where passed all the gossip of the camp. In his presence at Mrs. Barnaby's I read a sinister meaning. When he looked at Mrs. Deane, his expression, as I defined it to myself, became sinister, oily, insinuating. Of course, I exaggerated. Still, reviewing Sam Barton after the intervening years, I cannot say that it was all imagination. He alone pried Mrs. Deane with open compliment; he alone sometimes introduced ideas considered in that time wholly inappropriate to the hearing of a lady. Which always caused a moment of embarrassed chill about Mrs. Barnaby's dinner table; a silence broken only when Mrs. Deane adroitly turned the subject.

"There's going to be an assembly ball," I announced one evening as, having got the floor, I retailed camp news.

"Guess I'll have to put on a clean collar and take Mrs. Deane! There, boys, got my bid in first!" said Pop Eldridge hastily.

"Aw, no fair—if you tried to dance at your age, you'd look plumb unseemly!" put in Seiden.

"Guess I will need an assistant," said Pop Eldridge, "in case Mrs. Deane gives me the contract. Boys, why don't we all take her?"

The one exclamative "Sure!" exploded like a bunch of firecrackers round the table.

"It's selfish of me," said Mrs. Deane, "but you gentlemen have tempted me beyond my strength. I accept; it's understood, though, that Mr. Eldridge is head escort. So I'll go with you all—you, Mr. Michelson, and you, Mr. Selden—and you, Mr. Gilson!" Here she paused.

"I'm afraid I'll have to forego the pleasure," I said, trying to keep out of my voice the sultriness I felt. "But I must drop in to report it," I added, exerting my self-control, "and if I may have the pleasure of one dance—"

On the night of the ball, having seen Mrs. Deane at dinner with her hair newly curled for the event, having lived through a scattering fire of persiflage which turned me sick of soul, I sulked again. I told myself, as I walked furiously back to the Courier, that the ball could go hang; all the while knowing perfectly that I was lying to myself. And at about ten o'clock of an especially busy evening, I dropped a murder story half written and took the trail to Odd Fellows' hall.

Couples were waltzing furiously through the mist raised by their feet from a dusty, soft-pine door. Two reflector lamps illuminated a background of pathetically sparse evergreen decorations tied up with tiny and sneaky American flags; in the corner, an orchestra of guitars and violins twanged dreamily. Out of the crowd emerged Constance Deane, waltzing. She was in blue brocade, a dress simple for those days. The throat opened in a lace-edged square to show a bosom full, yet virginal. . . . I caught my breath. Then I was aware that Barton held her in his arms, held her all too close for current ideas on dancing. He was looking down on her with what I described to myself as his vulgar, insinuating smile. A surge of blood struck with the force of a tidal wave the base of my skull. I could have killed Barton. I hated him because I loved Constance Deane. It was ridiculous, unprecedented, even disgraceful. But I loved Constance Deane. I loved . . .

"Then you're going soon!" I exclaimed; and my voice, in spite of my will, was sharp.

"That depends on many things. Oh, I must have some of those daisies," replied Mrs. Deane. I knew perfectly that she was changing the subject deliberately, and that I was rebuked. She had dropped on one knee at a bed where mountain asters, pink and blue, fringed the stream. I knelt beside her; we picked two double handfuls, fringed them with fern from the stream bed, tied their stems—tight, bunchy bouquets being then the fashion in flowers—with withes of dandelion stalks.

But lying awake that night with the whoops, the rattle, the music of Cottonwood flowing in discordant waves through the chinks of our cabin, I spawned a rosy hope which became, as my stimulated imagination played upon it, a reality. Widows also were wedding rings. I had even read in

the flap door of her tent now, and the question I had come to ask her had been parried. I could not face the next twenty-four hours without some satisfaction of my inflamed curiosity.

"Did you say you might be going away soon?" I asked.

"Perhaps."

Then I blundered boldly toward the heart of the subject.

"When Mr. Deane comes for you?"

She was laying her hand on the tent flap. It stopped, frozen, and she shot out one quick glance before she answered:

"Call it if you wish."

Already conveted in her eyes of impertinence and curiosity, I might as well be hanged for an old sheep as a lamb. So I pursued the subject.

"There is a Mr. Deane, then—lly Mr. Deane?"

"Yes. Do I seem like a widow?" she asked rather sharply, and was gone inside the tent.

I forced a laugh.

"I noticed you dancing with Barton. You seemed to be enjoying yourself," I said; and my ill-natured mood must have shown through these simple words. For Mrs. Deane's head came up straight, and her eyes became as it was by a sense of vivid sympathy, seemed to spur the confessor on.

