

Emerson Alice B.

Betty Gordon in the Land of Oil: or, The Farm That Was Worth a Fortune



Alice Emerson

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«Public Domain»

Emerson A.

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CHAPTER I BREAKFAST EN ROUTE

“There, Bob, did you see that? Oh, we’ve passed it, and you were looking the other way. It was a cowboy. At least he looked just like the pictures. And he was waving at the train.”

Betty Gordon, breakfasting in the dining-car of the Western Limited, smiled happily at Bob Henderson, seated on the opposite side of the table. This was her first long train trip, and she meant to enjoy every angle of it.

“I wonder what kind of cowboy you’d make, Bob?” Betty speculated, studying the frank, boyish face of her companion. “You’d have to be taller, I think.”

“But not much thinner,” observed Bob cheerfully. “Skinny cowboys are always in demand, Betty. They do more work. Well, what do you know about that!” He broke off his speech abruptly and stared at the table directly behind Betty.

Betty paid little attention to his silence. She was busy with her own thoughts, and now, pouring golden cream into her coffee, voiced one of them.

“I’m glad we’re going to Oklahoma,” she announced. “I think it is heaps more fun to stop before you get to the other side of the continent. I want to see what is in the middle. The Arnolds, you know, went direct to California, and now they’ll probably never know what kind of country takes up the space between Pineville and Los Angeles. Of course they saw some of it from the train, but that isn’t like getting off and *staying*. Is it, Bob?”

“I suppose not,” agreed Bob absently. “Betty Gordon,” he added with a change of tone, “is that coffee you’re drinking?”

Betty nodded guiltily.

“When I’m traveling,” she explained in her defense, “I don’t see why I can’t drink coffee for breakfast. And when I’m visiting – that’s the only two times I take it, Bob.”

Bob had been minded to read her a lecture on the evils of coffee drinking for young people, but his gaze wandered again to the table behind Betty, and his scientific protest remained unspoken.

“For goodness sake, Bob,” complained Betty, “what can you be staring at?”

“Don’t turn around,” cautioned Bob in a low tone. “When we go back to our car I’ll tell you all about it.”

Bob gave his attention more to his breakfast after this, and seemed anxious to keep Betty from asking any more questions. He noticed a package of flat envelopes lying under her purse and asked if she had letters she wished mailed.

“Those aren’t letters,” answered Betty, taking them out and spreading them on the cloth for him to see. “They’re flower seeds, Bob. Hardy flowers.”

“You haven’t planned your garden yet, have you?” cried the astonished boy. “When you haven’t the first idea of the kind of place you’re going to live in? Your uncle wrote, you know, that living in Flame City was so simplified people didn’t take time to look around for rooms or a house – they took whatever they could get, sure that that was all there was. How do you know you’ll have a place to plant a garden?”

Betty buttered another roll.

“I’m not planning for a garden,” she said mildly. “You’re going to help me plant these seeds, and we’re going to do it right after breakfast – just as soon as we can get out on the observation platform.”

Bob stared in bewilderment.

“I read a story once,” said Betty with seeming irrelevance. “It was about some woman who traveled through a barren country, mile after mile. She was on an accommodation train, too, or perhaps it was before they had good railroad service. And every so often her fellow-passengers saw that she threw something out of the window. They couldn’t see what it was, and she never told them. But the next year, when some of these same passengers made that trip again, the train rolled through acres and acres of the most gorgeous red poppies. The woman had been scattering the seed. She said, whether she ever rode over that ground again or not, she was sure some of the seeds would sprout and make the waste places beautiful for travelers.”

“I should think it would take a lot of seed,” said the practical Bob, his eyes following two men who were leaving the dining-car. “Did you get poppies, too?”

“Yellow and red ones,” declared Betty. “The dealer said they were very hardy, and, anyway, I do want to try, Bob. We’ve been through such miles of prairie, and it’s so deadly monotonous. Even if none of my seed grows near the railroad, the wind may carry some off to some lonely farm home and then they’ll give the farmer’s wife a gay surprise. Let’s fling the seed from the observation car, shall we?”

“All right; though I must say I don’t think a bit of it will grow,” said Bob. “But first, come back into our coach with me; I want to tell you about those two men who sat back of you.”

“Is that what you were staring about?” demanded Betty, as they found their seats and Bob picked up his camera preparatory to putting in a new roll of film. “I wondered why you persisted in looking over my shoulder so often.”

Bob Henderson’s boyish face sobered and unconsciously his chin hardened a little, a sure sign that he was a bit worried.

“I don’t know whether you noticed them or not,” he began. “They went out of the diner a few minutes ahead of us. One is tall with gray hair and wears glasses, and the other is thin, too, but short and has very dark eyes. No glasses. They’re both dressed in gray – hats, suits, socks, ties – everything.”

“No, I didn’t notice them,” said Betty dryly. “But you seem to have done so.”

“I couldn’t help hearing what they said,” explained Bob. “I was up early this morning, trying to read, and they were talking in their berths. And when I was getting my shoes shined before breakfast, they were awaiting their turn, and they kept it right up. I suppose because I’m only a boy they think it isn’t worth while to be careful.”

“But what have they done?” urged Betty impatiently.

“I don’t know what they’ve done,” admitted Bob. “I’ll tell you what I think, though. I think they’re a pair of sharpers, and out to take any money they can find that doesn’t have to be earned.”

“Why, Bob Henderson, how you do talk!” Betty reproached him reprovably. “Do you mean to say they would rob anybody?”

“Well, probably not through a picked lock, or a window in the dead of night,” answered Bob. “But taking money that isn’t rightfully yours can not be called by a very pleasant name, you know. Mind you, I don’t say these men are dishonest, but judging from what I overheard they lack only the opportunity.”

“They’re going to Oklahoma, too, and that’s what interested me when I first heard them,” he went on. “The name attracted my attention, and then the older one went on to talk about their chances of getting the best of some one in the oil fields.”

“‘The way to work it,’ he said, ‘is to get hold of a woman farm-owner; some one who hasn’t any men folks to advise her or meddle with her property. Ten to one she won’t have heard of the

oil boom, or if she has, it's easy enough to pose as a government expert and tell her her land is worthless for oil. We'll offer her a good price for it for straight farming, and we'll have the old lady grateful to us the rest of her life.'

