

A Couple of Big Ones

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Bertie Burgess's heart was charged with anxiety as the laboring engine finally topped the final mountain grade on the Cattle Spur and began to pick up speed again. The weariness of the five-day railroad journey lapsed into the brooding silence of insecurity as the train descended towards the destiny that awaited her in the town at the bottom of the mountain.

The well-dressed young woman scooted lower in her seat; but small as she could make herself, she still towered nearly a head above the next-tallest person in the car. She knew that she'd have been downright good looking if only she hadn't been so tall. She had more than enough feminine attributes to catch any man's eye, but what man wanted a wife nearly a head taller than himself?

"Lord," she cried as the tears ran down her soot-streaked face, "I'm sorry for my dishonesty. You know how I've longed for a family, and now I've gotten myself into trouble over it. When Mr. Barry asked, I wrote that I was six feet and four inches tall, only I wrote it in numerals. But you know as well as I do that I made the '6' look more like a carelessly written '5' by not closing the loop; and O, You know how I doctored it." Her face burned with shame as she confessed her deceit.

"Please, Lord," she continued when she got control of herself, "please don't let this man who seems so kind in his letters be too discouraged. He has every right to turn me down. Whatever he does, please don't let my dishonesty hurt him too much."

Even as the penitent mail-order bride finished her heartfelt confession she could sense the slowing of the train. In another couple of minutes she'd be reaping the results of her sin. Suddenly the train was emitting a vengeful-sounding hiss as it jerked to a stop.

"End of the line, everybody off," the conductor shouted. All baggage and trunks will be available at the ticket office within fifteen minutes."

Bertie grabbed her handbag and day case and stumbled off the train, steeling herself for the rejection she deserved. Her eyes roved over the small crowd of passengers and greeters, looking for a red-bearded man about three inches shorter than she was. No one approaching that description was visible. She hurried into the station. It was almost empty.

Exasperated, Bertie walked dejectedly towards the front doors of the depot. The heavy double doors opened onto a boardwalk that was roofed all the way across the front of the public building. A wide stairway provided access to the rutted dirt road that was obviously the main street of the cow town. Several horse-drawn wagons and a run-down surrey were tied to the hitching rail across the ruts. A few saddled horses were hitched to another rail in front of the saloon a bit to the south. The pungent odor of the stock yards drifted in from somewhere further south along the rails. The nearest building to the north was labeled, "Hotel," in gaudy letters. A few broncs were tied next to a public watering trough in front of that building as well.

Bertie sat down on a bench on the boardwalk and pulled the well-worn letter from her handbag. She began reading it once again, though she had it memorized from many readings:

Dearest Bertie,

Enclosed is a one-way ticket to Copperton. I'll meet you at the railroad depot, and we'll be married at the town church right away so we can head out for the ranch as man and wife. I'm a bit over 6' 1" tall and have a red beard, so I shouldn't be too hard to recognize. I can hardly wait to set eyes on the little woman I believe the Lord has reserved for me.

With all my love,

Robert Barry

"Lord, she breathed out silently. How could I have done this? He's expecting a "Little" woman, and I'm so awfully big."

As she prayed, a stunningly beautiful blonde woman astride a palomino gelding reined her mount in about thirty yards up the street. Within a few seconds a well-kept wagon pulled up to the hitching rail across the street. As one of the tallest men Bertie had ever seen stepped down from the wagon, a quick motion up the street caught Bertie's eye. The blonde had slashed the palomino in the flank with her quirt, spurring it forward with the heels of her riding boots. She screamed fearfully as she approached the big man.

The chivalrous man glanced toward the scream, and stepped nonchalantly into the road. His strong right hand grabbed the reins just below the bit while he threw his left arm around the horse's neck. He had the run-away stopped within twenty feet. After calming the horse a bit he stepped around and helped the blonde off the beast. She fell all over her rescuer, but he took her hands firmly in his and led her to the other end of the bench that Bertie was sitting on.

"Can you watch her for a second while I get her a drink?" the big man asked Bertie. Assuming her positive answer, he walked over to the canvass water cooler that hung on the wall, and dipped a tin cup full of water for the lady.

"Would you care for one too," he asked Bertie as he returned to the water bag. He carried a cup full of water to Bertie and stood by silently while she drank it. "More?" he asked as she finished the drink.

"No Sir," she shook her head, "but thank you."