When I think of her as she was in that rosy dawn of a stormy morning, I see her always as she sat at the head of Mrs. Barnaby's table, the lamp-light drawing flecks of gold from the curl of golden-brown hair which tumbled across her shoulder, throwing from her brows shadows that could not veil the blue glint of her eyes, blurring to mystery the quick, whimsical expressions of her mouth. I hear her laughter running its gamut like a flute; the delicious pause and drip of her voice when she hesitated between syllables. And then that vision rises always the vulgar, invidious glitter of Sam Barton.

My dawning jealousy could find in the conduct of the rest no flaw to criticize. Never had queen more respect, never saint more reverence, than she from this tiny court of hers—all except Barton. He glistened, did Sam—Barton—his diamond studs and rings, his heavy watch charm, even his too perfect teeth. Most of his profession and kind took meals at Jim Huffaker's, where passed all the gossip of the camp. In his presence at Mrs. Barnaby's I read a sinister meaning. When he looked at Mrs. Deane, his expression, as I defined it to myself, became sinister, oily, insinuating. Of course, I exaggerated. Still, reviewing Sam Barton after the intervening years, I cannot say that it was all imagination. He alone pried Mrs. Deane with open compliment; he alone sometimes introduced ideas considered in that time wholly inappropriate to the hearing of a lady. Which always caused a moment of embarrassed chill about Mrs. Barnaby's dinner table; a silence broken only when Mrs. Deane adroitly turned the subject.

"There's going to be an assembly ball," I announced one evening as, having got the floor, I retailed camp news.

"Guess I'll have to put on a clean collar and take Mrs. Deane! There, boys, got my bid in first!" said Pop Eldridge hastily.

"Aw, no fair—if you tried to dance at your age, you'd look plumb unseemly!" put in Seiden.

"Guess I will need an assistant," said Pop Eldridge, "in case Mrs. Deane gives me the contract. Boys, why don't we all take her?"

The one exclamative "Sure!" exploded like a bunch of firecrackers round the table.

"It's selfish of me," said Mrs. Deane, "but you gentlemen have tempted me beyond my strength. I accept; it's understood, though, that Mr. Eldridge is head escort. So I'll go with you all—you, Mr. Michelson, and you, Mr. Selden—and you, Mr. Gilson!" Here she paused.

"I'm afraid I'll have to forego the pleasure," I said, trying to keep out of my voice the sultriness I felt. "But I must drop in to report it," I added, exerting my self-control, "and if I may have the pleasure of one dance—"

On the night of the ball, having seen Mrs. Deane at dinner with her hair newly curled for the event, having lived through a scattering fire of persiflage which turned me sick of soul, I sulked again. I told myself, as I walked furiously back to the Courier, that the ball could go hang; all the while knowing perfectly that I was lying to myself. And at about ten o'clock of an especially busy evening, I dropped a murder story half written and took the trail to Odd Fellows' hall.

Couples were waltzing furiously through the mist raised by their feet from a dusty, soft-pine door. Two reflector lamps illuminated a background of pathetically sparse evergreen decorations tied up with tiny and sneaky American flags; in the corner, an orchestra of guitars and violins twanged dreamily. Out of the crowd emerged Constance Deane, waltzing. She was in blue brocade, a dress simple for those days. The throat opened in a lace-edged square to show a bosom full, yet virginal. . . . I caught my breath. Then I was aware that Barton held her in his arms, held her all too close for current ideas on dancing. He was looking down on her with what I described to myself as his vulgar, insinuating smile. A surge of blood struck with the force of a tidal wave the base of my skull. I could have killed Barton. I hated him because I loved Constance Deane. It was ridiculous, unprecedented, even disgraceful. But I loved Constance Deane. I loved . . .

"Then you're going soon!" I exclaimed; and my voice, in spite of my will, was sharp.

"That depends on many things. Oh, I must have some of those daisies," replied Mrs. Deane. I knew perfectly that she was changing the subject deliberately, and that I was rebuked. She had dropped on one knee at a bed where mountain asters, pink and blue, fringed the stream. I knelt beside her; we picked two double handfuls, fringed them with fern from the stream bed, tied their stems—tight, bunchy bouquets being then the fashion in flowers—with withes of dandelion stalks.

