



“No one will get hurt if you behave yourselves,” said the masked one.

PASS for ARABELLA

By Ernest Hamilton

Hank just couldn't resist a pretty face — and sometimes pretty faces are a deadly cover up!

“I MOUGHT TOSS ye off neow,” the young conductor reflected, fumbling importantly with the gold chain on his railroad watch, “but I haint got the heart t’do it, hyar on the prairie. Station-master in Carson’ll know what t’ do with the likes o’ yew.” There was no animosity in his voice, but Pete knew

determination when he heard it.

"We can raise the dough if we get a chance in Carson," he told the conductor with a good deal more confidence than he felt. "We never opened anywheres yet that we didn't gross twice what we need for them tickets. You heard us do some of our act an'..."

"I know yew boys is purty-good," the young conductor answered, "but railroad rules is railroad rules. Ye gotta pay for yore tickets afore ye git on th' train, not afterwards. I got no choice but to hand the whole matter over to Station-master in Carson. He'll take keer o' ye." He moved off down the train, satisfied that everything was settled to his own credit.

Pete Antonelli stiffened his small body against the jouncing of the train, and sat erect on the uncomfortable wooden seat, making the best use he could of the extra inch that kept him from being just five feet high.

He fastened a reproachful stare on the lean length of the young man who remained sprawled in the opposite seat, with eyes half-closed and fingers strumming idly on the strings of a gleaming banjo.

Hank shifted a little in his seat, not so much out of physical discomfort as to avoid his partner's steady gaze. In the new position, instead of meeting Pete's sad black eyes, he found he could get an excellent three-quarters view of the girl in the seat eight rows behind on the other side of the aisle. There was something in the way that bright blue dress set off auburn hair and reflected equally blue eyes that made life seem a good deal simpler and more worthwhile.

"That," said Pete succinctly, following his friend's gaze, "is not no way to make money or to get new tickets neither."

"No," Hank agreed thoughtfully, "That's no way to get tickets." For a minute he let Pete have his full attention. "Honestly, I thought you took the tickets when we changed at Salt Lake."

"Well it don't do no good cryin' over split tickets," Pete retorted. "What we gotta do now is plan how we can make some dough fast enough soon's we hit Carson. That station-master ain't likely to be soft in the heart."

Hank plucked at the banjo strings. "I don't want to make money," he sang softly, "I don't want to make plans." His eyes turned again to the beautiful Arabella. "All I want to make, honey, is..."—he stopped to strike a full rippling chord—

"...music."

Pete gave a snort of disgust and sank down into the corner of his seat. "I think," he said gloomily, "that when that paticular piece of petticoat pulchritude finds out you'd rather make music than money, you ain't gonna make Arabella neither."

HANK RETORTED lazily, "Where do you think we'd be right now if I wasn't making music all the way? D'you think he let us stay on out of the kindness of his heart, or on account of my banjo together with Arabella's singing keeps the passengers fairly happy? Besides," he straightened up abruptly, "you got Arabella all wrong, Pete."

"Yeah, I know," the little man interrupted. "She's goin' out to take care of her ailin' brother, who..."

"No, she's not. You know why she is going? Because she says she just couldn't stay home when an adventure in pioneering was taking place right before her eyes! Because..."

A single explosive syllable from Pete cut him short. "Just the same reason you're goin'? Just for the romance an' allure of a new life in the wide open spaces? You kin put that one in a song and stick it in your banjo!"

"Well, that is why I'm going, and don't try to tell me it's not why you're going, too...and everybody else on this train!"

"I am going," Pete's voice was deceptively calm, "to raise five thousand smackeroos to open a dancehall with. You are going to raise a thousand to pay off your debts...and as much more as you can to stay out of debt for a while. We're both goin' because New York is deader'n all the nails in John Q. Public's best suburban home right now, and there ain't a livin' wage to be made in a dancehall or theater in town these days."

He stood up, slicking his hair down in the shadowy reflection the mirror at the end of the coach sent back to him. "You," he finished, "can make a fortune puttin' your fancy feelings down on paper an' singin' them on that eight-stringed harp your momma got for her angel-boy, but don't shove it at me, on account of I smelled enough of it when Pop took the flat over Hennessy's stables." He left Hank and stalked down the aisle, passing Arabella without so much as nod.