"If that doesn't sound like the scheming of a couple of rascals, I miss my guess," concluded Bob. "You see the trick, don't you, Betty? They'll take care to find a farm that's right in the oil section, and then they'll bully and persuade some timid old woman into selling her farm to them for a fraction of its worth."

"Can't you expose 'em?" said Betty vigorously. "Tell the oil men about them! I guess there must be people who would know how to keep such men from doing business. What are you going to do about it, Bob?"

The boy looked at her in admiration.

"You believe in action, don't you?" he returned. "You see, we can't really do anything yet, because, so far as we know, the men have merely talked their scheme over. If people were arrested for merely plotting, the world might be saved a lot of trouble, but free speech would be a thing of the past. As long as they only talk, Betty, we can't do a thing."

"Here those men come now, down the aisle," whispered Betty excitedly. "Don't look up – pretend to be fixing the camera."

Bob obediently fumbled with the box, while Betty gazed detachedly across the aisle. The two men glanced casually at them as they passed, opened the door of the car, and went on into the next coach.

"They're going to the smoker," guessed Bob, correctly as it proved. "I'm going to follow them, Betty, and see if I can hear any more. Perhaps there will be something definite to report to the proper authorities. From what Mr. Littell told us, the oil field promoters would like all the crooks rounded up. They're the ones that hurt the name of reputable oil stocks. You don't care if I go, do you?"

"I did want you to help me scatter seeds," confessed Betty candidly. "However, go ahead, and I'll do it myself. Lend me the camera, and I'll take my sweater and stay out a while. If I'm not here when you come back, look for me out on the observation platform."

Bob hurried after the two possible sharpers, and Betty went through the train till she came to the last platform, railed in and offering the comforts of a porch to those passengers who did not mind the breeze. This morning it was deserted, and Betty was glad, for she wanted a little time to herself.

CHAPTER II

THINKING BACKWARD

Betty leaned over the rail, flinging the contents of the seed packets into the air and breathing a little prayer that the wind might carry them far and that none might “fall on stony ground.”

“If I never see the flowers, some one else may,” she thought. “I remember that old lady who lived in Pineville, poor blind Mrs. Tompkins. She was always telling about the pear orchard she and her husband planted the first year of their married life out in Ohio. Then they moved East, and she never saw the trees. ‘But somebody has been eating the pears these twenty years,’ she used to say. I hope my flowers grow for some one to see.”

When she had tossed all the seeds away, Betty snuggled into one of the comfortable reed chairs and gave herself up to her own thoughts. Since leaving Washington, the novelty and excitement of the trip had thoroughly occupied her mind, and there had been little time for retrospection.

This bright morning, as the prairie land slipped past the train, Betty Gordon’s mind swiftly reviewed the incidents of the last few months and marveled at the changes brought about in a comparatively short time. She was an orphan, this dark-eyed girl of thirteen, and, having lost her mother two years after her father’s death, had turned to her only remaining relative, an uncle, Richard Gordon. How he came to her in the little town of Pineville, her mother’s girlhood home, and arranged to send her to spend the summer on a farm with an old school friend of his has been told in the first volume of this series, entitled “Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm; or, The Mystery of a Nobody.” At Bramble Farm Betty had met Bob Henderson, a lad a year or so older than herself and a ward from the county poorhouse. The girl and boy had become fast friends, and when Bob learned enough of his mother’s family to make him want to know all and in pursuit of that knowledge had fled to Washington, it seemed providential that Betty’s uncle should also be in the capital so that she, too, might journey there.

That had been her first “real traveling,” mused Betty, recalling her eagerness to discover new worlds. Bob had been the first to leave the farm, and Betty had made the trip to Washington alone. This morning she vividly remembered every detail of the day-long journey and especially of the warm reception that awaited her at the Union Station. This has been described in the second book of this series, entitled *If Betty should live to be an old lady she would probably never cease to recall the peculiar circumstances under which she made friends with the three Littell girls and their cousin from Vermont and came to spend several delightful weeks at the hospitable mansion of Fairfields.* The Littell family had grown to be very fond of Betty and of Bob, whose fortunes seemed to be inextricably mixed up with hers, and when the time came for them to leave for Oklahoma, fairly showered them with gifts.

No sooner did word reach Betty that her uncle awaited her in the oil regions than Bob announced that he was going West, too. He had succeeded in getting trace of two sisters of his mother, and presumably they lived somewhere in the section where Betty’s uncle was stationed.

“I’ll never forget how lovely the Littells were to us,” thought Betty, a mist in her eyes blurring the sage brush. “Wasn’t Bob surprised when Mr. Littell gave him that camera? And Mrs. Littell must have known he didn’t have a nice bag, because she gave him that beauty all fitted with ebony toilet articles. And the girls clubbed together and gave each of us a signet ring – that was dear of them. I thought they had done everything for me friends could, keeping me there so long and entertaining me as though they had invited me as a special guest; so when Mr. and Mrs. Littell gave me that string of gold beads I was just about speechless. There never were such people! Heigho! Four months ago I was living in a little village, discontented because Uncle Dick wouldn’t take me

with him. And now I've made lots of new friends, seen Washington, and am speeding toward the wild and woolly West. I guess it never pays to complain."

With this philosophical conclusion, Betty pulled a letter from her pocket and fell to reading it. Bobby Littell had written a letter for each day of the journey and Betty had derived genuine pleasure from these gay notes so like the cheerful, sunny Roberta herself. This morning's letter was taken up with school plans for the fall, and the writer expressed a wish that Betty might go with them to boarding school.

"Libbie thinks perhaps her mother will send her, and just think what fun we could have," wrote Bobby, referring to the Vermont cousin.

Betty dismissed the school question lightly from her mind. She would certainly enjoy going to school with the Littell girls, and boarding school was one of her day-dreams, as it is of most girls her age. After she had seen her uncle and spent some time with him – he was very dear to her, was this Uncle Dick – she thought she might be ready to go back East and take up unceremoniously. But there was the subject of the probable cost – something that never bothered the Littell girls. Betty knew nothing of her uncle's finances, beyond the fact that he had been very generous with her, sending her checks frequently and never stinting her by word or suggestion. Still, boarding school, especially a school selected by the Littells, would undoubtedly be expensive. Betty wisely decided to let the matter drop for the time being.

