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Tinhorn's Daughter

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Kidnapped

EARLY that morning, when they had left the stage station, Betsy Trotwood had supposed that they would reach the clearly outlined Rockies by midmorning.

But at noon, the Rockies were just as far westward, apparently, as they had been at the start. And even now, with dusk coming on, the rolling Concord stage and its six chunky horses were just entering the foothills of the higher peaks beyond.

In truth, Montana was an amazing country, especially to a girl outside the city limits of Boston for the first time in her life. The land was so BIG, so lacking in people, so empty of women!

The Concord's rumble and creak made small headway against the silent immensities and Betsy Trotwood thought that if she had to sit silent and alone much longer she would go mad.

The stage rolled into Twin Pines and the resulting commotion spared her sanity. Red-faced men in big hats, all dressed in stained leather, each one burdened with an enormous revolver and belt, gathered around the pausing stage for news.

The log stage station, scarred by arrows and bullets, looked very isolated, backed by the rearing foothills and dwarfed by the skyward rearing pines.



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The half-dozen men had approached with loud, coarse shouts addressed to the messenger and driver, but Bat had scowled and jerked his thumb down and the crowd had instantly removed hats, shuffled, peered and had begun to walk around on tiptoe. They still wanted news but they asked for it in whispers.

Betsy Trotwood knew that she was the cause of this sensation but she could not understand it. They acted as though she were dead and on her way to a funeral.

Her appearance belied anything like that. Her voluminous skirts were patterned in gay little flowers and her ripply brimmed hat was tied under her chin with a bright blue ribbon.

Bat Connor, the messenger, climbed down from the box and went inside. He came back a moment later swiping his hairy hand across his bleached whiskers and looking guiltily toward Betsy to see if she had noticed anything wrong.

Horses were being changed as this last run from Twin Pines to Puma Pass would be completed before midnight, and while Tom, the sober-faced driver, tried to remember to swear under his breath as the horses were changed, Bat took advantage of the pause to shift his Winchester into the crook of his arm, put his boot on the step and converse with the passenger. He wanted the boys to see the intimate terms he was on with her.

"Ridin' easy, miss?" said Bat, spraying a hub of tobacco juice.

"It is a little rough," ventured Betsy.

“Won’t be no more stage when the railroad gets through here and across the Rockies,” volunteered Bat. “Steel’s better ridin’, I guess, but it shore looks like the country is gettin’ all settled up. You goin’ as far as Puma Pass, ain’t you, ma’am?”

“Yes, if my father is there,” said Betsy.

Bat turned to the crowd. “Slim Trotwood still in Puma Pass, boys?”

The group looked thunderstruck for an instant and then brightly nodded all together.

“He’s still in Puma Pass,” relayed Bat. “And we’ll git you there. Just you wait and see. Ain’t a road agent could ever get up nerve enough to hold up any stage of mine!”

“Road agent?” said Betsy, startled.

“Shore,” said Bat. “We call ’em road agents because they stops us where they ain’t no station, see? Bandits.”

“You mean there are robbers in these hills?”

Bat grinned confidently and patted his Winchester as though it were a cat. “Now don’t worry none about it, ma’am. You got me ridin’ the box.”

The station boss felt a little jealous of Bat’s intimacy. He growled, “Sunset Maloney wasn’t scared none the *last* time.”

“You’ve been held up?” said Betsy quickly.

The crowd was instantly all compassion again. She looked very small and very pretty and just now, scared.

“Aw, it ain’t often,” said the station boss.

“But you *have* been held up,” she insisted to Bat.

He looked uncomfortable and gnawed a chunk from a villainous black plug before he answered. “Well, yes. A young

feller named Sunset Maloney's been holdin' up stages every time they's a money sack goin' in to your old man."

"He's been stealing from my father?"

"Sure. Slim Trotwood, as agent for the Great Western Railroad, is always havin' a wad shipped in to him. In fact, we're carryin' one right now."

Bat saw glory in his role. "Last time I put up a rarin' fight and this time he won't have nerve enough to come within six miles of the stage. You just trust to me, ma'am."

"What sort of fellow is this Sunset Maloney?" said Betsy.

"Pretty wild," replied Bat judicially. "Pretty wild. Faster'n a greased rattler with a six-gun. He's ornery as a barrel of wildcats. But we won't have no trouble."

Tom was hitched up again and Bat dragged himself back to the box, Winchester prominently displayed. The half-dozen station men tipped their hats to Miss Trotwood and the Concord rolled on its dusty way again.

The horses labored as they pulled the long grade. The road began to wind around high hills, and far below, Betsy could see winding streams all silver with distance. The world was turning scarlet and gold as the sun dipped behind the backbone of the continent. But none of this warm beauty lightened Betsy's heart.

She felt very small and helpless, shaken like a die in the otherwise empty coach. And now she had a new worry. Her father was losing his money to a road agent. Was that hurting the project about which he had waxed so enthusiastic?

She had never seen her father that she could remember. He

had come from fully as good a Boston family as her mother, but he had never seemed to fit in the East. At least that was what her mother had said. Her other relatives had been less kind.