A few seats farther back he stopped and waited, until Rose Cowley looked up from her

book.

“Would you care for a breath of fresh air, Mrs. Cowley? I’m just on my way out to the platform for a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” Her smile was warm, but her eyes were withdrawn, and there was no doubting the firmness behind her refusal. “I think I’ll just stay and finish this chapter.”

PETE WENT out, wishing there were some way to make her understand his interest. Rose Cowley was going west to sell the land where her husband had died a few months before. She had waited patiently in the east, saving money from her work as a seamstress while he cleared the land. After she sent out money for the funeral, she’d had just enough left to make the trip. She could have had the land sold for her, but partly because she was practical enough to realize that she could get more by not letting strangers handle it, and partly because she wanted to visit her husband’s grave, she’d chosen to spend what was left on train fare.

She was friendly enough to everybody, but she’d made it clear that she was not interested in any single man’s attentions. Pete went on out by himself, consoling himself with the thought that Rose Cowley, at least, was one woman whose head wouldn’t be turned the minute Hank looked at her.

The platform between trains turned out to be a sorry sort of refuge. Pete opened the door and closed it behind him, to be confronted by the conductor’s icy stare. He stayed just exactly long enough to prove to himself that the conductor’s ill wishes meant nothing at all to him, then ducked back inside.

He passed Rose Cowley’s seat this time determined to pay no more attention to her. But he couldn’t help noticing as he passed that Arabella was sharing the seat with her now. He heard the younger girl’s musical voice float down the aisle after him.

“You mean you didn’t have to go out to get the deed? You have it right with you, and you’re going for sentimental reasons?” The voice was clearly admiring. He couldn’t hear Rose Cowley’s answer, but he couldn’t help grinning to himself at Arabella’s apparent refusal to recognize any mercenary motives in Rose’s decision to make the trip west. Maybe the girl was just young and a little wild. By the time he got back to the seat

where Hank was plucking eerie minor chords of deepest melancholy, Pete was feeling considerably chastened.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Hank got there ahead of him. “OK, you don’t have to say another word Pete. I know what you think of me, and you’re right. You think I’m just a butterfly. You think just because I was born on the right side of the tracks, I haven’t got a serious thought in my head, and,” he stopped and ran his fingers over the banjo to bring out the saddest tones yet, “I guess you’re right.”

Pete stared uncomfortably from the clouded window to the planked floor. He stole a quick glance at his friend’s morose face, fastened his eyes again on the floor, and blurted out, “I’m sorry Hank. I got no business buttin’ into your business. Arabella’s probally a fine girl, an’ I probally don’t know anythin’ about women anyhow. It’s just that we got plans, see, an’ I ain’t gonna let anything get in the way. But I won’t put my dumb head in between you an’ your girls—I mean your girl—any more. You got enough sense...”

“Listen Pete, next time I hear you apologize, I’m going to break your head and all the plans in it. Can’t you ever get really mad at a guy? You know you’re always right, even when I think you’re wrong, so what...”

“If you boys are through tradin’ bouquets, can you give us a tune, Hank?” The girl’s smile was as brilliant as the new lamps some of the flossier joints back east were installing, and, Pete thought sourly, about as natural. Her voice was musical the way a brass gong is musical, clear in its notes, but metallically hard. Hank jumped to his feet, and the smile that lit up his aquiline features was enough to convince Arabella that he had never really looked at a woman before, and that he would never be able to look at another woman again. It was also enough to make Pete’s stomach turn slightly with the memory of all the girls Hank hadn’t been able to see anyone else but.

Pete’s discomfort increased as the two of them stood there, swaying with the violent sideways motion of the train, completely unaware of the world outside each others’ eyes. He stood it as long as he could, then he cleared his throat loudly.

“It ain’t right,” he addressed the flyspecked window, “for two good-lookin’ people like that to

get conversely crosseyed like they will be doin' if they don't quit starin' at theirselves in the other guy's eyes."