Sage brush and prairie was now left behind, and the train was rattling through a heavy forest. Betty was glad that the rather nippy breeze had apparently kept every one else indoors, or else the monotony of a long train journey. The platform continued to be deserted, and, wondering what delayed Bob, she took up the camera to try again for a picture of the receding track. She and Bob had used up perhaps half a dozen films on this one subject, and the gleaming point where the rails came together in the distance had an inexhaustible fascination for the girl.

"How it does blow!" she gasped. "I remember now when we stopped at that water-station Bob spoke of – I didn't notice it at the time, I was so busy thinking, but the breeze didn't die down with the motion of the train. I shouldn't wonder if there was a strong wind to-day."

As a matter of fact, there was a gale, but Betty, accustomed to the wind from the back platform of a train in motion, thought that it could be nothing unusual. To be sure, the branches of the tall trees were crashing about and the sky over the cleared space on each side of the tracks was gray and ominous (the sun had disappeared as Betty mused) but the girl, comfortable in sweater and small, close hat, paid slight attention to these signs.

"I can't see what is keeping Bob," she repeated, putting the camera down. "Maybe I'd better go back into the car. How those trees do swish about! I don't believe if I shouted, I'd be heard above the noise of the wind and the train."

This was an alluring thought, and Betty acted upon it, cautiously at first, and then, gaining confidence, more freely. It is exhilarating to contend with the rush of the wind, to pitch one's voice against a torrent of sound, and Betty stood at the rail singing as loudly as she could, her tones lost completely in a grander chorus. Her cheeks crimsoned, and she fairly shouted, feeling to her finger tips the joy and excitement of the powerful forces with which she competed – those of old nature and man's invention, the thing of smoke and fire and speed we call a train.

Suddenly the brakes went down, there was an uneasy screeching as they gripped the wheels, and the long train jarred to a standstill.

"How funny!" puzzled Betty. "There's no station. We're right out in the woods. Oh, I can hear the wind now – how it does howl!"

She picked up her belongings and made her way back to the car. As she passed through the coaches every one was asking the cause of the stop, and an immigrant woman caught hold of Betty as she went through a day coach.

"Is it wrong?" she asked nervously, and in halting English. "Must we get off here?"

“I don’t know what the matter is,” answered Betty, thankful that she was asked nothing more difficult. “But whatever happens, don’t get off; this isn’t a station, it is right in the woods. If you get off and lose some of your children, you’ll never get them together again and the train will go off and leave you. Don’t get off until the conductor tells you to.”

The woman sank back in her seat and called her children around her, evidently resolved to follow this advice to the last letter.

“She looks as if an earthquake wouldn’t blow her from her seat,” thought Betty, proceeding to her own car. “Well, at that, it’s safer for her than trying to find out what the matter is and not being able to find her way aboard again. I remember the conductor told Bob and me these poor immigrants have such trouble traveling. It must be awful to make your way in a strange country where you can not understand what people say to you.”

No Bob was to be seen when Betty reached her seat, but excited passengers were apparently trying to fall head-first from the car windows.

“I think we’ve run over some one,” announced a fussy little man with a monocle and a flower in his buttonhole.

With a warning toot of the whistle, the train began to move slowly forward. It went a few feet, apparently hit something solid, and stopped with a violent jar.

“Oh, my goodness!” wailed a woman who was clearly the wife of the fussy little man. “Won’t some one please go and find out what the matter is?”

Betty looked toward the car door and saw Bob pushing his way toward her.

CHAPTER III

WHAT BOB HEARD

When Bob entered the smoking-car he saw the two men he had pointed out to Betty seated near the door at the further end of the car. The boy wondered for the first time what he could do that would offer an excuse for his presence in the car, for of course he had never smoked. However, walking slowly down the aisle he saw several men deep in their newspapers and not even pretending to smoke. No one paid the slightest attention to him. Bob took the seat directly behind the two men in gray, and, pulling a Chicago paper from his pocket, bought that morning on the train, buried himself behind it.

The noise made by the train had evidently lulled caution, or else the suspected sharpers did not care if their plans were overheard. Their two heads were very close together, and they were talking earnestly, their harsh voices clearly audible to any one who sat behind them.

"I tell you, Blosser," the older man was saying as Bob unfolded his paper, "it's the niftiest little proposition I ever saw mapped out. We can't fail. Best of all, it's within the law – I've been reading up on the Oklahoma statutes. There's been a lot of new legislation rushed through since the oil boom struck the State, and we can't get into trouble. What do you say?"

The man called Blosser flipped his cigar ash into the aisle.

"I don't like giving a lease," he objected. "You know as well as I do, Jack, that putting anything down in black and white is bound to be risky. That's what did for Spellman. He had more brains than the average trader, and what happened? He's serving seven years in an Ohio prison."

Bob was apparently intensely interested in an advertisement of a new collar button.

"Spellman was careless," said the gray-haired man impatiently. "In this case we simply have to give a lease. The man's been coached, and he won't turn over his land without something to show for it. I tell you we'll get a lawyer we can control to draw the papers, and they won't bind us, whatever they exact of the other fellow. Don't upset the scheme by one of your obstinate fits."

"Call me stubborn, if you like," said Blosser. "For my part, I think you're crazy to consider any kind of papers. A mule-headed farmer, armed with a lease, can put us both out of business if the thing's managed right; and trust some smart lawyer to be on hand to give advice at an unlucky moment. Hello!" he broke off suddenly, "isn't that Dan Carson over there on the other side, smoking a cigarette?"

Bob peeped over his paper and saw the dark-eyed man spring from his seat and hurry across the aisle where a large, fat, jovial-looking individual was puffing contentedly on a cigarette.

"Cal Blosser!" boomed the big man in a voice heard over the car. "Well, well, if this isn't like old times! Glad to see you, glad to see you. What's that? Jack Fluss with you? Lead me to the boy, bless his old heart!"

The two came back to the seat ahead of Bob, and there was a great handshaking, much slapping on the back, and a general chorus of, "Well, you're looking great," and "How's the world been treating you?" before the man called Dan Carson tipped over the seat ahead and sat down facing the two gray-clad men.

