

Desperate Scenery

Excerpted from Chapter 12 entitled: Last Days in Ashton

August, 1910

[...]

On the evening the bordello burned, Torrance had saluted Dawn before breakfast, at high noon and twice after supper. She was a blonde, with fair skin, and when she was tired, she looked exhausted. So Norman, perfect gent that he was, had slipped out of bed about midnight to avoid disturbing her, had joined our card game at the warehouse [in the Reclamation Service Building near the tracks], and after I had gone to the Coleman bungalow for some acceptable sleep, Torrance strolled over with Wise, Roby and Kurt to call on Madam Lake. There was a jolly company in the enclosure that evening, not too numerous to overtax the girls, nor the secondary services, or the Madam's gruff hospitality.

A bunch of the town boys welcomed our Reclamation contingent to the little dance hall, the dining room and ample kitchen in which beer and sandwiches were served, and the girls tripped in and out, radiating robust health (attested by Doc Puckett's certificate on each bedroom wall) and professional gaiety, one of a good hooker's best assets. Her feet may be hurting, her temples aching, or her heart may be bruised, but she will dance and do whatever is expected of her, within the local standards of propriety, which vary from state to state, with a smile on her lips, her corsets laced or unlaced, and in the parlor ever a ready word to make her customers feel easier than they do at home. For if a wayward girl cannot offer distractions beyond those of the home, there is little point in her full sacrifice of respectability which she has made in the balanced interests of self-defense and the comfort of mankind, according to the Gospel of Spinoza the Second.

Norman was paired with Bramble Bertha, a rangy girl who had come into Ashton on the train with him from Pocatello. Bertha, or Bert, was said to have a whalebone spine. Kipling's "A Fool There Was" had not been launched upon the world that summer. It was due in several months, according to Divine plan. But Bertha had a hank of hair that reached from her movable scalp down to the back of her undimpled knees and thus had earned the nickname of "Sutherland" Sister. Nearly every first-class disorderly house in the country had a girl with long hair, in those days, and another little tom-boy Whose hair was trimmed in bangs and was relatively short.

When Torrance danced, he looked like the Yama-Yamaman, all elbows and knees, pointed feet and ears, and highlights in his complicated nose glasses. He chattered constantly to Bertha, and if she as much as opened her lips to ask for another beer, Norman would say: "Now, dearie. You talk too much."

Roby, our warehouse man, was short, broad-shouldered and stocky, with an Oregon twang in his voice. He wore at all times, according to Madam Lake, a short stub pencil tucked behind one ear. He was dancing with the fat girl, Mol-lie, built like a plump, squat vase. She wobbled and flowed like pale junket in his resolute arms, which did not reach more than halfway around her. Roby, when he danced a two-step, looked more methodical and serious than ever, and his lips moved silently, as if he were counting the steps in order to make a half-turn at symmetrical intervals. The other dancers learned his pattern on that fifteen-foot floor and steered their jolly girls accordingly.

Between dances the clients munched sandwiches. Madam Lake was proud of her homemade bread and would permit no store bread in her house. On certain mornings, I was told, the whole enclosure would be redolent of yeast and baking fragrance, which covered the less attractive early-morning odors in a cat house. That evening was cool, but not cold enough for a fire in the ample cooking range, so Madam Lake was using a small kerosene stove (Montgomery Ward SN-124367) with which to heat the coffee for those who asked for it. The Madam, that summer, was more than making up for several lean years among the Latter Day Saints.

Sometime after midnight, when the mild orgy was in an andante which fitted naturally between the opening allegro and the final presto, Kurt Mook [maybe Gus Isenberg], the scrappy little albino Dane, was in his underwear entertaining the group in the parlor with an imitation of a pair of Bulgarian wrestlers, and taking both parts. The men and girls assembled, also the Madam, were so intent on Kurt's performance that no one noticed that the little oil stove in the kitchen had fed its orange flame higher and higher and that stray oil or grease on the outside had caught fire. A nearby window curtain of artificial lace, also from Montgomery Ward, had swayed too near, was singed and then ignited. Suddenly the revelers in the parlor were aware that the whole kitchen seemed to be blazing. The quick thinkers routed out those who chanced to be relaxing in the bedrooms, among whom, I regret to report, was our talented junior engineer and designer, Norman Torrance.

There was no time for reflection, since The Lake was burning and crackling like a tinder box. Bramble Bertha grabbed a bright kimono, and Norman what clothes he could find, but he reached the safety of the sagebrush and the company of his Reclamation friends without an article of clothing of which Anatole France has written that, without them, a man is in no position to right wrongs or give his best service to mankind. Some call them trousers, others pants or britches. Before he had even noticed his lack of them, they had gone up in smoke.