HANK GRINNED tolerantly, and motioned to Arabella to share his seat. The girl leaned across and parted Pete's cheek as affectionately as if she didn't know what the two men had been arguing about. Her hand was unexpectedly soft on skin tormented by cold-water shaves, and when she said in a voice so warm that the metal of it must have melted, "I always did like a man who took the trouble to keep a smooth face," Pete had to remind himself sternly that he didn't like this girl. She was no good. He knew it in his bones, and he wasn't going to let a little sugarcoating fool him about the pill underneath.

"How about a song?" she asked again.

"I've got something I want to show you first," Hank said, and reached up into the box on the wooden shelf overhead, with its gold and crimson letters:

PETE AND HANK

HANK AND PETE

Magic and Fun Music and Dance
Song Hits Direct
From New York
Ventriloquist-Musician-
Humorist-Magician

HANK AND PETE

PETE AND HANK

With one hand braced against the shelf, to keep his balance in the rocking coach, he fumbled with the other till his fingers closed around the cowhide lariat. He sat down again, untying the loose end, and then, before it seemed to be quite untied, while he was sitting relaxed, and chattering away, there was a bellow from a man five seats down when the chicken leg in his hand vanished suddenly securely enclosed in the lariat noose.

Pete and Arabella both ducked instinctively as the drumstick whizzed between them. The thing had been done so quickly that neither of them realized where the wingless flying chicken had come from till they watched Hank, just as

casually, loosen the knot, and toss the tidbit back into the passenger's lap.

Arabella turned wide-eyed to Hank, who was managing somehow to look as if nothing at all had happened.

"Show me again," she demanded.

"Thought you'd like it," he answered, and couldn't quite keep a smug note from creeping into his voice. He put the lariat down, though, and picked up the banjo.

"Know any of the old forty-niner songs?" he asked. "Some of them about the Saints?"

Pete watched grimly. *That's the way to do it, he thought. Always give a dame something good and never give 'er what she asks for. It always works...for Hank.*

As Hank strummed on the banjo, and the girl picked up the tune, Pete was thinking it was the same thing, really, as show business. Give the suckers something good, but keep 'em guessing. Never give 'em what they're expecting, and they'll always come back for more. He pulled a handbill out of the package on the seat beside him, and began scribbling furiously, while Arabella finished the song:

*"I don't know how they manage there,
But I'd like to see the man
Who'd bring another woman home
To my wife Sarah Ann."*

By the time she finished, Pete was ready. He jumped up on the seat, put one leg behind the other, bashful-boy style, clasped his hands behind his back, and ducked his head, chanting in time to Hank's strumming:

*"I doubt the day'll ever come
But I'd like to see some trains
So comfortable that I can sleep
While Hank here entertains."*

Arabella was on her feet as soon he sat down amid a roar of laughter, calling out, "Come on, everybody sing!" Hank started over again, and the coach was suddenly in an uproar of shouting and singing and foot-stamping.

IT WAS THE fourth day of a trip as boring as it was uncomfortable, and everybody, whether they knew the words or not, and whether they liked the music or not, was ready to join in any

kind of fun. When the train suddenly ground to a shattering full stop, it took the whole coach by surprise. Pete found himself on the floor underneath a flounce of fine gingham which he had no trouble, even in his battered condition, recognizing as Arabella. Hank had fallen disjointedly into the corner of the seat he had been standing on, his body a mess of arms and legs, with the precious banjo, saved by instinct alone, standing up on end in the air as if it were growing out of his left hand. He was surveying the two strings that had snapped as he twisted his hand around, with ludicrous dismay, when an authoritative voice crackled down the aisle.

"*Reach!* Ain't nobody gonna git hurt, ef'n yew jes reach far that ceilin' an' keep a-reachin'. Straighten aout naow, one 'n all; 'n *reach!*"

Pete wanted to do nothing more than obey, but reaching at the moment would have meant reaching straight into Arabella. He waited with no small impatience till she got herself unentangled, then sprang to his feet with a showman's agility, and let his bare hands be plainly seen.