"I'm glad to see you for more reasons than one," said Blosser, passing around fresh cigars. "Who's behind us, Dan?" He lowered his voice. "Only a kid? Oh, all right. Well, Jack here, has been working on an oil scheme for the last two weeks, and this morning he comes out with the bright idea of giving some desert farmer a lease for his property. Can you get over that?"

Three spirals of tobacco smoke curled above the seats, and when Bob lifted his gaze from the paper he could see the round, good-natured face of the fat man beaming through the gray veil.

“What you want to go to that trouble for?” he drawled, after a pause. Clearly he was never hurried into an answer. “Seems to me, Jack, this is a case where the youngster shows good judgment. Where you fixing to operate?”

“Oklahoma,” was the comprehensive answer. “Oil’s the thing to-day. There’s more money being made in the fields over night than we used to think was in the United States mint.”

“Oil’s good,” said the fat man judicially. “But why the lease? Plenty of farms still owned by widows or old maids, and they’ll fairly throw the land at you if you handle ’em right.”

There was an exclamation from the dark-eyed man.

“Just what I was telling Jack this morning,” he chortled. “Buy a farm, for farming purposes only, from some old lady. Pay her a good price, but get your land in the oil section. Old lady happy, we strike oil, sell out to big company, everybody happy. Simple, after all. Good schemes always are.”

Jack Fluss grunted derisively.

“Lovely schemes, yours always are,” he commented sarcastically. “Only thing missing from the scenario, as stated, is the farm. Where are you going to pick up an oil farm for a song? Old maids are sure to have a nephew or something hanging round to keep ’em posted.”

“Now you mention it – ” Carson fumbled in his pocket. “Now you mention it, boys, I believe I’ve got the very place for you. I’ve been prospecting around quite a bit in Oklahoma, and this summer I ran across a farm that for location can’t be beat. Right in the heart of the oil section. Like this – ”

He took an envelope from his pocket and, resting it on his knee, began to draw a rough diagram. The three heads bent close together and the busy tongues were silent save for a muttered question or a word or two of explanation.

Bob began to think that he had heard all he was to hear, and certainly he was no longer in doubt as to the character of the men he had followed. He had decided to go back to Betty when the older of the two gray-suited men, leaning back and taking off his glasses to polish them, addressed a question to Carson.

“Widow own this place?” he asked casually.

“No, couple of old maids,” was the answer. “Last of their line, and all that. The neighbors know it as the Saunders place, but I didn’t rightly get whether that was the name of the old ladies or not.”

The Saunders place!

Bob sat up with a jerk, and then, remembering, sank back and turned a page, though his hands shook with excitement.

“Faith Henderson, born a Saunders – ” The words of the old bookshop man, Lockwood Hale, who had told Bob about his mother’s people, came back to him.

“I do believe it is the very same place,” he said to himself. “There couldn’t be two farms in the oil section owned by different families of the name of Saunders. If it is the right farm, and they’re my aunts, perhaps Betty’s uncle will know where it is.”

He strained his ears, hoping to gather more information, but having heard of this desirable farm, Fluss and Blosser were apparently unwilling to discuss it further. In reality, had Bob only known, they were mulling the situation over in their respective minds, and Carson knew they were. That night, over a game of cards, a finished proposition would doubtless be perfected, and a partnership formed.

“What about you?” Fluss did say.

“Who? Me?” asked Carson inelegantly. “Oh, I’m sorry, but I can’t go in with you. I’m going right on through to the coast. Oklahoma isn’t healthy for me for a couple of months. All I’ll charge you for the information is ten per cent. royalty, payable when your first well flows. My worst enemy couldn’t call me mean.”

“Got something to show you, Carson,” said the man with eye-glasses. “Come on back into the sleeper and I’ll unstrap the suitcase.”

The three rose, tossed away their cigar butts, and went up the aisle. Bob waited till they had gone into the next car, intending then to go back to Betty. His intentions were frustrated by a lanky individual who dropped into the seat beside him.

“Smoke?” he said in friendly fashion, offering Bob a cigarette. “No? Well, that’s right. I didn’t smoke at your age, either. Fact is, I was most twenty-three before I knew how tobacco tasted. Slick-looking posters went up the aisle just now, what?”

Bob admitted that there was something peculiar about them.

“Sharps, if I ever saw any,” said the lanky one. “We’re overrun with ’em. They come out from the East, and because they can dress and know how to sling language – Say,” he suddenly became serious, “you’d be surprised the way the girls fall for ’em. My girl thinks if a man’s clothes are all right he must be a Wall Street magnate, and the rest of the girls are just like her. They’re the men that give the oil fields a shady side.”

In spite of his roughness, Bob liked the freckle-faced person, and he had proved that he was far from stupid.

“You’ve evidently seen tricky oil men,” he said guardedly. “Do you work in the oil fields? I’m going to Oklahoma.”

“Me for Texas,” announced his companion. “I change at the next junction. No, the nearest I ever come to working in the oil fields is filling tanks for the cars in my father’s garage. But o’ course I know oil – the streets run with it down our way, and they use it to flush the irrigation system. And I’ve seen some of the raw deals these sharps put through – doing widows and orphans out of their land. Makes you have a mighty small opinion of the law, I declare it does.”

As he spoke the train slowed up, then stopped.

“No station,” puzzled the Texan. “Let’s go and find out the trouble.”

He started for the door, and then the train started, bumped, and came to a standstill again.

“You go ahead!” shouted Bob. “I have to go back and see that my friend is all right.”

CHAPTER IV BLOCKED TRAFFIC

All was uproar and confusion in the coaches through which Bob had to pass to reach the car where he knew Betty was. Distracted mothers with frightened, crying children charged up and down the aisles, excited men ran through, and the wildest guesses flew about. The consensus of opinion was that they had hit something!

“Oh, Bob!” Betty greeted him with evident relief when he at last reached her. “What has happened? Is any one hurt? Will another train come up behind us and run into us?”

This last was a cheerful topic broached by the fussy little man whose capacity for going ahead and meeting trouble was boundless.

“Of course not!” Bob’s scorn was more reassuring than the gentlest answer. “As soon as a train stops they set signals to warn traffic. What a horrible racket every one is making! They’re all screeching at once. Get your hat, Betty, and we’ll go and find out something definite. I don’t know any more than you do, but I can’t stand this noise.”

Betty was glad to get away from the babble of sound, and they went down the first set of steps and joined the procession that was picking its way over the ties toward the engine.

