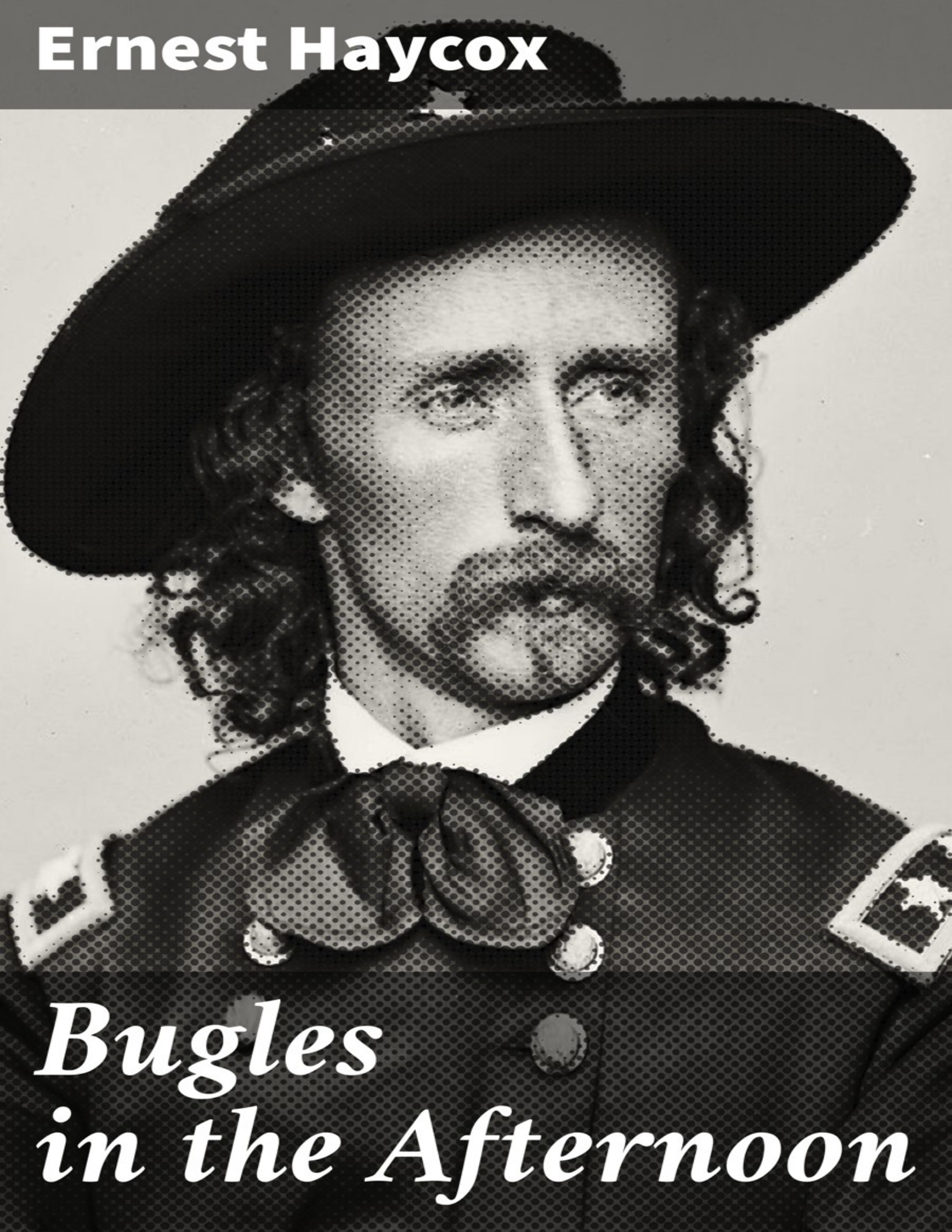
Ernest Haycox



Bugles in the Afternoon

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I. — THAT BRIGHT DAY—THAT FAR LAND

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THE town had a name but no shape, no street, no core. It was simply five buildings, flung without thought upon the dusty prairie at the eastern edge of Dakota, and these stood gaunt and hard-angled against the last of day's streaming sunlight. The railroad, which gave the town a single pulse beat once a day, came as a black ribbon out of emptiness, touched this Coraopolis with hurried indifference, and moved away into equal emptiness. The five buildings were alone in a gray-yellow space which ran outward in all directions, so empty that the tiring eye never saw where earth ended and sky began. There were no trees in this world, no accents, no relieving interruptions; nothing but the gray soil rolling on and a short brown grass turned crisp and now ready to fade when winter temperatures touched it.

The train—a wood-burning engine and three coaches—had paused and had gone, leaving one woman and one man on the cinders in front of the depot shed; the woman fair and round-bodied and slightly smiling at the land as if it pleased her. Beside her stood a collectreadreaion of trunks and valises.

