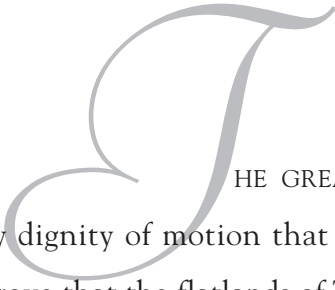




The Bride comes to Yellow Sky

HE GREAT TRAIN WAS RUSHING FORWARD such steady dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the flatlands of Texas were pouring toward the east.

A newly married pair had come on this train at San Antonio. The man's face was reddened from many days in the wind and sun. His roughened hands were continually moving over his new black clothes in a most nervous manner. From time to time he looked down respectfully at his suit. He sat with a hand on each knee, like a man waiting in a shop for a haircut. The glances he gave to other passengers were few and quick.

The **bride** was not pretty, nor was she very young. She wore a dress of blue with many buttons. She continually turned her head to regard some part or other of her dress. It made her feel strange. One

could tell that she had cooked and that she expected to cook, dutifully. The searching glances of some of the passengers as she had entered the car had brought the blood rushing to her face. Her uncomfortable expression was strange to see upon this plain face, which was usually calm and almost emotionless.

They were evidently very happy. “Ever been in a train like this before?” he asked, smiling with delight.

“No,” she answered, “I never was. It’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Great! After a while we’ll go forward to the dining car and get a big dinner. Finest meal in the world. Costs a dollar.”

“Oh, it does?” cried the bride. “A dollar? Oh, that’s too much—for us—isn’t it, Jack?”

“Not on this trip, at least,” he answered bravely. “We’re going to enjoy ourselves.”

Later he explained to her about the trains.

“You see, it’s a thousand miles from one end of Texas to the other. The train runs straight across it, and only stops four times.” He had the pride of an owner. He pointed out to her the beauty of the car they were riding in. And in truth her eyes opened wider as she observed the rich sea-green cloth covering the seats, the shining silver and glass, the wood that shone darkly like the surface of a pool of oil.

To the minds of the pair, their surroundings repeated the glory of their wedding that morning in San Antonio. This was the spirit of their new life, and the man’s face in particular shone with a joy that made him appear foolish to certain passengers. In the minds of some, there was supposed to be something hugely funny in the pair’s situation.

“We are due in Yellow Sky at 3:42,” he said, looking tenderly into her eyes.

“Oh, are we?” she said, as if she had not been aware of it. To show surprise at her husband’s remark was part of her wifely duty. She took from a pocket a little silver watch. As she held it before her, and stared at it with a look of attention, the new husband’s face shone.

“I bought it in San Antonio from a friend of mine,” he told her proudly.

"It's seventeen minutes past twelve," she said, looking up at him with a happy expression which, nevertheless, showed a lack of experience in conversing with men. A passenger, observing her small nervousness, laughed to himself.

At last they went to the dining car. The man serving their table happened to take pleasure in directing them through their meal. He viewed them with the manner of a fatherly guide, his face shining with kindness. But they did not understand his attentions. As they returned to their seats, they showed in their faces a sense of escape.

It was evident that, as the distance from Yellow Sky grew shorter, the husband became more nervous. His red hands were even more noticeable. He was rather absent-minded and faraway when the bride leaned forward and spoke to him.

As a matter of truth, Jack Potter was beginning to find his deed weighing upon him like a great stone. He, the town policeman of Yellow Sky, was a man known, liked, and feared in his community. He—an important person—had gone to San Antonio to meet a girl he believed he loved. And there he had actually married her without discussing any part of the matter with Yellow Sky. He was now bringing his bride to a sure-to-be-surprised town.

Of course, people in Yellow Sky married as it pleased them. But Potter's thoughts of his duty to his friends, or of their idea of his duty, made him feel he was sinful. He was guilty of a great and unusual crime. Face to face with this girl in San Antonio, he had leaped over all the social fences. At San Antonio he was like a man hidden in the dark. A knife to cut any friendly duty was easy to take in his hand in that distant city. But the hour of Yellow Sky—the hour of daylight—was approaching.

He knew very well that his wedding was an important thing to the town. It could only be equaled by the burning of the new hotel. His friends could not forgive him, he felt. And now the train was hurrying him toward a scene of surprise, merriment, and blame. He glanced out of the window again.

Yellow Sky had a kind of band, which played its horns and drums

painfully, to the delight of the people. He laughed without heart as he thought of it. If the citizens could dream of his arrival with his bride, they would march the band at the station and accompany them, among cheers and laughter, to his house.

He decided that he would use all methods of speed and cleverness in making the journey from the station to his house. Once safely at home, he would announce the news. Then he would not go among the citizens until they had time to master their emotions.

The bride looked anxiously at him. "What's worrying you, Jack?"

He laughed. "I'm not worrying, girl. I'm only thinking of Yellow Sky."

She understood, and her face turned red again.

They shared a sense of slight guilt that developed a finer tenderness. They looked at each other with eyes softly glowing. But Potter often laughed the same nervous laugh; the deep red color upon the bride's face did not lessen.