“Express due in three minutes,” said a brakeman warningly, hurrying past them. “Stand well back from the tracks.”

He went on, cautioning every one he passed, and a majority of the passengers swerved over to the wide cinder path on the other side of the second track. A few persisted in walking the ties.

“Here she comes! Look out!” Bob shouted, as a trail of smoke became visible far up the track.

He had insisted that Betty stand well away from the track, and now the few persistent ones who had remained on the cleared track scrambled madly to reach safety. A woman who walked with a cane, and who had overridden her young-woman attendant’s advice that she stay in the coach until news of the accident, whatever it was, could be brought to her, was almost paralyzed with nervous fright. Bob went to her distressed attendant’s aid, and between them they half-carried, half-dragged the stubborn old person from the shining rails.

“Toto!” she gasped.

Bob stared, but Betty’s quick eye had seen. There, in the middle of the track, sat a fluffy little dog, its eyes so thickly screened with hair that it is doubtful if it could see three inches before its shining black nose. This was Toto, and the rush of events had completely bewildered him. The dog was accustomed to being held on its mistress’ lap or carried about in a covered basket, but she had decided that a short walk would give the little beast needed exercise, and it had pantingly tagged along after her, obedient, as usual, to her whims. Now she had suddenly disappeared. Well, Toto must sit down and wait for her to come back. Perhaps she might miss him and come after him right away.

The thundering noise of the train was clearly audible when Betty swooped down on the patient Toto, grabbed him by his fluffy neck, and sprang back. Bob, turning from his charge, had caught a glimpse of the girl as she dashed toward something on the track, and now as she jumped he grasped her arm and pulled her toward him. He succeeded in dragging her back several rods, but they both stumbled and fell. There was a yelp of protest from Toto, drowned in the mighty shriek and roar of the train. The great Eastern Limited swept past them, rocking the ground, sending out a cloud of black smoke shot with sparks, and letting fall a rain of gritty cinders.

“Don’t you ever let me catch you doing anything like that again!” scolded Bob, getting to his feet and helping Betty up. “Of all the foolish acts! Why, you would have been struck if you’d made a misstep. What possessed you, Betty?”

“Toto,” answered Betty, dimpling, brushing the dirt from her skirts and daintily shaking out the fluffy dog. “See what a darling he is, Bob. Do you suppose I could let a train run over him?”

Bob admitted, grudgingly, for he was still nervous and shaken, that Toto was a “cute mutt,” and then, when they had restored him to his grateful mistress, they went on to their goal. No one had noticed Betty’s narrow escape, for all had been concerned with their own safety. Betty herself was inclined to minimize the danger, but Bob knew that she might easily have been drawn under the wheels by the suction, if not actually overtaken on the track.

There was a crowd about the engine, and the grimy-faced engineer leaned from his cab, inspecting them impassively. His general attitude was one of boredom, tinged with disgust.

“Guess they’ve all been telling him what to do,” whispered Bob, who, while only a lad, had a trick of correctly estimating situations.

Pressing their way close in, he and Betty were at last able to see what had stopped the train. The high wind, which was still blowing with undiminished force, had blown down a huge tree. It lay directly across the track, and barely missed the east-bound rails.

“Another foot, and she’d have tied up traffic both ways,” said the brakeman who had warned the passengers of the approach of the express. “What you going to do, Jim?”

The engineer sighed heavily.

“Got to wait till it’s sawed in pieces small enough for a gang to handle,” he answered. “We’ve sent to Tippewa for a cross-cut saw. Take us from now till the first o’ the month to saw that trunk with the emergency saws.”

“Where’s Tippewa?” called out an inquisitive passenger. “Any souvenirs there?”

“Sure. Indian baskets and that kind of truck,” volunteered the young brakeman affably, as the engineer did not deign to answer. “Bout a mile, maybe a mile and a half, straight up the track. We don’t stop there. You’ll have plenty of time, won’t he, Jim?”

“We’ll be here a matter of three hours or more,” admitted the engineer.

“Let’s walk to the town, Betty,” suggested Bob. “We don’t want to hang around here for three hours. All this country looks alike.”

Apparently half the passengers had decided that a trip to the town promised a break in the monotony of a long train trip, and the track resembled the main street of Pineville on a holiday. Every one walked on the track occupied by the stalled train, and so felt secure.

“Bob,” whispered Betty presently, “look. Aren’t those the two men you followed this morning? Just ahead of us – see the gray suits? And did you hear anything to report?”

“Why, I haven’t told you, have I?” said Bob contritely. “The train stopping put it out of my mind. What do you think, Betty, they were talking about the Saunders place! Can you imagine that?”

“The Saunders place?” echoed Betty, stopping short. “Why, Bob, do you suppose – do you think – ”

“Sure! It must be the farm my aunts live on,” nodded Bob. “Saunders isn’t such a common name, you know. Besides, the one they call Dan Carson – he isn’t with them, guess he is too fat to enjoy walking – said it was owned by a couple of old maids. Oh, it is the right place, I’m sure of it. And I count on your Uncle Dick’s knowing where it is, since they spoke of the farm being in the heart of the oil section.”

“Where do you suppose they’re going now?” speculated Betty.

“Oh, I judge they want to see the sights, same as we do,” replied Bob carelessly. “Perhaps they count on fleecing some confiding Tippewa citizen out of his hard-earned wealth. They can’t do much in three hours, though, and I think they’re booked to go right on through to Oklahoma. Of course I don’t know how crooks work their schemes, but it seems to me if you want to make money, honestly or dishonestly, in oil, you go where oil is.”

Betty Gordon was not given to long speeches, but when she did speak it was usually to the point.

“I don’t think they’re going back to the train,” she announced quietly. “They’re carrying their suitcases.”

“Well, what do you know about that!” Bob addressed a telegraph pole. “Here I am making wild guesses, and she takes one look at the men themselves and tells their plans. Do I need glasses? I begin to think I do.”

“I don’t guess their plans,” protested Betty. “Anyway, perhaps they were afraid to leave their bags in the car.”

“No, it looks very much to me as though they had said farewell to the Western Limited,” said Bob. “They wouldn’t carry those heavy cases a mile unless they meant to leave for good. Let’s keep an eye on them, because if they are going to ‘work’ the Saunders place, I’d like to see how they intend to go about it.”