Nobody walked abroad, nobody met the train. These two were alone, facing the mute buildings whose western window panes burned yellow in the sunlight. From this cinder platform ran a sinuous pathway through the short grass to a frame building, two stories high, three hundred

feet away; in front of the building were a wagon and a team and a pair of saddled ponies. Far out on the prairie a gauzy spiral of dust signaled the passage of riders, inbound or outbound. The man, somewhat farther down the platform, took his view of the town, looked at the woman and her luggage, and moved forward.

"That," he said, pointing toward the two-story building, "is probably the hotel. I presume you are going there. I'll take your light luggage."

She was not more than twenty-five, he thought; she had gray eyes and a pleasantly expressive mouth and her glance, turned upon him, was self-possessed. She smiled and said: "Thank you," and when he took up her valises and turned to the winding pathway she followed him without comment.

There had been a sharp and bright and full sun all day. Now it settled westward and seemed to melt into a shapeless bed of gold flame as it touched the far-away mountains; with its passage the air at once chilled and small streaks of breeze came out of the north with the smell of hard weather. Winter crouched yonder on the rim of the horizon and one day or one night, in the space of an hour, would turn this land black and bitter, shriveling every living thing exposed to it. He knew this land, or land like it; and the feeling of again being in it expanded his tissues and sharpened his zest for living. Yet for all its goodness it was like a smiling and beautiful woman, whose lavish warmth and generosity sprang up from those same strongly primitive sources which could make her cruel.

The wall of the hotel had a door and a set of windows opening up the dusty earth; and a single railroad tie lay before the door to serve as a step. The man paused to permit the girl to go before him into the place; and then followed. There was a narrow hall and a steep stairway splitting the building into equal halves. To the right of the hall a broad doorway opened into a saloon; another doorway on the left led to a ladies' parlor and office. He followed the girl into the parlor and set down the suitcases, waiting back while she signed the register. The hotelkeeper was a neat and large and taciturn woman. She said, "Together or separate?" When she found out, she said to the girl: "You can take Number Three." As the man stepped up to the register, she watched him a moment, estimating him; and then gave the girl another quick inspection.

He signed his named in a steady-slanting motion, *Kern Shafter*, and his pen momentarily hesitated and then continued, *Cincinnati, O*. It was a slight flaw in his certainty, at once noticed by the hotel woman; her glance held him a longer moment, not so much with interest or suspicion but with a cold steadiness. He laid the pen down, at the same time reading the name of the girl written directly above his own. It was: *Josephine Russell, Bismarck, D.T*.

"You take Seven," said the hotel woman to Shafter. She spoke to both of them with an inclusive glance. "If you're northbound on the stage, it's at half-past four in the mornin'. We serve breakfast at four."

Josephine Russell said: "May I have the key to my room?"

"They were carried away in people's pockets a long time ago. If you shut your door it will stay shut. If you're afraid,

prop a chair against the inside knob." She added in a small, grim tone: "You needn't be afraid. I don't stand for anything in this house. You'll have to carry your own luggage. I've got no man handy. Not that men are very handy."

Shafter turned to the valises and carried them up the stairs and waited for the girl to go ahead of him. She led the way down the hall and stepped inside Number Three. She walked across the room to the window and turned to watch him, one last flare of sunlight coming through her window, running over the curve of her shoulders, deepening her breasts. She had removed her hat and he observed that her hair was a dense black; even so she seemed fair of complexion to him. Perhaps it was the way her lips were shaped against her face or the way her eyes held their smiling.

"I appreciate your help," she said. "Do you think my trunk will be safe on the station platform until morning?"

"I'll bring it to the hotel," he said, and went away.

She remained where she was a moment, her head slightly tilted as she watched the doorway, idly thinking of him. He had worn a cravat which looked as though it might have been the present of some woman. His clothes were excellent clothes for this part of the land, and smiling came easily to him. Yet his hands, she recalled, were very brown; and the palms were square and thick. She swung about and observed that the sun had gone, leaving the land with a strange, thin, glass-colored light. The horsemen out on the prairie were seemingly no nearer now than they had been fifteen minutes before.

But all of it pleased her: the raw running of the earth, the great empty arc of the sky, the smells rendered out by the warm day and the curt bite of approaching winter, this sprawled little town that served as a rendezvous for homesteaders and cow hands and drifters fifty miles roundabout, the sound of men's voices in the saloon below; for Josephine Russell was a western girl returned from a trip east, and this West eased her with its familiar things. She hummed a little song as she took the grime of coach travel from her and prepared herself for supper; she stood awhile, watching the last glow of the disappeared sun fade in the high sky. Suddenly, then, the prairie all around her was dark and the shapes of the town's other buildings were sharp-edged shadows in the swift night. She turned down the stairs to the dining room.