But lying awake that night with the whoops, the rattle, the music of Cottonwood flowing in discordant waves through the chinks of our cabin, I spawned a rosy hope which became, as my stimulated imagination played upon it, a reality. Widows also were wedding rings. I had even read in

the flap door of her tent now, and the question I had come to ask her had been parried. I could not face the next twenty-four hours without some satisfaction of my inflamed curiosity.

"Did you say you might be going away soon?" I asked.

"Perhaps."

Then I blundered boldly toward the heart of the subject.

"When Mr. Deane comes for you?"

She was laying her hand on the tent flap. It stopped, frozen, and she shot out one quick glance before she answered:

"Call it if you wish."

Already conveted in her eyes of impertinence and curiosity, I might as well be hanged for an old sheep as a lamb. So I pursued the subject.

"There is a Mr. Deane, then—lly Mr. Deane?"

"Yes. Do I seem like a widow?" she asked rather sharply, and was gone inside the tent.

I forced a laugh.

"I noticed you dancing with Barton. You seemed to be enjoying yourself," I said; and my ill-natured mood must have shown through these simple words. For Mrs. Deane's head came up straight, and her eyes became as it was by a sense of vivid sympathy, seemed to spur the confessor on.

When I think of her as she was in that rosy dawn of a stormy morning, I see her always as she sat at the head of Mrs. Barnaby's table, the lamp-light drawing flecks of gold from the curl of golden-brown hair which tumbled across her shoulder, throwing from her brows shadows that could not veil the blue glint of her eyes, blurring to mystery the quick, whimsical expressions of her mouth. I hear her laughter running its gamut like a flute; the delicious pause and drip of her voice when she hesitated between syllables. And then that vision rises always the vulgar, invidious glitter of Sam Barton.

My dawning jealousy could find in the conduct of the rest no flaw to criticize. Never had queen more respect, never saint more reverence, than she from this tiny court of hers—all except Barton. He glistened, did Sam—Barton—his diamond studs and rings, his heavy watch charm, even his too perfect teeth. Most of his profession and kind took meals at Jim Huffaker's, where passed all the gossip of the camp. In his presence at Mrs. Barnaby's I read a sinister meaning. When he looked at Mrs. Deane, his expression, as I defined it to myself, became sinister, oily, insinuating. Of course, I exaggerated. Still, reviewing Sam Barton after the intervening years, I cannot say that it was all imagination. He alone pried Mrs. Deane with open compliment; he alone sometimes introduced ideas considered in that time wholly inappropriate to the hearing of a lady. Which always caused a moment of embarrassed chill about Mrs. Barnaby's dinner table; a silence broken only when Mrs. Deane adroitly turned the subject.

"There's going to be an assembly ball," I announced one evening as, having got the floor, I retailed camp news.

"Guess I'll have to put on a clean collar and take Mrs. Deane! There, boys, got my bid in first!" said Pop Eldridge hastily.

"Aw, no fair—if you tried to dance at your age, you'd look plumb unseemly!" put in Seiden.

"Guess I will need an assistant," said Pop Eldridge, "in case Mrs. Deane gives me the contract. Boys, why don't we all take her?"

The one exclamative "Sure!" exploded like a bunch of firecrackers round the table.

"It's selfish of me," said Mrs. Deane, "but you gentlemen have tempted me beyond my strength. I accept; it's understood, though, that Mr. Eldridge is head escort. So I'll go with you all—you, Mr. Michelson, and you, Mr. Selden—and you, Mr. Gilson!" Here she paused.

"I'm afraid I'll have to forego the pleasure," I said, trying to keep out of my voice the sultriness I felt. "But I must drop in to report it," I added, exerting my self-control, "and if I may have the pleasure of one dance—"

On the night of the ball, having seen Mrs. Deane at dinner with her hair newly curled for the event, having lived through a scattering fire of persiflage which turned me sick of soul, I sulked again. I told myself, as I walked furiously back to the Courier, that the ball could go hang; all the while knowing perfectly that I was lying to myself. And at about ten o'clock of an especially busy evening, I dropped a murder story half written and took the trail to Odd Fellows' hall.

Couples were waltzing furiously through the mist raised by their feet from a dusty, soft-pine door. Two reflector lamps illuminated a background of pathetically sparse evergreen decorations tied up with tiny and sneaky American flags; in the corner, an orchestra of guitars and violins twanged dreamily. Out of the crowd emerged Constance Deane, waltzing. She was in blue brocade, a dress simple for those days. The throat opened in a lace-edged square to show a bosom full, yet virginal. . . . I caught my breath. Then I was aware that Barton held her in his arms,