For some time the boy and girl tramped in silence, keeping Blosser and Fluss in view. A large billboard, blown flat, was the first sign that they were approaching Tippewa.

“I hope there is a soda fountain,” said Betty thirstily. “The wind’s worse now we’re out of the woods, isn’t it? Do you suppose those sharpers think they can get another train from here?”

“Tippewa doesn’t look like a town with many trains,” opined Bob. “I confess I don’t see what they expect to do, or where they can go. Here comes an automobile, though. Can’t be such an out-of-date town after all.”

The automobile was driven by a man in blue-striped overalls, and, to the surprise of Bob and Betty, Blosser and Fluss hailed him from the road. There was a minute’s parley, the suitcases were tossed in, and the two men followed. The automobile turned sharply and went back along the route it had just come over.

CHAPTER V BETWEEN TRAINS

Bob looked at Betty, and Betty stared at Bob.

“What do you know about that!” gasped the boy. “They couldn’t have arranged for the car to meet them, because the tree blowing down was an accident pure and simple. Where can they be going?”

“I don’t know,” said Betty practically. “But here’s a drug store and I must have something cold to drink. My throat feels dried with dust. Why don’t you ask the drug clerk whose car that was?”

Bob acted upon this excellent suggestion, and while Betty was recovering from her disappointment in finding no ice-cream for sale and doing her best to quench her thirst with a bottle of lukewarm lemon soda, Bob interviewed the grizzled proprietor of the store.

“A small car painted a dull red you say?” this individual repeated Bob’s question. “Must ’a’ been Fred Griggs. He hires out whenever he can get anybody to tote round.”

“But where does anybody go?” asked Bob, feeling that his query was not couched in the most complimentary terms, but unable to amend it quickly.

The drug store owner was not critical.

“Oh, folks go over to Xville,” he said indifferently. “That’s a new town fifteen miles back. They say oil was discovered there some twenty years ago, but others claim nothing but water ever flowed. That’s how it came to be called Xville. I guess if the truth was known, the wells wasn’t oil – we’re a little out of the belt here.”

That was as far as Bob was able to follow the sharpers. He had no way of knowing certainly whether they had gone to Xville, or whether they had hired the car to take them to some other place nearer or further on. Betty finished her soda and they strolled about the single street for a half hour, buying three collapsible Indian baskets for the Littell girls, since they would easily pack into Betty’s bag.

They reached the train to find the last section of the big tree being lifted from the track, and half an hour later, all passengers aboard, the train resumed its journey. Bob and Betty had eaten lunch in the town, and they spent the afternoon on the observation platform, Betty tatting and Bob trying to write a letter to Mr. Littell. They were glad to have their berths made up early that night, for both planned to be up at six o’clock the next morning when the train, the conductor told them, crossed the line into Oklahoma. Betty cherished an idea that the State in which she was so much interested would be “different” in some way from the country through which they had been passing.

The good-natured conductor was on hand the next morning to point out to them the State line, and Betty, under his direct challenge, had to admit that she could see nothing distinguishing about the scenery.

“Wait till you see the oil wells,” said the conductor cheerfully. “You’ll know you’re in Oklahoma then, little lady.”

Bob and Betty were to change at Chassada to make connections for Flame City, where Betty’s Uncle Dick was stationed, and soon after breakfast the brakeman called the name of the station and they descended from the train. As it rolled on they both were conscious of a momentary feeling of loneliness, for in the long journey from Washington they had grown accustomed to their comfortable quarters and to the kindly train crew.

They had an hour to wait in Chassada, and Bob suggested that they leave their bags at the station and walk around the town.

“I believe they have oil wells near here,” he said. “Some one on the train – oh, I know who it was, that lanky chap from Texas – was telling me that from the outskirts of the place you can see oil wells. Or perhaps we can get a bus to take us out to the fields and bring us back.”

“Oh, no,” protested Betty. “I know Uncle Dick is counting on showing us the wells and explaining them to us, Bob. Don’t let us bother about going up close to a well – we can see enough from the town limits. Look, there’s one now!”

They had reached the edge of the narrow, straggling group of streets that was all of Chassada, and now Betty pointed toward the west where tall iron framework rose in the air. There were six of these structures, and, even at that distance, the boy and girl could see men working busily about at the base of the frames.

“Looks just like the postcards your uncle sent, doesn’t it?” said Bob delightedly. “Gee! I’d like to see just how they drive them. Well, I suppose before we’re a week older we’ll know how to drive a well and what to do with the oil when it finally flows. You’ll be talking oil as madly as any of them then, Betty.”

“I suppose I shall,” admitted Betty. “Do you know, I’m hungry. I wonder if there is any place we can eat?”

“Must be,” said the optimistic Bob. “Come on, we’ll go up this street. Perhaps there will be some kind of a restaurant. Never heard of a town without a place to eat.”

But Bob began to think presently that perhaps Chassada differed in more ways than one from the towns to which he was accustomed. In the first place, though every one seemed to have plenty of money – there was a neat and attractive jewelry store conspicuous between a barber shop and a grain store – no one seemed to have to work. The streets were unpaved, the sidewalks of rough boards in many places, in others no walks at all were attempted. Many of the buildings were mere shacks incongruously painted in brilliant colors, and there were more dogs than were ever before gathered into one place. Of that Bob was sure.

“Do you suppose they’ve all made fortunes in oil?” Betty ventured, scanning the groups of men and boys that filled every doorway and lounged at the corners. “No one is working, Bob. Who runs the wells?”

“Different shifts, I suppose,” answered Bob. “I declare, Betty, I’m not so sure that you’ll get anything to eat after all. We’ll go back to the station; they may have sandwiches or cake or something like that on sale there.”

They turned down another street that led to the station, Bob in the lead. He heard a little cry from Betty, and turned to find that she had disappeared.

“The lady fell down that hole!” shouted a man, hurrying across the street. “There go the barrels! I told Zinker he ought to have braced that dirt!”

Bob, still not understanding, saw four large barrels that had stood on the sidewalk slowly topple over the side of an excavation and roll out of sight.

“She went in, too,” cried the man, scrambling over the edge. “Are you hurt, lady?” he called.