There was no door to shut out the barroom and she looked directly into it when she reached the foot of the stairs, noticing that Shafter now sat at a poker table with four other men. He had removed his coat for comfort and sat back in his chair with a long cigar burning between his lips. He seemed cheerful, he seemed content...

At four the next morning she came half asleep down the stairs and saw him again, at the same table and in the same chair, finishing up an all-night game. Later, she watched him come into the dining room. He had quickly shaved and, although he showed the lack of sleep, he had the same air of being pleased with everything around him. She smiled at him when he looked toward her, and got his smile back. He had a kind of ease with him, as though he had settled the question of himself and his future, had arrived at a decision

and had shrugged off many of the worries or the ambitions that made other men exhaust themselves. His hair was black and bushy and his face was of the long, thick-boned sort, browned by weather and showing the small seams of experience around his eyes. He had quick eyes which looked about him and saw the people and the situations which surrounded him; and it was this kind of watchfulness which inclined her to the belief that he was either western, or had long been in the West. All western men had that same awareness of their surroundings.

The breakfast was bacon and hot cakes and fried potatoes and bitter coffee. Afterwards she walked to the waiting stage in time to see Shafter lift her luggage into the boot. He said to her: "I never saw a stage that wouldn't go off without somebody's luggage. I put a trunk and three valises up there. Is that all?"

"Yes," she said, and stepped into the coach. A pair of young men came aboard and sat on the opposite seat, facing her; a huge man entered, sized up the seating capacity and squeezed himself beside her. Shafter was last, throwing away the unsmoked end of a cigar as he came. He had a long overcoat on his arm and as soon as he took place between the two younger men he opened the coat and laid it over her lap.

"It will be cold for an hour or so," he said.

Daylight flowed over the land in gray, chill waves; the smell of dust lay rank and still upon the earth and all sounds had a brittleness in the air. The brake rod struck sharp against the metal bracket and the driver's hearty cursing put the four horses in motion. They lumbered across the

baked earth, leather braces groaning; they turned the hotel's corner with the cry of one townsman coming up from behind: "Don't forget to tell Mike I'll be there tomorrow night!" Suddenly the town disappeared and they were rolling onward, with the coach wheels lifting and dripping an acrid dust.

The coach swayed and shuddered as it struck deeper depressions and the impact went through the five passengers closely crowded on the two seats. The big man sat with his hands on his knees, his bulk spilling against Josephine Russell. He made some small effort to pull himself together but found it impossible; and sat still, a horsy smell flowing from his clothes. He turned his head and grinned at her. "These rigs sure never were made for an ord'nary-size man."

She smiled at him, saying nothing. The smile encouraged him and he said: "I shot buff'lo here five years ago. Ain't none on this side of the Mizzoura anymore."

Early morning's dullness was on them. Josephine Russell had, woman fashion, settled herself to endure discomfort as gracefully as possible. The two younger men, each pushed into his corner, looked vacantly out upon the land, while Kern Shafter planted his feet solidly on the coach floor and, using the two men on either side of him as supports, fell promptly asleep.

Josephine Russell passed time's monotony by letting herself be curious about him. He knew how to relax completely in odd circumstances and had dropped asleep almost at once, his chin touching his chest, the long full line of his mouth softening. The wrinkles at the edge of his

temples disappeared when his eyes were closed and the squareness of his upper body went away. She had noticed earlier that when he stood still he carried himself at a balance, which was something civilians didn't often do. He was slightly under six feet; he had big hands and heavy legs. In a country that somehow impelled men to grow sweeping mustaches, burnsides, imperials or Dundrearies, he had remained clean-shaven; and he showed some kind of taste in his clothes and appearance. In the West such a thing was noticeable. He had fine manners with women and he knew how to be easy and smooth with them. That was noticeable, too. Her eyes narrowed slightly on him as she thought that this perhaps explained his reason for being out here; men who came west nearly always had reasons, some of which were gallant and some of which were sordid.

Time dragged on and the day grew warm. Sunlight struck through the coach window, burning on Shafter's face. He was instantly awake at that hot touch, motionless but with his eyes fully open. He looked at the coat still on Josephine's lap, and bent forward and took it and stowed it in a roll beneath his feet; and fell asleep again. The four horses went on at a walk, at a run, at a walk, each change of pace producing its agreeable break and its new discomforts. The wheels lifted the dust in ropy, dripping sheets and this dust traveled as a pall over and around the coach, setting up a landmark that could be seen miles distant; its gauze clouds rolled inside the coach, laying its fine film on everything, and crept into nostril and lung. The morning's coolness was absorbed by the first full rush of sunlight; a dust-stale heat began to collect.