Betsy's mother had not been dead half a year before her father had begun to communicate with Betsy. Relatives said that he was interested in the fortune her mother had left—as her mother's purse had been trap-tight as long as she had lived. But Betsy had liked to think otherwise.

Her father had written many times that he was now an agent for the Great Western, the first railroad into Montana, but that he needed money to buy up the right-of-way in advance of construction. Puma Pass, he had said, had been selected as the only possible crossing of the Continental Divide and if he could buy this land for the railroad he would be rewarded.

It had seemed very good to Betsy. She had liked the feeling of importance his letter had given her. She had sent money and then more money and finally, as a surprise, she had come west, against all advice, to help her father in every way she could. He did not know she was coming, but in a matter of hours . . .

The brake shrieked; the coach lurched to an abrupt stop and almost threw Betsy headlong against her largest trunk, which had been too big to go outside.

She sat hastily back and righted her bonnet, while the dust caught up with the stage which had made it and curled smokily past the windows.

A voice so clear and so brutally cold that it made her tremble knifed the evening chill.

“Throw down your rifle, Bat!”

The dust thinned and Betsy, leaning sideways, looked ahead. A man on foot was standing across a newly felled tree which blocked the road. He was a terrifying sight to Betsy as he stood there balancing a huge revolver in each hand. His face was completely covered with a red bandanna into which two crude eyeholes had been cut. He was dressed in a white buckskin shirt, flaring chaps and high-heeled boots. He looked very tall, very grim.

Betsy wished fervently for Boston and its solid policemen. Up on the box were ten thousand dollars in silver and bills—her money destined for her father. And it would all be gone in an instant.

She twisted at her hat ribbon. Two bright tears welled up in her large blue eyes—tears of terror. This must be Sunset Maloney. He hated her father. What would he do when he found that she was also a Trotwood? Shoot her, most likely.

The tall man was stepping down from the tree. Bat's Winchester rattled into the dust as he dropped it.

“Now, Sunset,” whined Bat. “Don't go gittin' nervous. I can't reach no higher.” And in a hoarse whisper, “Git your hands up, Tom, you fool. T'hell with them horses.”

“What are you carrying?” said the clear, chill voice.

“Got it right here,” cried Bat, anxious to please. The express box hit the road leadenly.

“Who's inside?”

Bat would not answer that. Betsy swiftly withdrew her head from the window. He had not seen her in the dusk. She knew he would kill her just as soon as he discovered who she

was. She mourned for faraway Boston. Why had she ever taken this foolish trip?

She moved swiftly across the seat, hitting her knees against her big wicker and leather trunk. In it were skirts and hats, carefully packed.

With brilliant inspiration, knowing that her fate depended upon her action, Betsy threw the trunk lid up, cast out the cardboard hat boxes and rolled hastily into the yielding mass of her piled skirts. There was just room enough with the hats out. She dropped the lid just as she heard his footsteps grating in the road beside the stage.

She heard something else. The patent locks clicked shut as the lid fell. But she had no fear. Bat would let her out as soon as the danger was past.

Sunset threw open the door, right gun ready to chop down if anyone had been waiting inside. He stood there for an instant, inspecting the place.

“Empty, huh?” said Sunset.

Bat leaned far over and looked down with jaw sagging. “Huh?” He blinked hard and leaned farther, almost falling from his high perch.

“Something wrong here,” said Sunset. “You don’t want me to look this over. What is it? Another messenger box?”

The stage creaked as he mounted the step. He looked at the shipping tag which had been affixed at the last outpost of the slowly advancing railroad.

““Trotwood, Puma Pass,”” read Sunset. “So it *is* something else.”

He gave the trunk a hard shove. It shot out the other door

and slammed to the ground, bottom side up. Sunset jumped down beside it and heaved it over.

"It's heavy enough," he said. Turning to look up at the box, he added, "I think that's downright thoughtless of you, Bat. You know I'm interested in anything goin' to Slim Trotwood."

"Sure," shook Bat. "Sure, Sunset. I . . . I guess I kinda forgot, that's all."

"Next time kinda remember to remember," threatened Sunset.

Deliberately he drew out a bowie knife and hacked down two small pines. He lashed these, one on either side, to his heavy rimfire saddle, making a specie of Indian travois.

Across this he placed the trunk, tying it in place with his lariat. Finishing, he turned to Bat and Tom. "When you get to Puma Pass, you tell that damned coyote Trotwood that I still aim to fight him as long as I got lead to sling and strength to pull a trigger. Savvy?"

"We told him last time and he damn near skinned us alive," complained Bat.

"Tell him again," said Sunset.

"You bet," said Bat quickly.

Sunset took his reins and led his mustang onto a game trail at right angles to the wagon road. With the trunk bumping along on the travois, he made his way between the pines, finally disappearing from view.

Tom, always short on words, growled, "You done it again."

"Can I help it?" blustered Bat. "He'd of shot me if I'd moved my little finger."

"You wouldn't be in with him, would you?" growled Tom.