Hank wasn't wasting time either. Pete breathed a sigh of relief that he had persuaded his partner not to carry a gun. No telling what Hank might have done if he was wearing a firearm. As it was, he showed his palms clean as fast as anyone in the car. Only Arabella didn't reach when that voice made its intentions clear. Instead, she stood up calmly, smoothed her dress into place, patted her hair back into a semblance of the careful coif she'd had before she descended on Pete, and strolled casually up the aisle toward the masked rider who was covering the coach with a six-shooter in either hand.

"Hi, Bella," the man said, as the girl came down toward him. "We shore missed yew. Right glad to see yew back." He motioned cautiously, without taking his gun off its range, to a sack that hung at his waist. Arabella detached the sack from his belt expertly, and began working her way back down the aisle.

She made friends, it seemed, with everyone on the coach. She knew just what each of them had that was valuable, and where it was kept. One or two tried to hold back, but after the first time she turned casually to the desperado who guarded the only open door, and said, "This fella wants to know what the hot end of a six-gun feels like," no one thought his possessions quite as important as they'd seemed an hour before. The metal that

gave her voice a brassy music gave it strength too. She meant what she said.

Pete was torn between a smug realization of how right he'd been, and a certain admiration for the job the girl was doing. She should have stuck to show business, he kept thinking, she's got it right down pat. Give 'em a good show just when they're expectin' somethin' else.

He didn't begin to get mad till she got to Rose Cowley. Rose was the only other woman on the train who was worth more than one quick look, and Bella hadn't liked her from the first time one of the men did give her a second look. Now Arabella stopped deliberately in front of Rose Cowley's seat, and held out her hand.

"You know I haven't got anything," the widow said. Her voice was cool and contemptuous.

"You have," said Arabella, very distinctly, "a piece of land. The deed is in your handbag. We can use that land."

Rose Cowley gasped as if she had been hit. It was a moment before she had breath enough to answer.

"It's all I have got," she whispered. "I haven't even got enough money to go back east, if you take that."

"Sorry, Mrs. Cowley, I'm not running a charity. The deed, please."

THE WOMAN looked from the girl in front of her to the man at the door. In panic, she swept the car with her glance, almost as though she expected someone there could help her. After a long minute, she drew her breath in sharply, and reached for her bag. She took the deed out, handing it over slowly, as if to keep it in her possession a little longer. Bella didn't hurry it. She let it linger in the other woman's hands for a long time, before she placed it irrevocably in the sack. Then she moved off up the aisle.

Pete felt black anger stirring in him. Standing next to him, Hank's face was undergoing a rapid transformation. The masked rider's greeting to Bella had hit him with all the force of disillusion and loss it could. He was smiling bitterly as she went up the center aisle. But when she walked away from Rose Cowley, there was direct personal hatred in his eyes. His lips moved in a twist that was halfway between crying and spitting as she approached their seat.

Pete and Hank exchanged just one swift look

as she came to them, and an unspoken plan flashed between them.

But Bella had her own plans. She passed them by without any more attention than she'd paid to the other occupants of the car who had nothing of value. For the first time in his life Pete was mildly grateful that he was fundless, and for the first time in his life, Hank was glad everyone knew he was broke. Arabella went on to the end of the coach, then turned back, and walked as far as the double seat the two of them were occupying.

Opposite Hank, she stopped, and all eyes in the car swiveled towards them. Arabella stood just long enough to create a maximum of suspense, while Pete once more unwillingly admired her showmanship. Then she pulled the drawstring tight on the sack, and tossed it easily to the feet of the gunman.

The bandit edged his riding boots around the bag without moving his guns, but his uneasiness was apparent. Bella took one deliberate step toward Hank, and the rough western voice called out to her.

"Ef'n yore done, Bella, we oughter git aout naow."

"Hold your horses, Charlie. I've got some business here." She was smiling, surveying Hank. Carefully, she reached over and took the banjo from the seat. "It's a shame the strings are broken," she said conversationally. "I want it to remember you by, but I don't really know how to string it right."

Pete was almost afraid to look at Hank's face. A few minutes earlier, he could have sworn the girl couldn't do anything to make Hank hate her more; now Pete shut his eyes and waited for the lightning to strike.