The big man, cramped in the corner of the seat, rolled his eyes around him and, by a series of cautious and self-conscious movements of his arm, burrowed into his pocket and found a cigar. He lighted it and dragged deeply on the smoke, his face growing bland and happier at once. Clouds of smoke spread through the coach and the big man made an ineffectual effort with his hand to sweep them away from Josephine.

The first smell of it woke Shafter at once. He opened his eyes and watched the big man steadily. The big man felt the weight of the glance but avoided it by looking out the window; he sighed heavily, he clenched the cigar between his teeth, he rolled it around his mouth, he took three rapid drags on it, and then irritably stared at Shafter. He held the glance with some defiance, but at last he pitched the cigar out of the window, whereupon Shafter again fell asleep.

At noon the coach, struggling against the endlessness of space, dipped into a coulee and drew before a drab, squat building which sat in a yard littered by tin cans and empty bottles. The passengers moved painfully from their confinement, ate dinner and returned reluctantly to their seats. The big man climbed beside the driver, replacing a slim, wild-haired youth who took his seat inside with a glowering silence. Coach and horses struggled up the coulee's side, faced the rolling sea of grass again, and resumed the steady march. The overhead sun pressed upon the coach, building up a trapped, sulky heat inside; and the dust began to drift up through the cracked floorboards in small, twining eddies. Shafter noticed how the dust touched and clung to the girl's hair; and noticed how the sun played

against her face, against the gentle crease of her lips. Humor lived there, even in this discomfort. She had been looking through the window, but felt his glance and met it coolly, now not smiling.

He turned his glance, staring upon the land and the land's gray-brown monotony. Haze came down on the far edges of the world but in that haze indistinct shapes moved —the only motion to be seen anywhere. He watched those shapes for half an hour and noticed them gradually drift in. Presently he knew what they were and his eyelids came closer together and a different expression reached his face. The driver's voice drifted down through the squealing and the coarse grinding noise of wheels and straps and double tree chains. "Always about here." But the coach's speed neither increased nor decreased.

It was a file of young Indians, slanting forward through the western sunlight on little patch-colored ponies. The Indians rode with a spraddled, keeling motion, their bronze-bare legs shining in the sun. Some of them were breech-clouted only and some wore white man's trousers and white man's shirts dropped outside; a hundred yards from the stage they wheeled and ran abreast of it, the little ponies controlled by single braided rawhide lines attached to their lower jaws. One Indian slowly drew an arrow back in his bow, aimed it, made an imaginary shot, and relaxed the bow; he flung up one finger derisively, whereupon the whole party wheeled and raced away. The driver's voice came down again, windy and relieved. "Agency bucks, but you never know whut they're up to."

Josephine Russell's face was steady and sharp and hardened, but she said nothing. She looked at Shafter.

He said: "Indian kids, just playing at trouble. Nothing to fear."

The sullen young man with the mop of wild hair had remained rigidly drawn together during the affair. Now he relaxed and spoke. "You live in this country?"

"No."

"Then you don't know. There's always trouble. Meet those kids where they thought they had a chance and it would of been different."

"No use worrying about things that don't happen."

The youngster was inclined to be intolerant of this apparent greenhorn, and the presence of a woman made him accent his own frontier wisdom. "If you'd seen what I seen out here—people scalped and whole families with their heads busted in—you wouldn't be so easy about it."

"If it had been spring or summer," said Shafter, "I would have been worried. But winter's coming. These Indians will be on the reservation, eating government beef. They will be good Indians, until spring comes again."

The youngster disliked his point of view being overthrown and he gave Shafter a hard, scowling glance and was evidently tempted to set him in his proper place by a few bolder words. Shafter took the lad's beetling glance and held it, and presently the lad reconsidered his intentions and only said, "If you'd seen what I seen," and reached into his pocket, producing a plug of tobacco from which he chewed an enormous lump and pouched it against one cheek.

Occasionally the stage rolled down the side of the coulee, struck rocky bottom with painful impact and tilted upward, throwing the passengers violently around the seats. The heat clung on with the westering sun and the dust was a screen through which the passengers viewed each other with blurred vision. It dampered normal breathing; it coated the faces of all and presently these faces turned oil-slick and this wetness grew gray and streaky as it formed small rivulets across the dust. The smell of the coach became rank with the odors of bodies rendering out their moisture and the confinement turned from discomfort to actual pain. Shafter noticed that Josephine Russell had taken firm control of herself, pressing back her feelings, and from this he realized she was feeling the ordeal. Now and then, aware of her bedraggled appearance, she pressed her handkerchief against her face.