“Betty!” shouted Bob. “Betty, are you hurt?” He took a flying leap to the edge of the hole, and, having miscalculated the distance, slid over after the barrels.

Over and over he rolled, bringing up breathless against something soft.

“I knew you’d come to get me,” giggled Betty, “but you needn’t have hurried. Are there any more barrels coming?”

Bob was immensely relieved to find that she was unhurt. The barrels had luckily been empty and had rolled over and into her harmlessly.

“Well, looks like you’re all right,” grinned the Chassada citizen who had followed Bob more leisurely. “Let me help you up this grade. There now, you’re fine and dandy, barring a little dirt that will wash off. George Zinker excavated last winter for a house, and then didn’t build. I always told him the walk was shifty. You’re strangers in town, aren’t you?”

Bob explained that they were only waiting over between trains.

“So you’re going to Flame City!” exclaimed their new friend with interest when Bob mentioned their destination. “I hear they’ve struck it rich in the fields. Buying up everything in sight, they say. We had a well come in last week. Hope you have a place to stay, though; Flame City isn’t much more than a store and a post-office.”

Betty looked up from rubbing her skirt with her clean handkerchief in an endeavor to remove some of the gravel stains.

“Isn’t Flame City larger than Chassada?” she demanded.

“Larger? Why, Chassada is four or five years ahead,” explained the Chassada man. “We’ve got a hotel and three boarding houses, and next month they’re fixing to put up a movie theater. Flame City wasn’t on the map six months ago. That’s why I say I hope you have a place to go – you’ll have to rough it, anyway, but accommodations is mighty scarce.”

Bob assured him that some one was to meet them, and then asked about a restaurant.

“If you can stand Jake Hill’s cooking, turn in at that white door down the street,” was the advice, emphasized by a graphic forefinger. “Lay off the custard pie, ’cause he generally makes it with sour milk. Apple pie is fair, and his doughnuts is good. No thanks at all – glad to accommodate a stranger.”

The white door indicated opened into a little low, dark room that smelled of all the pies ever baked and several dishes besides. There were several oilcloth-topped tables scattered about, and one or two patrons were eating. As Bob and Betty entered a great gust of laughter came from a corner table where a group of men were gathered.

“Guess that was good advice about the custard pie,” whispered Bob mischievously. “Think you can stand it, Betty?”

“I’m so hungry, I could stand anything,” declared Betty with vigor. “I’d like a couple of sandwiches and a glass of milk. I guess you have to go up to that counter and bring your orders back with you – I don’t see any waiters.”

Bob went up to the counter, and Betty sat down at a vacant table and looked about her.

CHAPTER VI

QUICK ACTION

A dirty-faced clock on the wall told Betty that it was within twenty minutes of the time their train was due. However, they were within sight of the station, so, provided Bob was quickly waited upon, there was no reason to worry about missing the connection.

Bob came back, balancing the sandwiches and milk precariously, and they proceeded to make a hearty lunch, their appetites sharpened by the clear Western air, in a measure compensating for the sawdust bread and the extreme blueness of the milk.

“What are those men laughing about, I wonder,” commented Betty idly, as a fresh burst of laughter came from the table in the corner of the room. “What a noise they make! Bob, do I imagine it, or does this bread taste of oil?”

Bob laughed, and glanced over his shoulder to make sure the counter-man could not hear.

“Do you know, I thought that very thing,” he confessed. “I wasn’t going to mention it, for fear you’d think I was obsessed with the notion of oil. To tell you the truth, Betsey, I think this bread has been near the kerosene oil can, not an oil well.”

“Well, we can drink the milk,” said Betty philosophically. “It’s lucky one sandwich apiece was good. Oh, won’t it be fine to get to Flame City and see Uncle Dick! I want to get where we are going, Bob!”

“Sure you do,” responded Bob sympathetically, frowning with annoyance as another hoarse burst of laughter came from the corner table. “But I’m afraid Flame City isn’t going to be much of a place after all.”

“I don’t care what kind of place it is,” declared Betty firmly. “All I want is to see Uncle Dick and be with him. And I want you to find your aunts. And I’d like to go to school with the Littell girls next fall. And that’s all.”

Bob smiled, then grew serious.

“I’d like to go to school myself,” he said soberly. “Precious little schooling I’ve had, Betty. I’ve read all I could, but you can’t get anywhere without a good, solid foundation. Well, there’ll be time enough to worry about that when school time comes. Just now it is vacation.”

“Bob!” – Betty spoke swiftly – “look what those men are doing – teasing that poor Chinaman. How can they be so mean!”

Sure enough, one of the group had slouched forward in his chair, and over his bent shoulders Bob and Betty could see an unhappy Chinaman, clutching his knife and fork tightly and looking with a hunted expression in his slant eyes from one to another of his tormentors. They were evidently harassing him as he ate, for while they watched he took a forkful of the macaroni on the plate before him, and attempted to convey it to his mouth. Instantly one of the men surrounding him struck his arm sharply, and the food flew into the air. Then the crowd laughed uproariously.

“Isn’t that perfectly disgusting!” scolded Betty. “How any one can see anything funny in doing that is beyond me. Oh, now look – they’ve got his slippers.”

The unfortunate Chinaman’s loose flat slippers hurtled through the air, narrowly missing Betty’s head.

“Come on, we’re going to get out of this,” said Bob determinedly, rising from his seat. “Those chaps once start rough-housing, no telling where they’ll bring up. We want to escape the dishes, and besides we haven’t any too much time to make our train.”

He had paid for their food when he ordered it, so there was nothing to hinder their going out. Bob started for the door, supposing that Betty was following. But she had seen something that roused her anger afresh.

The poor Celestial was essaying an ineffectual protest at the treatment of his slippers, when a man opposite him reached over and snatched his plate of food.

“China for Chinamen!” he shouted, and with that clapped the plate down on the unfortunate victim’s head with so much force that it shivered into several pieces.

Betty could never bear to see a person or an animal unfairly treated, and when, as now, the odds were all against one, she became a veritable little fury. As Bob had once said in a mixture of admiration and despair she wasn’t old enough to be afraid of anything or anybody.

“How dare you treat him like that!” she cried, running to the table where the Chinaman sat in a daze. “You ought to be arrested! If you must torment some one, why don’t you get somebody who can fight back?”