He opened them when he heard Hank's best lady-killing tones fall on the dead silence.

"How about something to remember you by?" Hank was saying. "Something I can think about when I miss my banjo?"

There was no mistaking his meaning. By God, thought Pete, he's even better than she is. That ain't what she expected, and it's sure goin' to be a good show. He opened his lips in obvious astonishment.

Arabella put the banjo down, and commanded sharply, "Step out in the aisle, handsome."

"Bells, Buck ain't gonna like thet." The

masked man was more than somewhat disapproving.

FOR ONE minute she gave him her full attention. Very slowly she answered. "Buck ain't going to know anything about it...unless you think it's healthy to tell him." She turned back to Hank, and stepped up close, raising her face so her lips were only inches from his mouth.

Hank grinned at her, his lips tight against his teeth. Very carefully, he brought his arms down, to fold against him. There was a sound from the man at the door, and Bella called back to him with irritation.

"These playboys don't carry no weapons, Charlie. Take it easy."

Hank's arms closed around her, and then everything happened at once.

From the doorway, a voice behind the masked man cracked with whiplash tones, "Drop them guns, son! This is the law!" A hundred pairs of eyes switched from the scene in the center of the coach to the doorway...and the bandit turned to look too, dipping his guns as he turned.

A second later, both guns emptied themselves with a crash into the floor, as the cowhide lariat snapped his arms tight against his body. A yell of pain from the masked man competed with the gunfire, and over it came Hank's shout.

"Shut the door and barricade it, you down there in front. If the others can't get in, they'll go away."

He was still holding Arabella in his left arm, and one end of the lariat in his right hand. He freed both hands by the simple method of using the cowhide to lash Bella's hands securely behind her back.

Up front, they began to barricade the doorway, till someone remembered, "The law's out there. What're we shuttin' the lawmen out fer?"

Pete leaped up on his seat.

"Ladeez and gentlemen," he shouted, and quiet descended momentarily. "Ladeez and gentlemen of the audience, please keep your seats. There will be a full performance given in Carson City tomorrow evening. What you have just witnessed is a small sample of the amazing feats that can be performed by the world's greatest ventriloquist and voice-thrower. That," he added, his voice coming from the ceiling, "being me, and

the world's champion lariat-slinger, *that* being *him*."

A furious pounding began on the door, and four men jumped up to strengthen the barricades. Pete motioned to the rest to stay where they were. "If you will all please keep to your seats, we will now distribute each an' every man's rightful property to its rightful owner."

Someone tossed him the sack of loot, and he dug into it and held up a wristwatch.

"Just a minute, Pietro."

HANK TOOK the sack from his hands, and hunted in it till he found what he wanted. While he searched, the pounding ceased, and just as he found what he wanted, the train started up again with a lurch. The men at the back of the coach began clearing away the luggage that had been piled against the door, as Hank marched up the aisle to Rose Cowley's seat.

"Your deed, ma'am," he announced, holding it out, and moving his head just enough to indicate a courtly bow, "and Hendrick van Saantzvoord, at your service." He bestowed on her a smile that could have only one effect; Rose smiled back because any woman could tell when a man looked

at her that way that he'd never really looked at any other woman before, and never would be able to see another woman again.

Pete didn't have time to be sick. The door was open by now, and the conductor was getting all the details from the men in back. Still fiddling importantly with his watch-chain, he marched grandly down the aisle to Hank.

"Sir," he cleared his throat loudly, and then once again, before he could tear Hank's eyes from Rose.

"Sir, I'm right pleased to info'm yew thet this comp'ny has sot up a' standin' rewa'd to enny 'n all passengers what shall be of help in apprehendin' thieves an' highwaymen. Soon's we git to Carson, I'd be happy to escort yew to the station-master theh, who'll make aout a permanent lifetime pass for yew an' yore fren' to travel on this hyar road, an'," he paused for effect. "I plumb think I mought be able to convince 'im under the circumstances, to make thet pass reetro-ack-tive."

That's it, thought Pete, Hank gives it to 'em even when he ain't tryin'. Let 'em expect one good show, and give 'em another. That's the natural-born showman for you.