The road had swung directly into the blast of the low burning sun and therefore it was a surprise when the stage wheeled to a stop before a raw and ungainly house standing alone in all this emptiness. The driver got down, grunting as his feet struck; he called back, "Night stop," and walked away. A man moved from the house toward the horses, and one by one the weary passengers lifted themselves from the vehicle and tried their cramped legs. Shafter stood by, giving the girl a hand down. For a moment he supported her, seeing a faintness come to her face; she touched him with both arms, she held him a little while and then, embarrassed, she stepped away. Shafter climbed to the boot of the coach and sorted amongst the luggage. "Which will you need for overnight?"

"The small gray one," she said.

He found it and brought it down. He stood a moment, surveying the house; he looked to an upper window and saw a woman there, staring out upon the coach. He gave the girl a quick side glance and noticed she had not seen the woman; a short and darker expression crossed his face and he led the way over the packed yard to the door. Three great hounds lifted up and growled at him but a voice—a woman's sharp voice—came out of the house, cowing them.

Josephine Russell murmured: "Are there nothing but women hotelkeepers in eastern Dakota?" She had made a more deliberate appraisal of the place and now she gave Shafter a sober glance. "Is it all right?"

"It will have to be," he said.

A woman met them in the half light of the long front room; a woman once young, and still not old in point of years. She stood back, ample-bosomed and careless of dress; her eyes were ready for Shafter and had warmth for him, but they turned cool and watchful when they swung to the girl. There was a moment—a long and unsure moment—while she studied them. Shafter said in a short voice: "You have a room for this lady?"

"Take the one at the top of the stairs. On the left."

He followed Josephine up the stairs. She stopped before a door and looked back at him a moment, and then opened the door and stepped into the room and stood in the center of it, looking on without expression at the room's furniture, at the rough blankets on the bed. He put down her suitcase and went to the window; he pried it open and looked out, and turned back to her. Her glance came over to him and he

saw a slight flicker of embarrassment, calm and self-possessed as she was.

He said: "A hell of a place."

She shrugged her shoulders. "But the only place." Then she said: "Are you going to be around here tonight?"

"Yes," he said. He looked at the door when he left the room and saw that there was no key; he closed the door and walked down the stairs. The woman who ran this doubtful desert shelter stood nearby, waiting for him.

He said: "Is that room all right?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Yes. But I don't ask the genteel to come here."

"This is a stage stop, isn't it?"

"Let it stop some other place," she said. Then she laughed, and her lips were full and heavy and red. "But there's no other place. Do you want a room?"

He said, "No," and color came to him and he turned out to the porch. He walked around the house, sizing it up, its windows blanked out by drawn green roller shades, its paintless angles, its unloveliness. There was an outside stairway running up the east wall, on which he laid a moment's attention; behind the house was another porch, and water and basin. He washed here and beat the dust from his clothes, and resumed his circle of the house. The sun dropped in a silent crash of light and, coming from an apparent nowhere, riders shaped themselves against the sudden twilight. He sat on the porch steps, watching them reach the yard, wheel and step off; all men stamped by their trade, booted and spurred and dusty and scorched by the sun, turned dry by the heat and hollow-hungry, careless and

nervous of eye, watching everything and nothing. There was a bar farther back in the house and out of it lights presently rose, and the sound of men talking—and of women talking. He got up and crossed the main room. He paused at the doorway of the bar and had his look at the women; he moved to the bar and took his drink, and stood with his elbows on the bar until he heard the dinner triangle banging. Then he went on to the dining-room door and waited for Josephine.

She came down the stairs and paused to look around; when her eyes found him he saw the relieved lightening of her face. She came up to him, smiling a little, and went into the dining room with him. He saw her glance touch the dozen men at the table and coolly take in the woman at its head—and the two other women also present. She knew them at once, he realized; it was the faintest break on her face, soon covered. After that she took her place and she never looked at them again.

The big plates and platters came circling around, were emptied and carried away by a China boy to be refilled. One man, already drunk, talked steadily; but otherwise the crowd was silent and hungry and ate without conversation. Small talk was a custom of the East; out here men resented making a ceremony out of a meal and wasted no time on it. Ten minutes after they had entered the room, most of the men had finished, and had gone on to the bar; in a little while the rest of the group had deserted the table, leaving Shafter and Josephine to themselves. She sipped at her coffee, tired but relaxed. Through his cigar smoke he watched the lamplight shining against the gray of her eyes,

he observed the sweetness and the humor restlessly living in her lip corners. She caught his glance and held it, thoughtfully considering him, making her own silent observations concerning him. Racket began to spread from the saloon and a woman's voice grew strident. The girl shrugged her shoulders and rose from the table.