The men stared at her open-mouthed, bewildered by her unexpected championship of their bait. Then a great, coarse, blowzy-faced man, with enormous grease spots on his clothes, winked at the others.

“My eye, we’ve a visitor,” he drawled. “Sit down, my dear, and John Chinaman shall bring you chop suey for lunch.”

Betty drew back as he put out a huge hand.

“You leave her alone!” Bob had come after Betty and stood glaring at the greasy individual. “Anybody who’ll treat a foreigner as you’ve treated that Chinaman isn’t fit to speak to a girl!”

A concerted growl greeted this statement.

“If you’re looking for a fight,” snarled a younger man, “you’ve struck the right place. Come on, or eat your words.”

Now Bob was no coward, but there were five men arrayed against him with a probable sixth in the form of the counter-man who was watching the turn of affairs with great interest from the safe vantage-point of his high counter. It was too much to expect that any men who had dealt with a defenceless and handicapped stranger as these had dealt with the Chinaman would fight fair. Besides, Bob was further hampered by the terrified Betty who clung tightly to his arm and implored him not to fight. It seemed to the lad that the better part of valor would be to take to his heels.

“You cut for the station,” he muttered swiftly to Betty. “Get the bags – train’s almost due. I’ll run up the street and lose ’em somewhere on the way. They won’t touch you.”

He said this hardly moving his lips, and Betty did not catch every word. But she heard enough to understand what was expected of her and what Bob planned to do. She loosened her hold on his arm.

Like a shot, Bob made for the door, banged the screen open wide (Betty heard it hit the side of the building), and fled up the straggling, uneven street. Instantly the five toughs were in pursuit.

Betty heard the counter-man calling to her, but she ran from the place and sped toward the station. It was completely deserted, and a written sign proclaimed that the 1:52 train was ten minutes late. Betty judged that the ticket agent, with whom they had left their bags, would return in time to check them out, and she sat down on one of the dusty seats in the fly-specked waiting-room to wait for the arrival of Bob.

That young man, as he ran, was racking his brains for a way to elude his pursuers. There were no telegraph poles to climb, and even if there had been, he wanted to get to Betty and the station, not be marooned indefinitely. He glanced back. The hoodlums, for such they were, were gaining on him. They were out of training, but their familiarity with the walks gave them a decided advantage. Bob had to watch out for holes and sidewalk obstructions.

He doubled down a street, and then the solution opened out before him. There was a grocery store, evidently a large shop, for he had noticed the front door on the street where the restaurant was situated. Now he was approaching the rear entrance and a number of packing cases cluttered the walk, and excelsior was lying about. A backward glance showed him that the enemy had not yet rounded the corner. Bob dived into the store.

“Hide me!” he gasped, running plump into a white-haired man in overalls who was whistling “Ben Bolt” and opening cases of canned peaches with pleasant dexterity. “Hide me quick. There’s a gang after me – five of ’em!”

“Under the counter, Sonny,” said the groceryman, hardly looking at Bob. “Just lay low, and trust Micah Davis to ’tend to the scamps.”

Bob crawled under the nearest counter and in a few minutes he heard the men at the door.

“Lo, Davis,” said one conciliatingly. “Seen anything of a fresh kid – freckled, good clothes, right out of the East? He tried to pass some bad money at Jake Hill’s. Seen him?”

Bob nearly denounced this lie, but common sense saved him. Small use in seeking protection and then refusing it.

“Haven’t seen anybody like that,” said the groceryman positively. “Quit bruising those tomatoes, Bud.”

“Well, he won’t get out of town,” stated Bud sourly. “There’s a girl with him, and they’re figuring on taking the one-fifty-two. We’re going down and picket the station. If Mr. Smarty gets on that train at all, his face won’t look so pretty.”

They tramped off, and Bob came out from his hiding place.

“They’re a nice bunch!” he declared bitterly. “I got into a row with ’em because they were teasing a poor Chinaman and Betty Gordon landed on them for that. Then I tried to get her away from the place, and of course that started a fight. But I suppose they can dust the station with me if they’re set on it – only I’ll register a few protests.”

“Now, now, we ain’t a-going to have no battle,” announced the genial Mr. Davis. “I knew Bud was lying soon as I looked at him. Why? ’Cause I never knew him to tell the truth. As for picketing the station, well, there’s more ways than one to skin a cat.”

CHAPTER VII

A YANKEE FRIEND

Micah Davis was a Yankee, as he proudly told Bob, “born and raised in New Hampshire,” and his shrewd common sense and dry humor stood him in good stead in the rather lawless environment of Chassada. He was well acquainted with the unlovely characteristics of the five who had chased Bob, and when he heard the whole story he promised to look up the Chinaman and see what he could do for him.

“If he’s out of a job, I’d like to hire him,” he said. “They’re good, steady workers, and born cooks. He can have the room back of the store and do his own housekeeping. I’ll stop in at Jake’s this afternoon.”

Bob was in a fever of fear that he would miss the train, and it was now a quarter of two. But Mr. Davis assured him that that special train was always late and that there was “all the time in the world to get to the station.”

“I’m expecting some canned goods to come up from Wayne,” he declared, “and I often go down after such stuff with my wheelbarrow. Transportation’s still limited with us, as you may have guessed. I calculate the best way to fool those smart Alecs is to put you in an empty packing case and tote you down. Comes last minute, you can jump out and there you are!”

Bob thought this a splendid plan, and said so.

“Then here’s the very case, marked ‘Flame City’ on purpose-like,” was the cheery rejoinder. “Help me lift it on the barrow, and then you climb in, and we’ll make tracks. Comfortable? All right, we’re off.”

He adjusted the light lid over the top of the box, which was sufficiently roomy to allow Bob to sit down, and the curious journey began. Apparently it was a common occurrence for Mr. Davis to take a shipment of goods that way, for no one commented. As the wheelbarrow grated on the crushed stone that surrounded the station, Bob heard the voice of the man called Bud.

“One-fifty-two’s late, as usual,” he called. “That young scalawag hasn’t turned up, either. Guess he’s going to keep still till the last minute and figure on getting away with a dash. The girl’s in the waiting-room.”

“I’m surprised you’re not in there looking in her suitcase for the young reprobate,” said Mr. Davis with thinly veiled sarcasm. “What happened? Did Carl order you out?”

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