"We're nearly there," he said.

As the train began to slow, they moved forward in the car. The long line of cars moved into the station of Yellow Sky.

"The train has to get water here," said Potter, from a tight throat and face, as one announcing death. Before the train stopped, his eye had searched the station, and he was glad and surprised to see there was no one there except the station master.

"Come on, girl," said Potter with a thick voice. As he helped her down, they each laughed in a strained manner. He took her bag and told his wife to hold his arm. As they hurried away he saw that the station master had turned and was running toward them, waving his arms. Potter laughed, and sighed as he laughed, when he realized the first effect of his wedding upon Yellow Sky. He grasped his wife's arm firmly to his side and they hurried away.

The California train was due at Yellow Sky in twenty-one minutes. There were six men in the Weary Gentleman **Saloon**. One was a salesman who talked a great deal and rapidly; three were Texans who did not care to talk at that time; and two were Mexican sheep farmers

who did not usually talk in the saloon. The saloon-keeper's dog lay in front of the door. His head was resting on his feet, and he glanced sleepily here and there with the ready watchfulness of a dog that is sometimes kicked. Across the sandy street were some bright green grass spots, so wonderful in appearance next to burning sands in the hot sun. At the cooler side of the railroad station, a man without a coat sat in a chair leaned back against the building. He smoked his pipe. The waters of the Rio Grande river circled near the town, and beyond it could be seen great flatlands.

Except for the busy salesman and his companions in the saloon, Yellow Sky was sleeping. The salesman leaned easily upon a table and told many tales with the confidence of a story teller who has found new listeners.

He was interrupted by a young man who suddenly appeared in the open door. He cried, "Scratchy Wilson's **drunk**, and has started to make trouble." The two Mexicans at once put down their glasses and disappeared through the rear door of the saloon.

The salesman, not understanding the importance of the warning, jokingly answered, "All right, old man. Suppose he has? Come in and have a drink anyhow."

But the information had made such an apparent impression on everyone in the room that the salesman was forced to see its importance. All had become instantly serious. "Well," he said, filled with mystery, "what is this?" His three companions started to tell him, but the young man at the door stopped them.

"It means, my friend," he answered as he came into the saloon, "that for the next two hours this town won't be very healthy."

The saloon-keeper went to the door and locked it. Reaching out of the window, he pulled in heavy wooden boards which covered the windows, and locked there. The salesman was looking from one to another.

"What is this, anyhow?" he cried. "You don't mean there is going to be a gun-fight?"

"Don't know whether there will be a fight or not," answered one

man firmly, “but there’ll be some shooting—some good shooting.”

The young man who had warned them waved his hand. “Oh, there’ll be a fight fast enough, if anyone wants it. Anybody can get a fight out there in the street. There’s a fight just waiting.”

The salesman seemed to be realizing the possibility of personal danger.

“What did you say his name was?” he asked.

“Scratchy Wilson,” voices answered together.

“And will he kill anybody? What are you going to do? Does this happen often? Can he break in that door?”

“No, he can’t break in that door,” replied the saloon keeper. “He’s tried it three times. But when he comes you’d better lie down on the floor, stranger. He’s sure to shoot at the door, and a **bullet** may come through.”

After that, the salesman watched the door steady. The time had not yet come for him to drop to the floor, but he carefully moved near the wall. “Will he kill anybody?” he asked again.

The men laughed, without humor, at the question.

“He’s here to shoot, and he’s here for trouble. I don’t see any good in experimenting with him.”

“But what do you do in a situation like this? What can you do?”

A man answered, “Well, he and Jack Potter—”

“But,” the other men interrupted together, “Jack Potter’s in San Antonio.”

“Well, who is he? What’s he got to do with this?”

“Oh, he’s the town policeman. He goes out and fights Scratchy when he starts acting this way.”

A nervous, waiting silence was upon them. The salesman saw that the saloon-keeper, without a sound, had taken a gun from a hiding place. Then he saw the man signal to him, so he moved across the room.

“You’d better come with me behind this table.”

“No, thanks,” said the salesman. “I’d rather be where I can get out the back door.”

At that, the saloon-keeper made a kindly but forceful motion.

The salesman obeyed, and found himself seated on a box with his head below the level of the table. The saloon-keeper sat comfortably upon a box nearby.

"You see," he whispered, "Scratchy Wilson is a wonder with a gun—a perfect wonder. And when he gets excited, everyone gets out of his path. He's a terror when he's drunk. When he's not drinking he's all right— wouldn't hurt anything—nicest fellow in town. But when he's drunk—be careful!"

There were periods of stillness. "I wish Jack Potter were back from San Antonio," said the saloon-keeper. "He shot Wilson once—in the leg. He'd come in and take care of this thing."

Soon they heard from a distance the sound of a shot, followed by three wild screams. The men looked at each other. "Here he comes," they said.

A man in a red shirt turned a corner and walked into the middle of the main street of Yellow Sky. In each hand the man held a long, heavy, blue black gun. Often he screamed, and these cries rang through a seemingly deserted village. The screams sounded sharply over the roofs with a power that seemed to have no relation to the ordinary strength of a man's voice. These fierce cries rang against walls of silence.