He followed her back to the big front room and he observed that she stopped at the stairs and looked toward the second floor with an expression of distaste. Suddenly she wheeled toward him and took his arm and they went out of the house and strolled along the vague road. A sickle moon lay far down in the sky, turned butter yellow by the haze in the air, and the stars were great woolly-crystal masses overhead. Sharp-scented dust rose beneath their feet, the fragrance of the earth was strong—the harsh and vigorous emanations of the earth itself. He felt the girl's body sway as she walked; he felt the warmth of her body, the warmth of her thoughts. The desert ran blackly away, formless and mysterious, and far out on the flats a coyote called.

"Do you know this country?" she asked.

"I know the West," he said. "I put in some time in the Southwest."

"Do you like it?"

"It's better than what I've had lately."

They went half a mile onward, slowly pacing; and turned back. The lights of the house gushed from a dozen windows—the only light and the only warmth in all this empty stretch of space; and the sound of laughter, sharply shrill, rode in the little wind.

She said: "What is your name?"

"Kern Shafter. I regret that you have to stay here tonight."

She didn't answer that until they had reached the porch. Then she murmured: "It will do," and passed into the house. At the foot of the stairs she turned to him and asked a question she had asked once before. "You'll be here?"

"Yes," he said. "Good night."

She nodded her head slightly by way of answer, and climbed the stairs.

After she had gone into her room Shafter left the house and went to the coach standing in the yard. He climbed to the boot and found his valise and took out a revolver. He sat on the top of the coach and hefted the gun idly in his palm, feeling its familiar weight, its accustomed and comfortable reality. He thrust it inside his trouser band and lay back to smoke out his cigar while the depth of night increased. The moon's light had no effect on the blind blackness; this yard, touched by house lights, was an island in all the surrounding emptiness. The stars sharply glistened and the scented wind lifted; and mystery closed down and loneliness moved in, with its questions and its far wonder. He sat still, brooding over things behind him, over old injuries still burning and old memories still sweet. When he had thought of them and had felt the heat of them, he closed his mind upon them; and yet, like the leaks in a dam gate, there were apertures in his will and his resolution, through which little seepages of memory still came. He stretched out full length, feeling the goodness of the wind and the ease that came to him. Looking at the sky, he seemed to grow longer and broader,

and the space inside him was less crowded. He thought: "I have made one right decision," and felt the peace of knowing it.

With the night also came the quick chill of winter not far away; the starglow had its frigid glitter, the far unseen distance had its threat of storm. Other riders came out of the night, dropped off before the house and moved in, to add to the growing noise. Shafter dropped from the coach and returned to the main room. He found a pair of chairs and drew them together, sitting on one and laying his feet on the other. The big woman who ran the place found him here, so placed that he had a view of the stairs and the doorway of the room directly above.

She stopped before him, smiling down. She lifted his hat and threw it aside and, still with her half smile, ran one finger along the edge of his head. "Your woman will be all right."

"Not mine," he said.

"I guess," she said, "you wouldn't have much trouble with a woman, if you wished. I know your kind."

"No," he said, "you don't."

"Don't tell me what I don't know," she said, half sharp with him. But her brief smile came back as she continued to watch him. "You don't need to curl up like a hound in front of her door. It will get noisy, but nothing will happen."

"Nothing will," he agreed.

"You plan to stay here all night? Right here?"

"Yes."

She ceased to smile. She spoke in a soft, jeering, faintly envious tone. "That's romantic, isn't it? You fool." Suddenly

she dropped a hand on his stomach, on the shape of the revolver beneath his coat. "I wouldn't flourish that thing around here. There's a couple men in the bar who could shoot that diamond ring off your finger without scratching your skin."

"Ah," he said, and grinned, "tough ones."

She was puzzled at his reaction. Her lips indecisively loosened while she watched him. He lay back on his chair, a quiet man who didn't seem to care about many things, who didn't give himself away. He dressed well and she knew, without giving it a thought, that he was far above her and perhaps had only a scorn for her. She hated men like that, even more than she hated the rough ones who came here to this house with their appetites; she hated them with a hard desire to use her claws on them—the fashionable, cool ones—and pull them down to her. But she didn't find herself hating this man. It was as she had said before to him: he had a way that women liked and an appeal that women would answer. But he didn't seem to care.

She started to touch him again but checked the gesture. "My God," she murmured, "this is a lonely place. Sometimes...If you're crazy enough to sit here all night I'll bring you a blanket later. Maybe some hot coffee."

"I'll be here," he said. She had swung away, but she checked and turned, her eyes scanning him with a small break of hope. Hard living had begun to etch its lines along her face, yet she still was a pretty woman in a loose, heavy, physical way. Carefulness of dress would have done much for her, but she had forgotten to care. She shrugged her

shoulders and walked into the saloon, which grew increasingly noisy.