The glow could be seen for miles around the countryside and in spite of the awkwardness of the hour, a fire alarm had been sounded in town. The alarm apparatus consisted of a giant gong which was beaten with a two-foot length of steel. The distant din woke me, I hurried to the window, and when I saw the angry glare and the direction from which it came I hustled into my clothes, noting the while that Wise, my roommate, was afield and that his pillow had not been rumped or even dented. Voices questioned from nearby bedrooms and I told Altha and Emily, as I rushed out into the open, that there seemed to be a fire "over back of the warehouse." By the time I got as far as the Ashton Hotel I saw Dawn, fully dressed, who hailed me. "Where's Norman?" she asked. I had the presence of mind to assure her that we all had been in a card game together and that he already was on the scene of the conflagration.

On the fringe of the burning Lake, Wise and Roby, intensely practical men, had borrowed for Norman one of the amateur fire fighter's oilskin outfits and, to my relief, when Dawn and I approached the scene, she spotted Norman, struggling nobly on the end of a bucket line which, although it was a futile gesture, gave the men something to do. The town marshal [Oliver "Bronc" Sparkman] in line of duty had herded Madam Lake and the hookers, some of whom were scantily clad, into the office of the grain elevator a hundred or more yards distant. Everyone had conceded from the beginning that neither the building nor any of its inanimate contents could be saved and the Madam was taking her loss with professional calm.

Dawn kept asking me who lived in the house, then in embers. When the fire fighters called it a night, Wise led Norman to his spouse and explained that since they had been among the first to see the blaze, they would have to spend an hour with the town marshal, answering questions the replies to which must be written on insurance forms, in quadruplicate. He also cautioned Dawn against the deceptive chill of the Idaho night air. She permitted me to escort her back to the hotel, which was in a flurry of preparations, making ready to receive the homeless ladies of joy and their landlady. Dawn, who had a clear conscience and an uninquisitive maidenly mind, said good-night sweetly at her door on the second floor, and in a few minutes was fast asleep again.

I rejoined Wise and Torrance, assuring the latter that everything was all right; that Dawn, as free from suspicion as a meadowlark in spring, was in the arms of Morpheus, and none other. The problem then arose as to how and where we should find, at two A.M., a pair of trousers, pants or britches which would match those Norman had lost. We did not want to consult Nephi, or any of the pious Mormons, for fear of bruising their sensibilities and injuring the reputation of the Reclamation Service. There was no Gentile clothing store in town.

Our task was complicated because Torrance, who had no eye for colors, had been wearing a pair of corduroys of an especially vile shade, somewhere between green clay and fresh putty. The proprietor of the Gentile pool room, how-ever, came across with a pair that fitted Torrance, as nearly as anything ever fitted him, but they were much darker. Dawn, who was not highly sophisticated, was, in the words of her husband, "nobody's fool." She would spot the new pants and ask about the old ones, and that would lead the conversation into dangerous territory

Kurt Mook, the drug clerk, had a brilliant idea. In the new stock he had ordered was some bleaching powder which, if dissolved in gallons of warm water, would remove color from practically anything. Wise, Kurt and I went over to the drug store, mixed up a batch of the bleaching fluid, dipped the dark corduroys into it and removed them when we thought they had reached a shade approximating that of the lost pair of pants. When they were rinsed, wrung and artificially dried, Wise took a brand from the wood stove and burned a large hole in one of the legs, so that Torrance could explain that they had been ruined at the scene of the conflagration before he had been equipped with fire-fighting clothes. Thus he was able, without agitating Dawn, to dispose of the substitute trousers the next morning, and the tranquility of a marriage, which already had attained a reputation for tenderness and devotion in the countryside, was saved.

More schedules, bids and contracts had to be amended so that Madam Lake could buy what was needed for a new enlarged hook shop, and Roby was considerate enough to spare her a few of the carpenters and bums who could build it. Meanwhile the girls from The Lake, after a short stay at the Hotel Ashton on enforced good behavior, were shipped to Pocatello to await in the roomy stockade there the completion of new quarters in Ashton.

We considered it a tribute to our ability to attend to our work faithfully, no matter what distractions occurred, when Crowe, appreciative as always, took steps to secure for all of us that month a raise in pay, and, beginning in September I received \$136.84 monthly, instead of the \$99.43 I had been paid in August. Just how the various fiscal agents, officials and executives between Idaho and Washington, D.C., arrived at those quaint figures, I never could discover, but I could spend whatever they gave me with ease and dispatch, as well as odd amounts I picked up on the side.

-end chapter 12