The man's face flamed in a hot anger born of **whiskey**. His eyes, rolling but watchful, hunted the still doorways and windows. He walked with the movement of a midnight cat. As the thoughts came to him, he roared threatening information. The long guns hung from his hands like feathers, they were moved with electric speed. The muscles of his neck straightened and sank, straightened and sank, as passion moved him. The only sounds were his terrible invitations to battle. The calm houses preserved their dignity at the passing of this small thing in the middle of the street.

There was no offer of fight—no offer of fight. The man called to the sky. There were no answers. He screamed and shouted and waved his guns here and everywhere.

Finally the man was at the closed door of the saloon. He went to

it, and beating upon it with his gun, demanded drink.

The door remained closed. He picked up a bit of paper from the street and nailed it to the frame of the door with a knife. He then turned his back upon this place and walked to the opposite side of the street. Turning quickly and easily, he fired the guns at the bit of paper. He missed it by a half-inch. He cursed at himself, and went away. Later he comfortably shot out all the windows of the house of his best friend. Scratchy was playing with this town. It was a toy for him.

But still there was no offer of fight. The name of Jack Potter, his ancient enemy, entered his mind. He decided that it would be a good thing if he went to Potter's house, and by shooting at it make him come out and fight. He moved in the direction of his desire, singing some sort of war song.

When he arrived at it, Potter's house presented the same still front as had the other homes. Taking a good position, the man screamed an invitation to battle. But this house regarded him as a great, stone god might have done. It gave no sign. After a little wait, the man screamed more invitations, mixing with them wonderful curses.

After a while came the sight of a man working himself into deepest anger over the stillness of a house. He screamed at it. He shot again and again. He paused only for breath or to reload his guns.

Potter and his bride walked rapidly. Sometimes they laughed together, quietly and a little foolishly.

"Next corner, dear," he said finally.

They put forth the efforts of a pair walking against a strong wind.

Potter was ready to point the first appearance of the new home. Then, as they turned the corner, they came face to face with the man in the red shirt, who was feverishly loading a large gun. Immediately the man dropped his empty gun to the ground and, like lightning, pulled out another. The second gun was aimed at Potter's chest.

There was a silence. Potter couldn't open his mouth. Quickly he loosened his arm from the woman's grasp, and dropped the bag to the sand. As for the bride, her face had become the color of an old cloth.

She was motionless.

The two men faced each other at a distance of nine feet. Behind the gun, Wilson smiled with a new and quiet cruelty.

“Tried to surprise me,” he said. “Tried to surprise me!” His eyes grew more evil.

As Potter made a slight movement, the man pushed his gun sharply forward. “No, don’t you do it, Jack Potter. Don’t you move a finger toward a gun yet. Don’t you move a muscle. The time has come for me to settle with you, and I’m going to do it my own way—slowly, with no interruption. So just listen to what I tell you.”

Potter looked at his enemy. “I haven’t got a gun with me, Scratchy,” he said. “Honest, I haven’t.” He was stiffening and steadying, but at the back of his mind floated a picture of the beautiful car on the train. He thought of the glory of the wedding, the spirit of his new life. “You know I fight when I have to fight, Scratchy Wilson. But I haven’t got a gun with me. You’ll have to do all the shooting yourself.”

His enemy’s face turned pale with anger. He stepped forward and whipped his gun back and forth before Potter’s chest. “Don’t you tell me you haven’t got a gun with you, you dog. Don’t tell me a lie like that. There isn’t a man in Texas who ever saw you without a gun. Don’t think I’m a kid.” His eyes burned with anger and his breath came heavily.

“I don’t think you’re a kid,” answered Potter. His feet had not moved an inch backward. “I think you’re a complete fool. I tell you I haven’t got a gun, and I haven’t. If you’re going to shoot me, you’d better begin now; you’ll never get a chance like this again.”

So much enforced reasoning had weakened Wilson’s anger; he was calmer. “If you haven’t got a gun, why haven’t you got a gun?” he asked. “Been to church?”

“I haven’t got a gun because I’ve just come from San Antonio with my wife. I’m married,” said Potter. “And if I had thought there’d be a fool like you here when I brought my wife home, I would have had a gun, and don’t you forget it.”

“Married!” said Scratchy, not at all understanding.

“Yes, married. I’m married,” said Potter, clearly.

“Married?” said Scratchy. Seemingly for the first time, he saw the pale, frightened woman at the other side. “No!” he said. He was like a creature allowed a glance at another world. He moved a pace backward, and his arm, with the gun, dropped to his side. “Is this the lady?” he asked.

“Yes; this is the lady,” answered Potter.

There was another period of silence.

“Well,” said Wilson at last, slowly. “I suppose we won’t fight now.”

“We won’t if you say so, Scratchy. You know I didn’t make the trouble.” Potter lifted the bag.

“Well, I guess we won’t fight, Jack,” said Wilson. He was looking at the ground. “Married!” He was not a student of good manners; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the wildlands. He picked up his fallen gun, and he went away. His feet made deep tracks in the heavy sand.