Josephine's room was ceiled with rough lumber whose edges never quite lay together. There was a single window, with a green roller shade discolored by sun and in-beating rain. A lighted lamp stood on a table made up of fragments of boxes which once had contained canned goods; above the table a blemished mirror hung askew. The bed was a four-poster made of solid mahogany, the possible derelict of some wagon train passing through, and on it lay lumpy quilts and a pillow without a slip. The floor had once been covered with a lead-colored paint, but this now had largely broken away so that it was a kind of leprous gray and brown.

Josephine stood in the middle of the room, remembering the people downstairs and hearing the noise which now came up in growing stridency; particularly she heard the voices of the women. She shrugged her shoulders and walked to the bed, pulling back the quilt to explore the two blue army blankets which served as sheets. She bent, looking closely at the blankets; she peeled back the blankets and studied the mattress. She bent still farther down, running a finger along its stitched edge. "At least there are no bedbugs," she thought, and got ready for bed.

She propped the room's lone chair against the door-knob, turned out the light and stood a moment at the window, watching the yard. She saw a man lying on top of the coach, smoking a cigar, and though it was intensely black beyond the range of house lights, she thought she recognized the shape of Shafter's shoulders. The thought of him, vagrant

and curious and slightly warm, held her still for a little while; then she crept into bed.

There were men in the adjoining rooms, their lights coming through the warped joining of the wall boards, their voices quite plain as they exchanged stories, each worse than the one before. She rested, still and wide awake, listening to a fight begin and go through the house in grunting, crashing, falling echoes. Some man yelled out his cursing and a gun exploded and a woman screamed; afterwards a man rushed into the night and presently rode away at a dead run. Near midnight someone came slowly up the stairs, his body making a weight on the flimsy wood. He crawled along the hall, his hands scraping the wall. He touched the knob of the door and stopped, and she heard the knob turn and the door give; after that, she heard another traveler come lightly up the steps. One soft word was said and a sharp blow struck, sending one of the men against the wall. Presently that one fell down the stairs in a tumbling, rocketing fashion. The man who had so lightly come upward now went down with the same soft footfalls. Josephine thought: "He's watching out for me," and thought of Shafter, again with relief. Little by little some kind of order crept into this wild house as its inmates fell asleep, and its guests rode away.

II. — WEST OF THE RIVER

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AT one o'clock, Shafter left his seat at the foot of the stairs and went into the barroom. Everybody had gone except one drunk stretched dead to the world across the pool table, and one gloomy houseman cleaning up the debris. Shafter got a glass of whisky and carried it to a table and sat down; the woman who seemed to run this place came up from some other quarter of the house and took a chair across from him. The flame of her vitality obviously burned low, for she sat with her elbows on the table, supporting her head, staring at the table's green felt top. She murmured:—

"Hard way to make a living, isn't it?"

He said nothing and presently his silence made her lift her glance to him. He smiled at her and pushed his drink over the table. She looked at it a long while, all the brightness faded out of her. "No," she murmured, "I hate the sight of it." She looked up at the barman. "Go get us some coffee, Bill." Then she noticed the drunk on the pool table and a raspiness came to her voice. "Roll that dumb beast off there before he digs his spurs into a thousand dollars' worth of woodwork." The barkeep was a taciturn and a literal man. He moved to the table, put both arms under the sleeping drunk and gave him a short shove. The drunk fell loosely, striking in sections, at the knees and then at the shoulders. His head slammed hard on the floor and his mouth flew open. He rolled slightly, threshed his arms, and ceased to move. Bill went on toward the back of the house.

"Look at him," said the woman in bitter disgust, pointing to the drunk. "That's a man. That's what they all look like. He'll sober up, eat breakfast and go away. But he'll be back in a couple days. That's what I've got to make my living from."

He said: "Feel this way every night?"

"Every night."

"Time to move on then."

"One place is no better than another," she said, and looked at him with a small revival of interest. When she realized he had been steadily watching her, she pulled herself straight and ran her hands lightly over her hair. "Do I look as bad as I feel?"

"What's your name?"

"May," she said. "There's another May here, but she's Straight-Edge May."

"All women are beautiful, May."

"You fool," she murmured, "don't talk like that. You don't mean it. Even if you did mean it, it would get a woman like me to thinking about things she shouldn't anymore." But his words had lifted her; they had revived her spirits. "You've knocked around, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Running from something."

He showed her his smile again, that easy and careless smile which changed him, which took the darkness out of him. He had sympathy for her but he let it show in his eyes rather than spend words on it. He sat with her and took her as she was. "Everybody runs from something, May. Or runs after something."

"In trouble?"

"No. I don't have to watch what's behind me."