The big man returned to the cooler and dipped himself a drink. He drank it slowly before returning to the women. "If you're ready to go, Sandy," he said, "I'll bring Rowdy." Not waiting for an answer, he crossed the street and brought the horse, which had behaved perfectly even though he had only been ground hitched since the incident. The blonde took the reins from his hand rather petulantly; and mounted up to ride off at a brisk trot. When Bertie looked back, the kindly giant was gone.

A few minutes later Bertie drifted back into the station and asked the agent for a schedule. There were no other trains expected up the spur for a couple of days, so a schedule mix-up was unlikely. "Guess I've been stood up, Lord," she breathed. "It's no more than I deserved though." Still, she waited on a bench hoping against hope that her fiancé would show up.

The big man walked through the station every half-an-hour or so, touching his tan Stetson in a brief salute to Bertie every time he passed her by. He was at least three inches taller than she was, and there wasn't an ounce of flab on him. Each glimpse she got of him impressed her more at how humbly handsome this clean shaven brute of a man was. As the afternoon drew on, he finally stopped to talk.

"Ma'am," he began, "I don't know who you are waiting for, but they won't be coming by train for at least two days. Can I help to get you settled at the hotel or something?"

"Oh no," she stammered. "I can walk, seeing it's only half-a-block away."

"You don't want to go anywhere near there," he answered. "It's not reputable. The real hotel is three blocks north. You don't even want to be caught walking past the one across the street."

"Thank you," she replied. "Maybe I'd better accept your help and get settled in before dark. I have a trunk in the office."

"Show me which one," he urged her. "It'll be safer kept in your room."

When Bertie pointed out her trunk, he picked it up effortlessly and threw it over his shoulder. She noted the muscles bulge under his shirt, though he did not appear to be straining a bit as he carried it to his buckboard. He stowed it in the back, and stepped around to help her up to the seat. He didn't wait for her to climb in; he just wrapped his monstrous hands around her waist and deposited her up there. She was still catching her breath as he climbed on beside her. He smelled of freshly cut hay and saddle leather, with a hint of cologne. When he clucked to the horses they responded like they were used to his gentle voice.

As they rode along Bertie thanked him profusely for his help. "And by the way," she added, "that was a brave rescue of that woman on horseback this afternoon."

"Thanks," he answered. "I don't know why she always has so much trouble with that horse when he seems to be so gentle."

"It's none of my affair," she replied, "but she wasn't havening any trouble with him at all. She actually slashed him in the flank with her quirt after you got out of the wagon. I saw the whole thing."

"I kind of suspected something like that," he mused. "Now why would she do that?"

"Mister..." she hesitated.

"Just call me Bob," he interjected.

"O.K. Mr. Bob, whether you realize it or not, you're as handsome as you are big. I imagine it's just as simple as that."

He blushed like a school girl, and they rode on in silence.

After helping Bertie register, Bob carried her trunk into her room and sat it in a convenient out-of-the-way spot along the wall. When he was satisfied that everything was in order he took leave of her and disappeared down the hallway. Although it made her feel a mite guilty, Bertie almost hoped that she had indeed been stood up, and that this handsome gentleman would come around more often.

About six o'clock in the evening the confused woman went down to the dining room for a bite to eat. As she walked across the lobby, the gentle giant rose from an easy chair to meet her. "May I have the pleasure of your company for dinner this evening, Ma'am," he asked, offering his arm.

"Mister Bob," she answered, turning to face him. "I am engaged to be married. Much as I appreciate all you've done for me today, I hardly think it would be fair to my fiancé."

"I'm also engaged to be married," he retorted mischievously; "that is, if you are five feet four inches tall."

Bertie's face turned crimson. "If you'll look closely, she whispered with downcast eyes, it really is a six, even if I camouflaged it a bit."

"So I finally noticed," he grinned. "A hastily written six is as easily confused with a sloppy five as a poorly written seven is confused with a one. Right? I didn't want to scare a five-foot-four-inch woman away so I made six-foot-seven-inches look more like six-foot-and-one-inch; and I shaved off my beard so it wouldn't scratch your face. I never dared to dream that you'd actually be just the right size for me."

Suddenly his arms were around her, and she was snuggling into his chest. She fit there perfectly. After a long kiss right there in public, he broke it off.

"The preacher and my best friend are waiting at the church", he whispered huskily. "You wanna have dinner now, or wait 'til we're married?"

"First things first, Mister Barry," she answered happily. "Where's the church?"

"Maybe we should put something in our vows about never deceiving each other again," he teased as they walked hand-in-hand up the church steps.

"I've learned my lesson if you've learned yours," she answered. "I'm not telling any more big ones."

"Me neither," he agreed; and they both started giggling like a couple of teenagers on their first date.