"You've never had to come to places like this for your fun, either," she said, judging him with her wealth of man-knowledge. "Your kind uses theater tickets and bonbons, and back rooms at fashionable restaurants."

For the second time this night, she caught him off guard, causing him to flush. "May," he said. "Let's talk about the weather."

She regarded him closely, amused that she could embarrass him but also puzzled by it; embarrassment was a rare thing in a man and somewhat beyond her limits of experience. She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I don't know much about your kind. I only met one like you. That was a long time ago. If I knew where he was now I'd write him a letter and let him know just how I turned out after he got through with me." A small tinge of bitterness got into her voice. "Maybe it would make him add something extra on the collection plate next time he went to church."

"How do you know he goes to church, May?"

"It's fashionable for his kind to marry somebody respectable and go to church, and buy his way into heaven. No doubt, when he gets sentimental, he sometimes thinks, 'I wonder where she is now.' Not that he's sorry. His kind of man is proud of one good sinful memory. As for the woman, she can just look out for herself." She bent toward him and showed him an old, old anger. "I don't like your kind of men." But as soon as she said it, her mouth softened. "But I like you. I guess that explains how I got here."

Bill came in with two cups of coffee, black and hot and rank, and moved back to his dismal chores. Shafter dumped his whisky into the coffee and drank it slowly. He was loose in the chair, he was thoroughly at rest, enjoying the small tastes and sounds and colors around him. She thought to herself, as she studied him: "I'd figure him a genteel bum, except that he threw George Dixon down the stairs." That made her speak up. "You're too quick for your own good. Dixon didn't mean to go into the lady's room. He was just drunk."

"There is only one way to handle Dixons," he said.

"He may come back," she said. "He's a mean one."

"If you hit Dixons hard," he said, "they don't come back. If you hit them soft, they do."

She said: "You uncover yourself just a little bit at a time. You get different as you go. Is there anything I can do for you?"

He looked at her with a greater attention. "How's that, May?"

"Do you need a stake? I've got plenty of money."

He didn't immediately answer and he didn't smile at her again. He finished his coffee, and rose. Her glance remained on him.

"Didn't hurt your feelings, did I?" she wanted to know.

He shook his head. "No, May, you made me feel fine. But I don't need it."

She followed him from the barroom to the front room. "You don't need to stay down here anymore. Take the room across the hall from your lady."

He turned on her, looking down, the quietness of his eyes and the expression in them giving her goodness. She wanted to touch him, to reach up and lay her fingers through his black hair; she wanted to come close upon him and lift her mouth for him. But she stood back, a realist who knew that for him she was a vessel long since drained empty; it was the first time in many years she had felt that way about a man.

"Why did you offer me the grubstake, May?"

"People can always hope," she said. "Maybe you would have taken it. Maybe you would have stayed."

He moved to the stairs and turned back there, one hand lying heavy-spread on the railing. "Remember what I told you," he said. "All women are beautiful."

She shook her head, darkened by what she wanted and couldn't have. "If you wish to be kind, never say that to a woman like me." She watched him all the way up the stairs.

And she was at the foot of the stairs at five in the morning when, following breakfast, he turned out of the house. She had taken pains with her hair; she had pressed away the lines about her eyes with cold towels, and she had put on the dress she used for trips to Fargo. But she didn't speak to him as he went by, for he had Josephine with him, and she knew exactly what her station was. After they had gone out, she moved to the porch, watching the stage swing around in the yard. She saw him bend and look through the window at her; and she stood still and watched the stage roll away through its dust and become at last a point in the distance.

The man who had been capsized from the table the night before now moved out of the house in painful slowness. He stopped beside her, puzzled as to the soreness of his bones. "By God," he said, "it must of been a big night. Somebody ride a horse through the barroom, May? I been stepped on, all over."

"No," she said. "You just fell down."

"Must of been from the roof," he murmured and went on to his horse. He groaned when he went into the saddle; he turned and waved a hand. "See you soon, May."

She still watched the stage, but she said, with a piece of a smile: "All right, Tom. Be good and come again."

THE coach ran along the twin ruts of the road, outward upon the prairie, under the rising flood of clear and brilliant sunshine. For the space of half an hour, the world stood bathed in morning's freshness, in its coolness, in its bright cleansing light; and for that half hour the horizons were sharp lines in the distance. Then the coolness went away and the faint fog began to rise and the enveloping dust settled within the coach and the monotony of the ride gripped them again. Three of the passengers had dropped off at the night station, leaving only the heavy man, Josephine and Shafter inside. Shafter propped his shoulders in the corner of the coach, braced his feet on the floor and fell asleep.

When he awoke, there was a series of small, ragged up-and-down black strokes against the emptiness and the horses had smelled their destination and were now running freely without the urging of the driver; somewhat later the